

SSO dazzles in China

The orchestra's concerts get a warm reception in Beijing and Shanghai

Robert Markow

THE Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) garnered warm response to its concerts in Beijing and Shanghai.

The concerts, in Shanghai last Sunday and in Beijing on Tuesday, were part of the orchestra's five-city tour of China and Taiwan.

They also coincide with the ongoing month-long Singapore Season in both cities, a showcase of the Republic's arts and culture organised by 14 government agencies.

Both concerts showed the heights to which SSO conductor Shui Lan has brought the orchestra in his 10 years as music director.

He led the same programme in both cities and it was one designed for audience appeal and to feature the orchestra's greatest strength, its magnificent 63-strong string section.

Rachmaninoff's sumptuous, lushly romantic Second Symphony – all 57 minutes of it – unfolded in glorious waves of sound.

American violinist Gil Shaham was the soloist in the Butterfly Lovers Concerto,



PHOTO: SSO

SHANGHAI HIGH: Gil Shaham wows them with his solo.

which he has made one of his calling cards of late.

This Asian variant of the Romeo and Juliet story can easily become cloying in the wrong hands, but such is his innate artistry and obvious love for the work's deeply expressive message that one could not help but be seduced.

Audiences in both cities heard a

world-class orchestra in peak form, and they responded warmly, resulting in encores from Shaham and the orchestra.

But while Beijing awarded the more enthusiastic applause, Shanghai got the better performance.

The latter's Oriental Concert Hall, part of the futuristic Shanghai Oriental Art Center, allowed the SSO's sound to bloom and glow in a way it could not in Beijing's Poly Theatre, where the acoustic setting was uncomfortably bright,

almost garish.

In Beijing, musicians also talked of not being able to hear each other. Consequently, there were a few minor blemishes in intonation and ensemble.

But the Shanghai performance came as close to perfection as this writer has ever experienced from an orchestra. Ra-

zor-sharp attacks, well-blended and balanced sonorities, and a dynamic range that extended from the threshold of audibility to towering walls of sound all attested to the extraordinary discipline the conductor has instilled into the orchestra.

Concertgoers turned out in impressive numbers, filling Shanghai's 1,900-seat hall to about 75 per cent capacity and Beijing's 1,400-seat facility to about 85 per cent.

Many of the conductor's long-time friends and colleagues turned up to greet him backstage after each performance. These included violinist Lin Cho-Liang, composer Tan Dun and Chen Gang, co-composer of the Butterfly Lovers Concerto with He Zhanhao.

Shui says: "The performances in Shanghai and Beijing were extremely well-received and I am heartened by the enthusiastic response. I am proud of our musicians for the outstanding performances they gave."

Indeed, the two concerts showed that the SSO has learnt how both to dazzle the ears with technical brilliance and to touch the heart with expressive fervour.

> Robert Markow is an American freelance writer based in Montreal who writes for American Record Guide, Music Magazine (Toronto), The Strad, Opera News and Opera Magazine.