Winds’ sonic gems dazzle at gala

In 10 short years, the Philharmonic Winds have established themselves as the leading Singapore wind orchestra. Founded by Belgian-Singaporean conductor Robert Casteels, who programmed much new music, including Singaporean compositions, the band continues this legacy under promising young conductor Leonard Tan.

Its 10th Anniversary Gala Concert, mostly conducted by Tan, was a showcase of the ensemble’s considerable prowess and achievement. The first half comprised music by composers not known for their wind music.

English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams’ Toccata Marziale (1924) opened the proceedings on a bustling state of pomp and ceremony. Its brevity paved the way for the evening’s most interesting work, Frenchman Florent Schmitt’s Dionysiaques (1913). Its Impressionist and sinuous opening recalling Debussy gave way to a bacchanalian frenzy, filled with jazzy, popular dancehall idioms. Further rehearsals would have yielded a better-focused performance but there was no mistaking its fervour.

Australia-born Percy Aldridge Grainger’s The Power Of Rome And The Christian Heart (1947) was unusually sober for a composer famed for catchy dance and folk-song arrangements. Evelyn Lim’s pipe organ solo provided the resonance, contrasted with dark and heavy-laden winds vibes. Harp and piano issued other-worldly textures before the piece closed quizzically and open-ended.

Flashier was solo percussionist Yeow Ching Shiong presiding on five timpani in American Michael Daugherty’s Raise The Roof (1907). Wearing shirtsleeves, his octopus-like handling of mallets and wire-brushes and use of bare hands were a tour de force as this extroverted music took on Latin and bossa nova rhythms.

One of the Winds’ regular guest conductors, Timothy Reynish from Britain, took over the baton for his compatriot Frank Bridge’s The Pageant Of London (1911). The work, a suite of renaissance dances bookended by two marches, ably interpreted by the band, conjured up the might of old England, one last hurrah before the sun set on the empire.

The best performance of the evening was, arguably, of the least original work, Franco Cesarini’s Poema Alpestre (Alpine Poem, 1999), conducted by Tan.

The Swiss composer had acknowledged his inspiration: famed German composer-conductor Richard Strauss’ 50-minute-long An Alpine Symphony. And, indeed, Cesarini’s 25-minute tone poem sounded like poor man’s Strauss – with his use of bucolic cowbells and imitation invocations of nebulous misty vistas, pastoral interludes and a requisite snowstorm.

Nevertheless, the young musicians carved out a performance that lacked nothing in passion and commitment.