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Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Victoria Concert Hall, Singapore — review
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A concert of recently composed music interwoven with family connections



Ng Pei-Jee (left) and Ng Pei-Sian in Kalevi Aho's *Concerto for two cellos*

Concertos for two cellists are about as rare as horn soloists in Asia, yet both turned up last Friday with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in a programme of music written mainly in the past decade. Numerous connections held the evening together, mostly familial, and mostly stemming from within the orchestra itself.

The first half was largely taken up by Michael Hersch's *a sheltered corner*, a concerto for horn and orchestra from 2011 performed by Jamie Hersch, the orchestra's associate principal horn and, not incidentally, the composer's brother. After the interval, Kalevi Aho's *Concerto for Two Cellos*, featuring the orchestra's principal cellist Ng Pei-Sian and his fraternal twin brother Ng Pei-Jee, clearly became the evening's popular favourite.

Since context is often key to any performance, it perhaps made sense to experience Aho's piece as essentially a relationship between two voices emerging initially in a brotherly tussle and gradually forming a united front against outside forces. Preceding Aho's showpiece was *Rain Tree* by the Singapore-born, US-based composer Chen Zhangyi, a one-time composition student of Hersch. Though the piece still has one foot in the conservatory — Chen himself describes it essentially as a tropical homage to Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* merged with Copland's *Appalachian Spring* — the composer proved himself a talent to watch.

Thomas Adès's *Dances from Powder Her Face* — from 1995, the oldest music on the programme — opened the evening with bright winds and brass, offering music director Lan

Shui a chance to showcase the acoustical refurbishing at the Victoria Concert Hall. Adès's jazz-band vibe was a world away from Hersch, who, though the same age (both were born in 1971), possesses a different sensibility entirely. Barberesque lyricism was punctuated with Shostakovich-like dissonance; despite the title, Hersch found no respite from his musical anxiety.

If his music has a particular fault, it would be an over-reliance on sudden dynamic contrasts for shock value. But when a composer has a soloist capable of taking his instrument from a stentorian hunting call one moment to a haunting whisper the next, one can forgive a few extra outbursts.

