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Song of the strings



EMOTIONAL CHORD Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra Photo: M. Vedhan

The Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra traversed movements, eras and moods through timeless compositions

Although different in their moods and meanings, composers Corelli, Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart and Grieg had at least one thing in common on a pleasant winter night: a desire to please.

In a profound display of virtuosity and vigour, The Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra played compositions traversing the Baroque, Classical and Romantic eras at a concert that was a throwback to a time when fervour and flair set the musical tone.

Barely months after the end of World War II when the bombed-out city of Stuttgart was merely rubble, 30-year-old Karl Munchinger, a conductor, assembled an orchestra named after his hometown. More than half a century later, the orchestra retains the fine sound and spirit it was founded upon — evident from their many recordings and performances at classical music festivals across continents.

At the Sir Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall, the orchestra — with a wonderful introduction to its repertoire by manager Max Wagner and under the direction of Wolfgang Kussmaul — ushered in the Yuletide spirit with Arcangelo Corelli's "Christmas Concerto". Written for the night of Christmas by a master violinist with an exceptional gift for melody, it is a cheerful contemplation of the message of the birth of Christ. This Baroque piece, in its six movements, showcased the wholesome, smoothly-blended sounds of the violins with measured tempos and subtle rhythms. The Pastorale movement that ends the piece was sublime and serene, and in Corelli's day it was tradition for shepherds to play their flutes outside nativity cribs.

The music world revels in Antonio Vivaldi's masterpiece "The Four Seasons". But his "Concerto for Two Cellos", set in a minor key is equally unforgettable. The two cellists gave a finely-

etched performance — the piece had a warm timbre despite a modern harmonic accent — with a constant throbbing rhythm that heralded a hunt in wild country. Pretty as a picture

J.S. Bach has been a favourite with the orchestra — the “Brandenburg” Concertos have been recorded at least three times. Remaining true to this view, the orchestra chose to perform a reconstruction of the composer's “Concerto for Three Violins”, the original having been lost to the vagaries of time. The rendition had both a lyrical as well as a visual quality to it. The three violinists who took centrestage were stylish, rhythmically buoyant and ornamented their repartees with vivid dynamic contrasts. Bach's velvety string passages had majestic chords swirling in the mists of dark operatic drama. The violinists were clear in their playing, their music rich in themes, textures and the telling.

When the orchestra reassembled for the second half of the concert to play pieces from the Classical and Romantic period, they were joined by musicians from the Symphony Orchestra of India, Mumbai.

They opened with Wolfgang Mozart's “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” (A Little Night Music). The serenade is perhaps one of the most popular compositions in Western Classical music and the orchestras focussed on getting the music across to the audience just as Mozart would have wanted it. There was never a slack moment all through its four movements and the playing was replete with singing phrases, lively dialogues and chiselled execution. This was music written for the outdoors, to be performed on a balmy night for loved family and friends. The lyrical beauty of the strings seemed to say as much.

The closing piece was Edvard Grieg's “From Holberg's Time: Suite in olden style”. Written to honour the Danish poet and historian, Ludvig Holberg, the suite has five movements which combine elements of 18th Century Baroque dance forms with Grieg's own 19th Century Romantic style.

The music ran the gamut from gut-string passages and pastoral sonorities to fleet-footed sprints and lyrical episodes that spoke of a whirlwind gypsy romance. It climbed to a crescendo in the repetitive passages of the Gavotte and dropped to a whisper in the Air.

Lively yet languorous, the orchestra played with characteristic fire — beneath their music's easy charm lay a far more complex soul. In their splendid performance, the orchestra seemed to have a world within it. Their strings sang of the magic of Christmas, the spirit of a city that rose from the ashes and the genius of the composers — all this, in a little night music.