

Those Sensational Singaporeans



Gil Shaham performed the *Butterfly Lovers Concerto*.

SSO Tours Shanghai, Beijing, Taipei

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The future of western classical music now lies in Asia". Kurt Masur famously declared a few years ago. An invitation to join the Singapore Symphony (SSO) on its tour of China and Taiwan last October brought this observer discoveries and revelations on a grand scale attesting to the truth of Masur's statement.

First, a few facts. There are nearly as many full-time, full-sized professional orchestras in China as there are in the USA—a feat accomplished in a fraction of time. The country's population of 1.3 billion harbors somewhere between 20 and 100 million piano students (depending on which source you choose to believe), mostly kids. Its GNP is growing at 9% per year. Within the next two years this country will host both the Olympics (2008 in Beijing) and the World's Fair (2010 in Shanghai).

In Shanghai alone, according to the United Airlines in-flight magazine, "a new building of 30 stories or more has been completed every 12 days for the last six years". It is China's most populous city (14-18 million, depending on your source) and will have the world's tallest building, the World Financial Center—to open this year. This is the lively metropolis where I joined the SSO for the first stop on a whirlwind jaunt through three Asian cities.

Like many other large cities in China, Shanghai boasts a spanking new arts complex,

the Oriental Arts Center, opened in late 2004 in Pudong New Area. 20 years ago, Pudong, the region east of central Shanghai across the Huangpu River, was all marshland. Today it looks like a set from a *Star Wars* film. Futuristic, highly individual buildings crowd the landscape. The stunning arts center, designed by French architect Paul Andreu, consists of five halls arranged like petals of a butterfly orchid in full bloom. Its steel and glass shell shimmers in whatever daylight gets through Shanghai's insantly polluted air and glistens at night. Tickets for visiting orchestras are costly by Chinese standards—in the \$40-80 range for most seats (by comparison, a subway ticket costs 24 cents)—but nearly two-thirds of the Center's 2,000 seats were filled for the SSO's concert on October 21. Most of the audience came casually but smartly attired, and the hall was liberally sprinkled with 20- and 30-somethings (parents of those 20 million piano students?). There were few foreigners. Awesome gongs, rather than the pretty chimes or bells we hear in the west, summoned concertgoers to their seats.

The SSO played like gods, and the audience responded accordingly. This is an orchestra on the edge of technical perfection. Lan Shui, its music director for the past ten years, has instilled in his musicians a level of discipline found in only a handful of the world's top orchestras. The SSO plays with an intense pride born of total confidence in themselves and deep respect for Shui. "Everyone gives 110%, all the time", remarked Associate Concertmaster Lynnette Seah.

Right from the opening notes of Barber's

School for Scandal Overture the orchestra was spot-on in a performance that crackled with excitement and offered razor-sharp articulation. Next came the *Butterfly Lovers Concerto*, co-composed by Chen Gang and He Zhanhao. It is crammed full of traditional Chinese tunes that brought smiles of recognition from the audience. Gil Shaham has made the work one of his calling cards lately (he has also recorded it with the SSO—review this issue). This Asian variant of the Romeo and Juliet story—as much a tone poem for violin and orchestra as a concerto—can easily become cloying in the wrong hands, but such is Shaham's innate artistry and obvious love for the music that one could not help but be seduced.

The SSO displays a glow and richness of sound that is immediately striking—the kind of sound one used to associate with orchestras like Philadelphia and Boston. While there are no weak sections, the strings are the orchestra's greatest strength. Rachmaninoff's lushly romantic Symphony No. 2 proved an ideal vehicle for all 63 string players to pour forth waves of glorious sound. They were richly complemented by eloquent solos from principal oboist Rachel Walker, English horn player Elaine Yeo, and principal clarinetist Ma Yue. Brass were refined and beautifully balanced rather than blatantly aggressive.

If Shanghai is China's commercial hub, Beijing is its political hub. Two days later the SSO played in the city's Poly Theatre, still run by a branch of the military, with guards in full dress everywhere. The hall is also the venue for the annual Beijing Festival (2007 was its tenth anniversary), the largest performing arts festival in the country. But its too-bright, almost glassy acoustics created problems. Musicians reported not being able to hear each other on stage. As a result, there was a smattering of imperfect attacks and out-of-tune notes in the winds. Applause was even more enthusiastic than in Shanghai, to the extent that "no applause between movements" (in English only, strangely enough) appeared as a surtitle twice in the course of the Rachmaninoff symphony.

At the time of the SSO's stop in Taipei (October 25), Taiwan was again agitating for membership in the United Nations. Flags lined the streets, banners and posters proclaimed "UN for Taiwan. Peace Forever". Such is the level of political sensitivity that flights between Beijing and Taipei, a relatively short distance, are routed through distant Hong Kong. None of this affected the level of performance the SSO gave here.

The exterior of the National Theatre Concert Hall is designed like one of those garish vermilion temples that adorn postcards, but inside all is elegant and refined. It boasts an acoustic not unlike Boston's Symphony Hall:

impressive clarity, embracing warmth, and highly-tuned sensitivity to nuances of balance, color, and dynamics. The SSO—pros that they are—quickly adapted and turned in a performance that on a scale of 1 to 10 must be rated a 12.

Though the population of Taipei is but a fraction of Beijing's or Shanghai's, it generated an audience equal in size and included many students with instruments in tow. It was also fiercely attentive—one could hear the proverbial pin drop in the quietest moments—and hugely appreciative. Rather than do the now-meaningless "standing ovation" that follows every routine concert in the west, Taipei's audience sat but roared its approval each time Shui returned for a bow.

40 years ago, Herbert Kupferberg wrote a book about the Philadelphia Orchestra called *Those Fabulous Philadelphians*. Today he might have written *Those Sensational Singaporeans*.



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piece further, placing it in an unknown, almost weightless time and place. The ensemble was positioned in the back of the hall behind the audience, and the singers often processed from there to the front stage on a kind of center aisle catwalk. They wore heavy black costumes and pale white make-up. With bugged out eyes, they moved in a physically tortured and gnarled manner. It was like a German version of *Butch* (the post-Hiroshima style of Japanese performance).

The main stage started out as a wall of mirrors and later became either a vast empty expanse of blinding white light, a pit of deep blackness, or something in between, like an intensely starlit sky. In the second act, a naked man (probably the minotaur) was stretched out in a hexagonal tunnel, as if in a giant CAT scan, which was suspended above the stage. Later the performers crawled about beneath and on top of a grand piano. It all came to feel like *The Addams Family* meets *Lost in Space*.

It was shocking not only that the final scene was performed beneath a giant revolving mirror ball but that the audience responded with such hearty and sustained applause—and that I was sitting in the most respected of Berlin's three opera houses. Based on this four-night sampling of headline events, the quality of musical performances in Berlin is extraordinary high, but the currents of contemporary musical styles feel dated and remote. And audiences, it seems, are trained to accept almost anything put before them.

