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Concert review

SSO under baton of Kolja Blacher wins standing ovation for stirring Dvorak's Ninth

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Guest conductor Kolja Blacher led the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in a concert at the Esplanade Concert Hall on Jan 16.

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From The New World

Singapore Symphony Orchestra

Esplanade Concert Hall

Jan 16, 7.30pm

What, or where, is the new world exactly, and what does it mean to be from it? The three works on offer this evening posed radically different responses to this question, but all were performed with idiomatic clarity and thrilling conviction by guest conductor Kolja Blacher and a galvanised Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO).

In the Orchestra-Variations On A Theme Of Paganini by Russian-German Boris Blacher – the father of Kolja – the new world is the dissolution of the old in jazzy, chaotic modernity. Its tribute to the old world lies in birthing itself from the same hoary Paganini theme that has generated a whole lineage of variations from Liszt to Lutoslawski.

But its abrupt distortions of the theme, and occasional flight from it, tell a story of instability and dislocation worlds from its illustrious predecessors. Blacher's transfiguration of his source material seems to be truly of the new world.

Kolja Blacher directed his father's work with vigour and insight, and the SSO played with great verve, although they occasionally sounded slightly tentative in some of the hairier cross-rhythms.

Less an emanation of the new world than an intimation of another one was the world premiere of Danish composer Søren Nils Eichberg's *Quadriga*, a fascinating series of impressionistic movements titled "dream sequences" for the wonderfully unorthodox combination of saxophone quartet and orchestra.

Although Eichberg's instrumentation implies a kind of new-world concerto grosso, this is a work less concerned with novelty than with the halting suspension of time and causality.

The composer's programme notes, which invoke the liminal space between dream and sleep, might suggest a deliberately soporific conception of musical expression. But the work's cumulative effect was hypnotic rather than narcotic, with the interplay between the four saxophonists and orchestra creating an uncanny and almost meditative sense of estrangement.

The Rascher Saxophone Quartet played with finesse and immaculate cohesion. These qualities were also apparent in its encore, a take on the G minor fugue from Book 2 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* that made this most severe of old-world fugues feel thrillingly unfamiliar.

Blacher is known as a solo violinist and as the concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic. But he is also a conductor of vision and charisma, as evidenced by his alternately nostalgia-infused and adrenaline-filled performance of Antonin Dvorak's ninth symphony with an inspired SSO.

To Dvorak, like Moses on Mount Nebo, to view the new world is also to perceive one's estrangement from it, and the fascination of this famous work is that its heart is sick with nostalgia for old Europe despite its heavy American accent.

Blacher and the SSO skilfully captured the intensity of the emotional dislocation behind this divided identity. After a slightly clunky adagio introduction, the first movement unfolded with thrilling momentum and with a particularly radiant flute solo in the "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" theme.

Blacher and the SSO found an intense, unforced stillness in the rapturous second movement, the cor anglais solo played with heart-rending lyricism.

The orchestra was incisive and fleet-footed in the tricky scherzo, but best of all was the tour de force performance of the last movement. Its eruptive coda practically blew the roof off the building and elicited an immediate and well-deserved standing ovation.

Whether the new world represents a place of promise or a state of estrangement, the journey there has rarely been more vivid or alluring than with Blacher and the SSO.