

Heralding European Unity

EUROPE hosts 23 major languages and countless minor tongues. But there is one language that crosses borders without a ripple - and that is the universal language of music.

Over the past several centuries there have been European musicians transcending borders with their peripatetic nature and pan-Europe outlook. They were among the earliest ambassadors of a united Europe.

As a tribute to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, and in celebration of Europe's Day, the Spanish Embassy presented a concert at the Al Bustan Palace Hotel.

Proud of the seminal role that Spain played in the genesis of the European Union, Tomas Rodrigues-Pantoja, Ambassador of Spain, explained that the concert would feature transnational composers and trace the evolution of European music from the Baroque to the Classical, Romantic and early Modernist periods.

A Spanish Trio with violinist Joaquin Torre, cellist Iagoba Fanio and pianist Ivan Martin stuck the first chords with Franz Schubert's beautiful Trio Opus 99 in B Major. The violinist led with exquisite notes from an Italian violin almost four hundred years old. Of similar vintage, the 1746 cello slipped into the melody with deep, sonorous tones that tug at the inner heart. The pianist glided masterfully into Schubert's eloquent pictorial keyboard figurations. With a slowly unfolding harmonic drama, the Opus, wide in scope, required - and was met with - both delicacy and technical finesse.

The strings came into their own with a sonata by Baroque composer Georg Freidrich Handel (1685-1859), arranged as a virtuoso duet for violin and cello by a modern composer. Joaquin Torre said the piece required "a display of everything the violin and cello can do". This lively, intellectually complicated work was approached with grace and understated intensity - evoking the sublime grandeur of Handel's style.

The Spanish element of the programme came with 'Requiebros' for violin, cello and piano, a charming and well-loved piece by cellist Cassado Gaspar (1897-1966) who travelled the world playing the works of other composers - apparently too shy to play his own compositions.



Naturally enamoured of this popular Spanish work, the Trio played with expressive ease and infectious joy.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) and Claude Debussy (1862-1918) were chosen to represent the transition from late Romantic to Modernist music. An impressively melodic interpretation of Stravinski's Suite Italienne for violin and piano was played with spectacular intensity and strategic emphasis on rhythmic structure.

Then came the dreamy sensuousness of Debussy in The Girl with the Flaxen Hair and Troubadours. It was time for the young virtuoso pianist, Ivan Martin to excel in Debussy's glittering passages and web-like figurations. Totally absorbed in the music, at times silently

singing, Ivan touched the keys with feather-like lightness to evoke the water-drops and sunlight that infuse Debussy's works with mood and colour. In the rushing sections with their dissonant harmonies, Ivan moved his fingers so suddenly and swiftly that they became a blur like the wind in winter. He was equally dexterous with the subtle, noble beauty and exquisite tenderness of Chopin's piano solos.

The concert ended triumphantly with Mendelssohn's Trio No One, Opus 49. Optimistic, energetic, riding high, the three instrumentalists wove their sounds into a single song of celebration. It was in this buoyant mood that the Trio and the Spanish Ambassador met me after the concert. Anyone who was there in

that moment would want to be a musician - so joyous, energised and articulate were they.

In this jubilant atmosphere, it was natural to comment that Ivan evoked images of Liszt; that Iagoba's facial expressions were a predictive mirror of the music; and, that Joaquin drew out the secret tones of his ancient violin as only a master knew how.

When asked what it felt like to move through the dramatic contrasts of the programme - the musicians said that it was about feeling deeply what each composer felt - and playing in such a way that the audience would feel it too. And I imagined the hundreds of people who had just left, heading in different directions - all in the same exalted mood.