

# Happy birthday, father

Compositions by HRH Princess Sirivannavari soared at Thailand Cultural Centre to celebrate King Rama X's 70th birthday



*HRH Princess Sirivannavari with the RBSO. (Photo courtesy of RBSO)*

In celebration of the auspicious occasion of His Majesty the King's 70th birthday this year, two evenings of immense beauty and stunning creativity were staged at the Thailand Cultural Centre recently, featuring the brilliant and original music of his highly talented daughter HRH Princess Sirivannavari Nariratana Rajakanya, performed with great passion and commitment by the Royal Bangkok Symphony Orchestra under the baton of music director Michel Tilkin.

This truly inspired gift of love and dedication was received by King Maha Vajiralongkorn himself and Her Majesty Queen Suthida when they attended a sold-out performance on Nov 26. The day before, the very same concert was presented for the enjoyment of the general public, with Princess Sirivannavari also in attendance for this special programme consisting entirely of her own compositions.

The inspirational Princess has been the patron of the RBSO since 2016 and has generously gone the extra mile in composing new music for the orchestra to perform, record and enjoy every single year since. In 2019, a similar event was presented for the King at the National Theatre, and on both occasions, the luxurious visual aspect of the stage-set production was just as impressive as the aural feast of the music itself. A stunning, massive wall of yellow-white flowers behind the RBSO was framed by heavenly, pure white drapes, all bathed continuously in glorious bright light.

Four substantial compositions were performed by an enlarged RBSO (particularly in the percussion and band departments), beginning with *Mythos Poëtica*, a multi-movement suite for orchestra which immediately conveyed the essential elements of Princess Sirivannavari's compositional style and aesthetic vision. Principally a fusion of traditional and modernistic musical elements from around the world -- but predominantly based on the Western classical music tradition -- she explores endlessly varied sonic soundscapes on a large and expansive canvas, both highly effective and emotionally moving.

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Therefore, big romantic tunes for the violins, violas, cellos and double-basses and majestically sweeping gestures for two harps are juxtaposed with reflective moments for solo harpsichord, then giving way to a full-bodied rock-band format including electric guitar, drum kit and synthesiser. Individual section principals were regularly featured in exposed solo spots, not least the concertmaster, and violinist Bing Han here played confidently and with an admirable focus in *Mythos Poëtica* and elsewhere. Another important and extremely well-delivered solo from collaborative pianist Sasipa Rasmidatta came in Chapter 3 of the suite, called *Love*.

The second piece in the programme was in fact the first of two world premières at the historic concerts -- *Le Mariage De Minuit Fantaisie Pour Piano Et Orchestra* (Midnight Marriage Fantasy For Piano And Orchestra), a single movement tone poem featuring the Greek concert pianist Titos Gouvelis, currently a professor at the Athens Conservatory. Beginning with a solitary solo piano intoning a bell-like tone to evoke the lonely atmosphere of midnight, this work unfolded to reveal a compositional mind of high sophistication and complexity. A pensive opening quickly developed towards an intensely strong sense of arrival, with an overpowering main melodic theme for violins, violas and clarinet accompanying the pianist's first explosion of virtuosity as Gouvelis covered the entirety of the keyboard with rapid arpeggiations, up and down. The second amazing world première followed the intermission, a concerto for violin and orchestra entitled *Nefreretta*. Guest German violinist Niklas Liepe had a large collaborative role in moulding many sections of the solo part, and he was therefore a perfect choice on all fronts for this occasion.

He has recently made two other very successful appearances with the RBSO, and his ultra-sweet tonal palette, lush and expressive vibrato, and incredibly dexterous left-hand virtuoso facility are exactly what is required for this work -- thoroughly modern in style whilst also deeply romantic in tone.

The final work in these most memorable concerts was another extremely enjoyable suite for orchestra, also called *Nefreretta*, which shared an Egyptian-inspired thematic link with the preceding violin concerto. With the evocative and potent movement titles *Exotic New Tomb*, *Flash Of Two Worlds*, *Oriental Liebe* and *Divine Infinity*, this work contained perhaps the most dramatic and awe-inspiring musical content of the evening. For the most part forceful and dynamically powerful in volume, this music was also impressive for its occasional changes of tempo and atmosphere, with moments of sublime contemplation including a tender cello solo at the end of *Exotic New Tomb*, played very sensitively by principal cellist Apichai Leamthong. The ensuing *Flash Of Two Worlds* kept the spotlight on him for another exquisite solo, evoking a scene of tranquillity and calm.

Indeed, the entire programme was defined by a breathtaking succession of contrasting musical textures and material, with the final movement *Divine Infinity* a most fitting apotheosis and conclusion, featuring the whole Royal Bangkok Symphony Orchestra together in a crescendo of rousing excitement.