

# A grand celebration

A-list French cellist opens 2023 season for the Royal Bangkok Symphony Orchestra



A celebratory concert given by the Royal Bangkok Symphony Orchestra in honour of the 36th birthday of its beloved patron HRH Princess Sirivannavari Nariratana Rajakanya began the 2023 season in splendid fashion.

Genius French cellist Gautier Capuçon enthralled a sizeable audience at the Thailand Cultural Centre with a quite stunning performance of Sir William Walton's breathtakingly beautiful *Cello Concerto*. His jaw-dropping technical wizardry was matched in equal measure by an emotional expressivity of the most tender and exquisite kind, in a profound interpretation which seemed to penetrate every subtle nuance of this highly sophisticated modern masterpiece.

Presented in collaboration with the Tourism Authority of Thailand and B. Grimm Group, the concert was conducted by Belgian maestro Michel Tilkin, who has overseen countless triumphant classical concerts on the podium of the TCC since his first visit in 2010. Established firmly in the hearts and minds of Bangkok's musical fraternity as one of the RBSO's most significant and influential figures in its now illustrious four-decade history, Tilkin began the concert with Gioachino Rossini's iconic *Guillaume Tell Overture*, and concluded with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's imposing evergreen orchestral showpiece *Scheherazade*.

From the last of his 39 operas, the *William Tell Overture* is known popularly because of its "galloping-like" conclusion (through its association with the American TV series *The Lone Ranger*), whilst followers of the RBSO itself have been listening to the orchestra open its Sunday Park Concerts with this for the last three decades. So much so that it was identified as an unofficial signature tune for the orchestra as far back as the 1990s by then music director John Georgiadis. However, in compositional

context what is in fact the concluding *March Of The Swiss Soldiers* is preceded by three very contrasting sections, opening with an utterly unique orchestration.

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A totally exposed group solo for the cello quintet here is one of the biggest challenges of nerve in the entire repertoire. It requires utter commitment and confidence to open a concert in this fashion, and principal cellist Apichai Leamthong approached the delicate moment admirably as he played the first rising phrase of the concert alone, then leading his own "troops" through the whole *Andante* passage with admirable focus. Such is the collective responsibility necessary to make this chamber-music texture sound secure, it is quite appropriate here to list the other fine cellists of the quintet -- Panyaphat Wongwechwiwat, Wishwin Sureeratanakorn, Panadda Permpnich and Pairoj Puengtien. After a furious *sturm und drang Allegro* episode describing a wild mountain storm in the Swiss Alps, cor-anglais player Nuttha Kuankajorn then rendered beautifully one of the most iconic pastoral ear-worms in all of classical music, depicting a herdsman guiding his cattle to the pasture.



Cello soloist Gautier Capuçon.

Capuçon plays on a fine Matteo Goffriller cello made in 1701. Nicknamed *L'Ambassadeur*, it has a deep sonority and mellow tone, a quality most appropriate for the more introspective passages of the Walton concerto -- not least the two imposing virtuosic cadenzas which punctuate the *Tema Ed Improvvvisazioni* finale. Born in 1981, the brilliant soloist has recorded all the major works of the repertoire and is a multiple award winner, including first prize at the Maurice Ravel International Academy of Music competition (Saint-Jean-de-Luz, France, 1998). His utter command on the stage of the TCC was quite apparent from the outset, as the tick-tock clockwork-like texture ushered in the solo cello's first plaintive, tearfully singing entry.

The expansive canvas of Walton's highly individual modern musical voice unfolded with a sublime structural balance and poise, as Tilkin and Capuçon maintained clear communication with each other

through multiple changes of pace and dynamic in the first-movement Moderato. The soloist dispatched chromatically laden multiple-stopping hurdles with consummate ease, whilst for their part, the RBSO musicians gave meticulous attention and care to their many complex entries and subtle accompaniments. Walton's magical cocktail of timbres conjured by vibraphone, celesta and harp was indeed particularly wondrous to hear and behold. Pyrotechnic fireworks ensued in the following scherzo-like Allegro appassionato second movement, with moto perpetuo semiquaver scurries for Capuçon revealing a staggering level of dexterous control. Meanwhile, his spectacular "thrown-bow" jeté co-ordination at the climax, executed with a suave élan, was met with barely concealed gasps of amazement across the auditorium.

The finale's opening *Lento* manifests Walton's intrinsic English reserve, whilst an explosive orchestral tutti -- marked Risoluto tempo giusto and Briosio (vivacious, cheerful) -- between the two cadenza pillars of the movement, displays the other side of the composer's hybrid musical personality, influenced by his sun-drenched adopted home of Ischia, an idyllic Italian island in the Mediterranean. The RBSO absolutely revelled in this bold outburst of an orchestral statement, negotiating the difficult writing very commendably.

For an encore Capuçon played *The Swan* by Saint-Saëns, accompanied by Ema Mitarai on the harp, delighting the crowd and the Princess herself as he dedicated the piece in honour of her birthday. Following this, a humorously imaginative arrangement of *Happy Birthday* itself by Vanich Potavanich brought the first half to a close.

Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* also centres around an extremely substantial string solo, but in this case, it is for the violin concertmaster. Moreover, this is a universally known pinnacle of the standard orchestral canon which all musicians and audiences alike are very familiar with -- therein lies the significant challenge of rendering the solo part convincingly. RBSO leader Bing Han did a superb job of playing this role. Her tone was sweet and alluring for the recurrent main theme, whilst technically awkward double-stopping was extremely well handled and made to sound effortless -- always a sign of polished technique. Playing with a cool head and assured stage presence, her strong confidence transmitted happily to the orchestra as a whole, with Tilkin conducting the entire lengthy score with great authority and passion. Many other individual members of the orchestra also excelled in their solo spots, not least principal bassoonist Thanawat Ngosawang in his arabesque, improvisatory cadenza of hypnotising power.