

## Review: Schumann Fest

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**Schumann Fest**  
**Hong Kong Phil**  
**HK Cultural Centre Concert Hall**  
**Reviewed: January 17 and 24**

The Hong Kong Phil's Schumann mini-festival sandwiched two recitals devoted to lieder and chamber music between a meatier pair of concerts comprising his four symphonies and two of the concertos. While Schumann's songs and chamber works have always been objects of admiration, his technique in writing for orchestra has often been the target of scrutiny.

The enthusiasm with which the composer approached his symphonies is well documented, but turning the bland printed page into coherent and fervent reproductions of Schumann's intentions is a challenge that defeats many conductors.

Johannes Wildner

With the first two symphonies under the direction of Hans Graf and, a week later, the third and fourth conducted by Johannes Wildner, a critical comparison was inevitable. Wildner's rather jolly platform demeanour might not be to everyone's taste, but his readings were among the best I've heard. There wasn't a single moment that smacked of downtime; the music felt driven throughout, while still finding opportunities for flexibility when appropriate.

With Wildner conducting from memory, the players were a model of responsiveness, finding an instinctive balance during the stodgier stretches of the orchestration; the brass served up some very fine moments indeed.

He may have walked on stage like a lost little boy, but soloist Zhang Haochen knew exactly where he was going in the Piano Concerto in A minor, and that was on a direct route to the work's poetry. How wonderful to hear such a refreshingly alternative view of this work that has come to sound so predictably routine.

He immediately set the tone with his statement of the first movement's familiar opening theme, shading every note in even the shortest of phrases; the melodic exchanges of the slow movement that usually sound so twee were transformed into exquisite interplay between keyboard and orchestra.

A week earlier, the best efforts of cello soloist Qin Liwei were largely wasted because conductor Hans Graf failed to establish balance with the orchestra. Most disappointing was the slow movement of Symphony No2, in which the romantic lyricism was handled with the passion of a eunuch.

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