

“Pluck And the Magic Banyan Tree” – a Harp Musical

What a delightful evening! Pluck and the Magical Banyan Tree is a sequel to the world's first (and only) harp musical and what a sequel it was!

You may well ask what a harp musical is. This is something developed by Singapore harpist Katryna Tan, in which the music is almost completely provided 'live' by harps. If you have not seen it, you may find it hard to imagine such a spectacle, where up to 25 harps may play on stage together at any one time.

The storyline is somewhat whimsical, with Pluck, the protagonist losing her powers of gifting music to her people with a wave of her wand. Yes, she waves her wand and her people start playing beautifully without the need for practice or lessons. Of course, we know that cannot last, and she starts losing her powers because the magical Banyan Tree that is the source of her powers is dying, probably due to over-exploitation. As Pluck travels around the world, looking for a new tree to bring back to her land, she finds that she and her friends share their knowledge of music (melody, rhythm and harmony) with the people. They eventually learn that music is actually within everyone and by sharing this knowledge it still in turn nurture back the Magic Banyan Tree. The tree came back to life after that and everyone lived happily ever after.

Cliché? Maybe just a tad. But one does not attend musicals for their sophisticated storylines. One attends for the beautiful music, the angelic performers, the amazing playing, the lovely set and the magnificent costumes. On all these fronts, the harp musical, Pluck and the Magical Banyan Tree, delivered.

Much of the music was written by Singapore's preeminent composer, Mr Eric Watson, who composed music numerous times for Singapore's National Day parade. Watson's music is playful and catchy, perfectly capturing the spirit of the musical. Intertwined with these original works were classical pieces such as Handel's Harp Concerto in B Flat major, excerpts from Greig's Peer Gynt Suite and Mchedelov's Variations on a Theme of Paganini.

Handel's Harp Concerto was adroitly adapted for 2 harps by Katryna Tan. This was played by 2 of Rave Harp's pioneer members, Lee Yun Chai and Nicholette Chin, who are currently studying harp performance in the Juilliard School and the Royal College of Music respectively. Their playing was strong and confident, traversing the trickier and more demanding passages of the concerto with deceptive ease. What was more interesting was their ability to exploit the different tonality of harps that they were playing to full effect. Yun Chai played on a chilli-red full acoustic harp, while Nicholette played on an electro-acoustic harp, electric blue no less. Although not obvious during tutti, the tonalities of the harps were very different and it actually enhanced the different passages that were played in turn by Yun Chai and Nicholette, making it a delightful "Question and Answer" between the two instruments.

The other noteworthy piece that was played was Mchedelov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. This virtuosic piece is rather hellish to play although really impressive. To allow as many young harpists as possible a chance to be able to play this demanding piece, it was ingeniously broken down into its variations and played by various groups of harpist separately. The technical brilliance of these young harpists shone through every variation, a fine testament to the firm grounding they have in their harp technique.

Eric Watson's composition, "Music All Around Us" brought the evening to a close. This bright and cheerful tune was very reminiscent of music from Singapore's National Day Parade that Watson composed for and ended the musical on a fabulous high note.

This was actually my first experience with a harp musical and I have to say I was totally blown away by the dedication and professionalism of the production crew and the young performers who are all part time volunteers from Rave Harps. Hopefully, there will be more of such productions to come and I look forward to the great things these talented young harpists will achieve in time to come.

By Leonard Lim Ang Tee , Singapore