

## CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

# Orchestra in Development, Two Soloists in Their Prime

By **BERNARD HOLLAND**

The effect of European classical music on the Far East is not that different from its effect on the United States. It simply came later, and without the successive waves of immigrants who carried old ways of music in their suitcases and reinvested them in American culture.

But Brahms and company have made the long voyage, and a return trip is under way. Asian musicians populate the string sections of Western orchestras, flood American and

## Singapore Symphony

Avery Fisher Hall

European conservatories and commissions, become prominent soloists, compose for the world stage and, as in the case of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, establish symphonic institutions of their own.

With a big audience, major management, star soloists and their music director, Lan Shui, the Singaporeans framed Wednesday night's concert at Avery Fisher Hall with Richard Strauss and in between grappled with East-West relations. This is already a competent set of professionals, with true string playing but perhaps room to grow in the wind and brass sections. Strauss's "Don Juan" did not fail in the enthusiasm depart-



Photo by Ito for The New York Times

The Singapore Symphony Orchestra, with Lan Shui conducting.

ment, exuding a hurtling fierceness at an emotional level somewhere between the tightly wound and a barely curbed hysteria.

The Suite from "Der Rosenkavalier" at the end was more settled, and Mr. Shui took his musicians through all of the ritards, accelerations, swells and diminutions that mark correct Straussian interpretation. Some of these devices worked natu-

rally; others sounded more studied than easily felt. This is a group in the midst of a learning process and will get much better.

In the program's two inner pieces, Western orchestral style greeted Chinese sensibilities. No expense seems to have been spared to show this music off. Yo-Yo Ma was the soloist in Chen Yi's "Ballad, Dance and Fantasy," and Gil Shahan

played the violin in "The Butterfly Lovers," composed collaboratively by Chen Gang and He Zhanhao in 1959. The Ma-Shaham appearance represented a high-end parcel of musical real estate.

Chen Yi's music is about storytelling and theater, and a search for striking and original effects. Mr. Ma's long, overarching solos are the storytellers here. There is bent intonation, intentional harshness of bow attacks and swooping portamento — all in imitation of traditional Chinese stringed instruments.

Orchestra players whisper, stringed instruments scurry, the high and low possibilities of winds are tested, and timpani explode like cannonfire. There are also moments of big brass and soaring violins quite in the style of the "Don Juan" music that came before. Germanic ideas of construction and development have little place here. This is a narrative bustling for attention, using orchestra sound as its stage and props.

"The Butterfly Lovers" was denounced during Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-76), although how this music could offend anyone, politically or otherwise, is difficult to understand. With traditional modal scales as raw material and a sweetness of soul to give them shape, it has as its only ambition a simple songfulness, a character on which Mr. Shahan's gorgeous tone could feed endlessly. Both he and Mr. Ma were very good.