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Jealousy

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SUBHEADLINE: A comic opera plays out old tensions in a contemporary fashion and makes light of artistic rivalry

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Take artistically flawless musical scores (like those of the scale of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart or his rival Antonio Salieri), add very talented performers and musicians clad in lavish costumes (like those 50 artists coming from the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts), exploit the ageless topic of rivalry but make it a laughing stock and throw it all together in an enclosed room at ambient temperature, surrounded by music lovers.

Guess what you get? The ideal recipe for a great comic opera performance, like the one played last Friday night at Bangkok's National Theatre.

No doubt the hundreds of spectators who attended the one and only performance of Genius & Jealousy by the renowned Hong Kong Academy Symphony Orchestra and Opera Department, felt very privileged.

`` It was great, great fun. I loved it! I wish there were more such performances. For us Thai people it is a very new style of show," commented an enthusiastic viewer working at Siriraj Hospital, who came with her teenage children.

At the invitation of the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra Foundation, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts had thus come to Bangkok to present their latest production, a comic opera in Italian, German and English directed by Adelaide-born Kevin Miller, (the Head of Opera and Vocal Studies), with the renowned Austrian Christoph Campestrini holding the conductor's baton.

As the title suggests, Genius & Jealousy pursues the idea of rivalry, yet not so much the ill-feeling between Mozart and his six years elder Salieri, than the emulation between composer, librettist and prima donna.

`` This perennial battle between the composer and the dramatist has gone on for centuries, and will go on for ever," comments Kevin Miller a few minutes before the start of the performance, in the hubbub of singing exercises, roars of laughter and people noisily clearing their throat. `` At the end, the music might win. Mozart's music wins for sure," he continues.

The plot revolves around a not-overly-successful composer who is commissioned to write an opera in four days. Together with his librettist, they try and overcome their outrage towards those with enough money to make such arbitrary demands, in order to go further into the creative process.

The on-going battle between the priorities of music and words soon wins centre stage, while the casting of the prima donna is also a pleasure party. Rivalry and competition are again in the themes as the two lead sopranos, Eleanora (the impresario's latest passion played by Taiwan-born Vicky Chen Wen-chi) and Tonina (a wealthy prince's mistress played by Philippine-born Armela Fortuna), obviously hate each other.

The music is a collage of Mozart's *Der Schauspieldirektor* (The Impresario) sung in German and Salieri's *Prima La Musica, Poi Le Parole* (Music Before Words) sung in Italian, interspersed with recitatives and dialogues in English.

Apart from the comedy and ridiculousness inherent to the story itself, the public found great fun in the Thai language bits and pieces interjected here and there, which took everyone by surprise and gave rise to frenetic cheers and laughter.

The juxtaposition of numbers by Salzburg's prodigy Mozart and the royal court of Vienna's very proficient Salieri, is inspired by the historical clash between the two, when in 1789 Emperor Joseph II entertained guests in his Vienna palace while *Der Schauspieldirektor* performed at one end of the orangery and Salieri's *Prima la Musica* at the other

This fruitful emulation between two prodigious talent has been brought up to date for the greatest pleasure of contemporary spectators. After "the pleasant surprise" (in the words of Kevin Miller) of the opera's performance in Vietnam a few weeks ago, the 50 or so musicians, mostly students, have returned to Hong Kong with a new resounding success in their favour.