

Prom 61: Singapore Symphony Orchestra/Shui – a tour de force for Haefliger

Royal Albert Hall, London

The SSO's Proms debut showcased a sensational Zhou Long premiere and noble no-frills Rachmaninov

★★★★★

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Rapid-fire figurations ... Andreas Haefliger performs Zhou Long's Postures during Prom 61 at the Royal Albert Hall, London. Photograph: Chris Christodolou/BBC

The centrepiece of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra's debut Prom, with its music director, Lan Shui, was the European premiere of Postures, a new concerto by Zhou Long, written for the versatile Swiss pianist Andreas Haefliger. Born in China, Zhou now lives in the US, and the east-west fusion that characterises his music is informed by the classical Chinese tradition that was suppressed when he was a teenager during the Cultural Revolution.

Postures is a big, three-movement work, cast in some respects along traditional lines, with overtones of Ravel and Stravinsky in the scoring. But the title derives from kung fu and the complex piano writing aligns western virtuosity with eastern ideas of the martial artist as a spiritually focused athlete. The piano's percussive qualities are stressed throughout. Haefliger's rapid-fire figurations are tracked and echoed by a huge array of orchestral percussion.

During the slow movement, he bends into the body of the instrument and strikes the strings with his hands to produce bell-like sounds that suggest ritual solemnity. It's not perfect. Zhou can repeat ideas too often. There are discursive passages, and only the hair-raising finale feels compact. But it's a sensational tour de force from Haefliger, and a fine display of orchestral bravado for the SSO and Shui.

Russian music formed the rest of the programme, which kicked off with a driven, rather unyielding account of the overture to Glinka's Ruslan and Lyudmila and closed with Rachmaninov's second symphony. Shui's credentials as a Rachmaninov interpreter are impeccable, and his no-frills performance was intense without sentimentality, noble but never bombastic. The tang in the SSO's brass throughout the evening suggested an orchestral sound modelled along Russian rather than western European lines. The single encore was Walton's March for A History of the English-Speaking Peoples, flamboyantly done.

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