

Soaking in surprises

review concert

SPECTRUM: MUSIC & WORDS

Conservatory New Music Ensemble
Esplanade Recital Studio/Sunday

chang tou liang

With new music, one really does not know exactly what to expect. Just take

each surprise as it comes.

The first was conductor Tony Makarome himself. More familiar as a jazz bassist, he ambled in attired like some extra on the set of Casablanca. Assuming the role of engaging introducer and stand-up comic, he looked like a cross between circus ringmaster and Uncle Peter of Babies Proms.

Breaking the ice which often frosts up concerts of contemporary music, his way was direct and unstuffy. Soon the music began, with luscious strains of United States-based Indian composer Juhi Bansal's song cycle, *The Lost Country Of Sight*, based on Neil Aitken's words. The

scoring was light and transparent for just cello, piano and sparing percussion, enabling the words to be highlighted.

Unfortunately, soprano Khor Ai Ming, audibly recovering from laryngitis and placed too posteriorly, was limited in range and projection. She struggled with the words and much of the nuances in this exotically coloured idiom were lost in the fray. Another reading on a better day will be keenly anticipated.

No such problems existed for the programme's main work, Morton Feldman's *Music & Words*. The 1987 collaboration between the New York avant-garde composer and playwright Samuel Beckett

explored an uneasy relationship between the spoken word and music, encapsulated in a radio play.

The protagonists, played by narrators Craig De Wilde and Thomas Hecht, were holed up in a mock-up of a disc jockey's studio, complete with illuminated "On The Air" sign, reel-to-reel tape player and several LPs. The props did not obscure a tour de force from De Wilde, whose typical broadcaster's drawl was as convincing as his efforts to sing like a drunkard. The droll and grizzled Hecht, enacting a godlike character called Croak, was the perfect foil.

Seven musicians performed sequences

in interjection, but seemed distant from where the action was, which was probably what both creators had intimated all along. While it will take some time for this Asian premiere to sink in, it was reward enough just sitting back to contemplate this 35-minute Godot-like effort and its inanities.

The concert closed with Chinese composer Huang Ruo's *Chamber Symphony No. 1*, named after the Song Dynasty patriot-general Yue Fei. Mostly instrumental, its blend of Chinese and Western idioms was alluring, closing with the players laying down their instruments and chanting incantations.

In this case, music often better expresses feelings which elude words.