

SSO sizzle at Proms debut

Conductor Shui Lan and 98 musicians wow audience in London

Review Concert

SSO AT THE BBC PROMS

Singapore Symphony Orchestra,
Shui Lan, conductor, Andreas Haefliger, piano
Royal Albert Hall, London/Tuesday

Mervin Beng

In London

This year's BBC Proms features a host of international orchestras, from Beijing to Istanbul, Iceland to Melbourne, presenting concerts as diverse as the cultures they represent.

Thirty-five years might seem a long time to build up to the Singapore Symphony Orchestra's debut Proms concert, but orchestras with much longer histories than the SSO are just making their Proms debut this year and others are still awaiting their elusive invitation.

The SSO's tour programmes typically include a substantial Romantic symphony and true to form, its music director Shui Lan selected Rachmaninov's Symphony No. 2, a challenging work, paired with a new work for piano and orchestra by American-based Chinese composer Zhou Long.

The 98 musicians and Shui might have been excused for taking some time to overcome jet lag and warm to the occa-



SSO conductor Shui Lan (left) and pianist Andreas Haefliger (far left) take a bow after the performance at London's Royal Albert Hall. PHOTO: BBC/CHRIS CHRISTODOULOU

sion, but none was needed.

Shui's brisk reading of the Overture To Russlan And Ludmilla was handled with aplomb by the strings and the orchestra sounded remarkably at ease from the first beat of the baton.

The overture was followed by the European premiere of Zhou's Postures For Piano And Orchestra, a co-commission by the BBC Proms and the SSO, with Andreas Haefliger on piano. The composer admits to regarding the piano as a

highly percussive instrument and in his Postures, he juxtaposes a percussive piano with animal gestures from gongfu.

Fortunately, what could have been a banal caricature was thoughtfully crafted into three coherent movements - Piano-dance, Pianobells and Pianodrums.

The piano part was written with Haefliger in mind, whose ability to switch from driving percussion to shimmering keyboard runs was most impressive.

Shui and the SSO were equally

empathetic to the dramatic orchestration, with the percussion section relishing the Peking Opera "Monkey" rhythms in the final movement. Parts in the second movement which called for the pianist to strum on the piano strings like a harp felt a little contrived, but the work fully engaged the near-capacity audience, who rewarded it with warm applause.

For a relatively young Asian orchestra to take on Rachmaninov's Second Symphony, an intensely emotional and

demanding work, takes gumption, but orchestra and conductor were up to the challenge.

The opening movement was carefully shaped and layered, followed by an impressively tidy second movement. The achingly beautiful slow movement is always a favourite of audiences, but it was the pure joy that conductor and orchestra exuded in the finale that will be remembered.

Shui's direction of the hour-long symphony from memory was exemplary - intelligent, subtly nuanced and well shaped. He was matched by an orchestra in sizzling form. Every player, every section without exception gave their best, with the principal clarinet, cor anglais, and percussion and horn sections deserving special mention.

The small contingent from Singapore present to support the SSO's Proms debut included Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong, National Arts Council CEO Kathy Lai and High Commissioner to the United Kingdom Foo Chi Hsia. They must have been delighted with the SSO's performance.

The broader Proms audience - the concert drew a capacity audience of 5,500 - were no less enthusiastic about the performance.

In response, Shui and the orchestra obliged with a suitably English encore, a march by William Walton, A History Of The English Speaking Peoples - a clever touch, well appreciated by the audience.

After tonight, this reviewer expects that the SSO will find itself back at the Proms sooner rather than later.

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