

CULTURE NOTES

Eastern promise



The Singapore Symphony Orchestra is like a teenage athlete just about to hit peak form. This could be one of the great orchestras of the 21st century. So could its rival, the Malaysian Philharmonic. We all know that Asia produces dazzling soloists. But orchestras? I was sceptical until I heard the Singaporeans at the Southbank Centre this month. Accompanying Stephen Hough in Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto, they matched his virtuosity with their bouncy brio. The conductor, Lan Shui (above), had the sections swaying like stalks in a gale in Rachmaninov's *Isle of the Dead* and Debussy's *La Mer*. The encores: Bernstein's *Candide* overture, taken at a lick that would have raised even Lenny's eyebrows, and Stokowski's arrangement of *Air on a G String*. Rarely has Bach been mucked about with so classily: grave purity from the upper strings, that trademark joyful bounce from plucked basses.

You can hear Lan Shui conduct the SSO in *La Mer* on Bis Records; the Malaysian Philharmonic is equally fine in Suk's *Asrael*, also on Bis. If I admire the Singaporeans more, it's because the Malaysians essentially bought themselves a first-rate orchestra of foreigners. Lan Shui has turned an untidy, largely native-born ensemble into something extraordinary. 'A bridge between East and West', we're told. That's fine as a multicultural mission statement, but I'm more excited by the fact that Singapore, like Venezuela, has learnt how to make us feel that we're listening to a European masterpiece for the first time.

—Damian Thompson