



10 Years of Adventurous Programming

Lan Shui & the Singapore Symphony

Gil French

Lan Shui and the Singapore Symphony perform more world premieres and contemporary music (especially by Asian composers) in a year than most American orchestras do in five. On November 18 he added an original stroke of programming, following each movement of Charles Ives's *Holidays Symphony* with one of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

Two questions are obvious: Did it work to switch every 10 minutes from polytonal polyrhythmic Americana to baroque style? And did this programming (apparently never done before) make sense? Right off the bat in 'Washington's Birthday', Shui caught the nostalgia of this atmospheric movement—it was instant melancholy. Pianissimo string bass sound wrapped around the hall. Melodies and motifs sighed and lingered. The gorgeous textured sound of every choir in the orchestra was clear and effective, whether *ppp* or *fff*. The chicken reel rhythms were toe-tapping stuff, served up against the woodwinds' polyrhythmic polytonal brilliance, as celebration dissolved into a distant 'Good Night, Ladies'.

Imagine the mind shift for 23 strings and a keyboard player (switching from piano and celeste to harpsichord) as Shui exited and Cho-Liang Lin entered to be both soloist and conductor in 'Spring' from *The Four Seasons*. With extraordinarily bright tuning they gave a whole new meaning to terraced textures and atmosphere. Tutti were transparent and buoyant. Three violins consorting with the harpsichord had their own defined presence. I thought the interchange between Lin and Concertmaster Alexander Souptel couldn't be beat until I heard his interplay with magnifi-

cent Principal Cellist Nella Hawkins in the other three concertos. This was the best I've ever heard Lin as soloist. His technique was flawless, his rhythms and articulation upbeat without being clipped, his style supremely lyrical, and his shaping of lines richly malleable.

Yet for all that, the big surprise was Lin's skill as a conductor. Rotating easily from left to right as he stood, he drew out the harmonic and lyrical functions of Vivaldi's bass line, whether played by the violins, violas, cellos, or string basses. One rather common harmonic shift in the second violins added a luscious moment to the second movement of 'Autumn', especially in the superb acoustics of the Esplanade on the Bay Concert Hall (one of acoustician Russell Johnson's best). As soloist, Lin's shifts in vibrato and weight on the bow in the second movement of 'Summer' provided perfect contrast to the tensile sound of the orchestra painting its own colors close to the bridge. And in 'Winter' it was especially icy "close to the bridge", as if the orchestra's *allegretto* articulations were a means of keeping warm. In the second movement Lin made his mellow violin float over the violas and cellos, and the finale was a fabulous fiddling hoe-down for all the strings.

And so it went as Spring was followed by Decoration Day, then Summer, Fourth of July, Autumn, Thanksgiving, and Winter. This was Shui's program idea, and it worked because both the Ives and Vivaldi are based on three common elements: atmosphere, picture painting, and terraced textures. Indeed, the wilted ending of 'Decoration Day' served as gentle segue into 'Summer', the 'Fourth of July' brawl led into Autumn's drunken bash (the one element Lin was too gentle with), and

Autumn ends in the same key Thanksgiving Day begins in.

But not even Shui's ingenious programming (what a relief not to throw the Ives at an audience in one big onslaught) could outshine his conducting. His gestures practically painted Decoration Day's rousing march to clearly audible effect, following by the achingly evocative quick fade of the second violins. Thanksgiving was the cry for help or salvation that the mercurial Ives intended, and Shui never once let the inner pulse meander.

Orchestral soloists—a deeply expressive flute, poignant English horn, four sets of distant chimes, a trumpet seemingly over the horizon, and stirring brass replacing a chorus in the finale—were stunning all night. Good news for the Singapore Conservatory (Jan-Feb 2007), where many SSO players are on the faculty.

'Fourth of July' brought things full circle for Shui. He's no slouch with rhythms, poly-mixes, and dynamics to begin with. In the 26 measures that require a second conductor for the percussion that are an eighth-beat off from the rest of the orchestra, it was Shui who assisted David Zinman and the Baltimore Symphony in their 1995 Argo recording. With this concert, which wrapped up Shui's 10th anniversary season as the SSO's music director, it was he who was master conductor of what has become a world-class orchestra that can switch between such radically divergent styles with virtuosic ease.

A Week Later

Robert Markow

Two years ago I heard the SSO in Carnegie Hall give an absolutely spectacular performance of Richard Strauss's *Don Juan*. Music Director Lan Shui brought off another Straussian miracle last November 23 at home in Singapore with *Ein Heldenleben*, proving once again that Singapore's cultural life is keeping pace with its advances in medicine, finance, technology, and education. 20 years ago the SSO was a good regional orchestra. Today it unquestionably ranks among the world's best. On the basis of what I heard in *Heldenleben*, the SSO may just possibly have the world's finest strings at the moment. Right to the back of each section, every player was giving 110%. There was a sheen to the sound such as is rarely heard anymore, anywhere. Technically the playing was impeccable, yet there was also an élan—a sense of pride and pleasure in the effort. Russian Concertmaster Alexander Souptel brought a spirit of bold adventure and profound eloquence to his solos, Principal Trumpet Laurence Gargan threatened at times to cover the orchestra in tidal waves of sound, and the delicate exposed tuba duets were flawless. Is there anything this orchestra can't do? Lan Shui has been music director there for ten years. Let's hope he stays another ten.

