

The tales of this world have already been written ... and have to be written over and over again. Not because we need new tales. They have to be written so that the tradition of telling tales, of writing tales does not die out." – Peter Bichsel (Swiss writer)

These words that capture the Swiss tradition of storytelling marked the inauguration of Swiss Tales 2008, a cultural gift to the Cairo Opera House on its 20th birthday. The cultural and artistic exchange program will bring six varied performances and concerts by Swiss artists throughout the year to the stages of the Cairo and Alexandria Opera House.

On Sunday night, First Lady Suzanne Mubarak, the President of the Swiss Confederation Pascal Couchepin and Culture Minister Farouk Hosni rang in the year-long jubilee with a bang.

To kick off the celebrations, audiences were treated to a feast of sights and sounds, of styles and skills from famous classical musical group Piano Seven.

At the main hall of the Cairo Opera House, Hosni opened the night with a word on the role of the arts in building a bridge between different cultures and the history of the opera house in enriching our lives through concerts, ballets, art shows and performances from around the world.

With that he welcomed Couchepin to the stage, where he congratulated Egypt on this cultural milestone in its history. "Egypt's geographic location makes it a cultural gateway to the Middle East and Africa," he said, adding that activities planned for Swiss Tales 2008 are meant to foster cultural exchange between musicians, dancers and artists of both countries.

The stage was set up with seven pianos facing the center of the stage where the percussion section was set up. The performers made their way onto the stage: the seven current pianists — Francois Lindemann, Olivier Rogg, Marc Perrenoud, Valentin Peiry, Fabrizio Chiovetta, Michel Bastet and Pierre-Luc Vallet — accompanied by violinist Stephanie Decaillet and percussionist Nicolas Levon.

Piano Seven started out in 1987 as a one-off experiment, the brainchild of Lindemann and Sebastian Santa Maria. The first performance bringing the sounds and skills of seven pianists on one stage was an instant hit, and a second run was in high demand. Since then, the Swiss-based ensemble has played around 150 concerts in Switzerland, France, Belgium, Lebanon, Egypt, Brazil, Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and China.

Their first performance in Egypt took place on the very same stage exactly 10 years ago, and while some of the musicians are new to the group, the quality and diversity of the music presented has not faltered.

To keep the music fresh, every three years the group invites two other musicians to merge their instruments and style with seven pianists. According to the group, the subject of the current show is musically Latin — in the wide sense of the term — "a crossover of 20th century European piano music and elements of popular music, namely jazz and tango."

They opened with "L'Ecrin," what can best be described as an experimental number. Instead of starting the concert by hammering away at their keyboards, each pianist wrapped a lock of horsehair around their piano strings, and moved it up and down to produce the sounds of a string instrument.

It almost seemed like the musicians were tuning their instruments — pianos and violin — as opposed to playing their opening piece. Although it did sound a bit scratchy, it was definitely a creative presentation.

My favorite piece of the night was the third composition "Tango Negro," and as its name suggests, the music was inspired by the fiery, romantic South American dance. Listening to the symphony evoked images of a courtship, starting off slow and a bit hesitant and then gradually gaining speed and confidence.

The push and pull between the pianos and the violin resembled the movements of the dance itself. At times there was a power struggle between the instruments, as one sound attempted to overtake the other. Then there was a more relaxed harmony, much like two lovers falling gracefully into a comfortable romance, before turning again into a heated display of emotions and sounds.

What helped make the musical composition accessible to the audience was the accompaniment of the visual images created by video artists Daniel Wyss and Bastien Genoux.

Behind the musicians was a screen projecting these images, a collage of videotaped footage and shots of the live performance. They are interpretations of Piano Seven's pieces by the visual artists.

The footage seemed distracting at first, but only until you learn to focus on both the sounds and the images at the same time do you get the full effect of each masterpiece.

Another highlight was a song that was like a musical interpretation of the movement of air. At first it was more like a breeze, then spurred by the tunes of the musicians, it picked up speed and strength, turning into to a gusty wind. It then slowed down to a quieter, lighter breeze.

One song sounded like the movements of water, traveling down a stream with the ebb and flow of the water crashing softly into rocks and stones before settling down into a quiet lake.

The performance stopped after this song to give Lindemann a chance to introduce each musician. The piece that followed was eerie and intimate at the same time. The video projected gave us a more personal look at the musicians, with close-ups of their faces looking straight at the camera. At first, their expressions were serious, but they grew more relaxed to the tunes of the music. Like the song itself, the images — shot in black and white — seemed elegant and nostalgic.

Overall, the show was not what I expected — it was much more entertaining. The performers left their coattails at home, and were not tied down to their pianos. For one, the violinist roamed the stage through the entire show, interacting with each pianist depending on which musician was taking the lead. The rest moved around, switching pianos after and sometimes during the piece to bring the dominant keystrokes to the forefront — to pianos one and seven.

Fabrizio Chiovetta often moved to the stage front, leaving the keys of his piano to try his skillful hands at the accordion.

Percussionist Levon stole the show. During one song, he improvised a scat, and later told me he was impersonating President Couchebin. The scat also sees him impersonating different languages, including Latin, Arabic and an African dialect. At that moment, he became a sort of performance artist before he performed a short song, and wowed the audience with his beautiful voice.

Of his role in Piano Seven, he told Daily News Egypt, "It's hard for the pianists to hear each other because of the distance from one piano to the other. It sounds coherent for the audience, but the sounds of the different pianos can be distracting for the musicians. The percussions are the core of the performance, keeping everyone on beat...if they lose their way, I'm here to tell them where the beat is."

To an inexperienced ear, some of their pieces seem really long. But while they only took around five breaks to give the audience a chance to show their appreciation by clapping, they actually performed around 12 different pieces.

The reason for that, Levon said, is because "it's not good to stop after every piece and wait for the audience to clap. You lose the momentum, the energy you've built up along the way. It's better to keep moving with very subtle changes in tempo and rhythm; and flow smoothly from one to the other."