

simplest before he puts it through its decorated paces.

The 15 pieces on the second CD naturally show a good deal more formal variety and invention of yet higher quality. Two of the first tracks on the disc, *Music Murmuring in the Trees* and the *Mazurka-étude* (published in 1851 and 1858 respectively), clearly reveal what a strong influence Wallace must have had on Gottschalk: you could easily pass them off as works by the younger composer. *Souvenir of Spain*, indeed, contains several passages that occur almost note-for-note in Gottschalk's *Souvenirs d'Andalousie*, although here the chronology is difficult to establish: Gottschalk first performed his piece in a concert in Madrid in 1852, and Wallace's was published in London and New York in 1856, the year in which Gottschalk gave the U.S. premiere of *Souvenirs d'Andalousie*, also in New York; it may now be impossible to establish which was written first. More striking, much of *L'absence et le retour* (1859), described in its subtitle as a "Romance suivie d'une grande polka brillante," could pass as Chopin; so could *Une fleur de Pologne* (1862)—indeed, with that title it may even be a deliberate homage. And *La force*, Wallace's stormy "Third Étude de Salon" (published in 1853), comes very close to Liszt. The disc closes with the most ambitious piece in the program: *La cracovienne*, written in 1842, and almost 12 minutes long, built from an extended dramatic introduction, quieter central section, and concluding set of variations.

On both CDs Wallace's taxing piano-writing really puts Rosemary Tuck through the hoop, but she emerges from its glittering challenges unbowed; indeed, her playing communicates the same zeal for the music that emerged in our conversation. The piano tone is full-bodied and the recorded sound natural. Robert Pheasant and Tuck herself provide the helpful notes for the first disc, Peter Jaggard for the second. Both discs perform an important role in reacquainting listeners with one of the major voices of its time and a figure of genuine historical importance in the history of American, Australian, and British music.

The Sensational Singapore Symphony Orchestra

BY ROBERT MARKOW

Honest music critics do not often get to use the word "sensational." But that was the only way to describe concerts I heard the Singapore Symphony Orchestra give last October in Shanghai, Beijing, and Taipei. In joining the orchestra for part of its most recent tour to China and Taiwan, I was able to learn at close range exactly how this orchestra qualifies to be ranked as one of the finest in the world, how it got that way, and what makes it tick.

But first, a word about the booming performing arts scene in Singapore: in addition to the SSO, the city can boast an opera company (Singapore Lyric Opera, founded in 1991 and offering just two productions a year but which recently gave the best *Barber of Seville* I've ever seen); a superb string quartet, the T'ang Quartet, which consists of former SSO musicians and represents the only world-class string quartet with all Asian members based in an Asian city; a recently-opened conservatory with a curriculum modeled after Peabody's; and an iconic performing arts complex, Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay, which opened in 2002 with four performance spaces, 20 eateries, and, of course, lots of shops (this is Singapore, after all). There is also a Singapore Chinese Orchestra, a Singapore Indian Orchestra, a semiprofessional Singapore Philharmonic, an annual piano festival, a dance company, several theater companies operating in various languages, an arts radio station, an international film festival, and—until recently, an arts journal and a Tower Records outlet—all this in a city of just over four million.

Like much else in Singapore—and Asia generally—these days, the SSO rose to prominence in an astonishingly short time. Founded in 1979 (exactly a century after China's oldest orchestra in Shanghai), it is still a youngster by the standards of most American and European orchestras. Yet in these 28 years, the orchestra has already been abroad 16 times to 24 countries on four continents. In addition to many of the expected venues like New York, Paris, Berlin, Munich, and Hong Kong, it

has played in Athens, Istanbul, Cairo, and at the famed temples of Angkor in Cambodia, where it gave a benefit concert with José Carreras for land-mine victims in 2002.

In just the past decade alone, the SSO has grown from a good regional orchestra to a world-class ensemble with a level of discipline George Szell would have been proud of. I recall hearing a concert just a few years back in which the brass tended to blare rather than blend, strings did not always make perfect unison entrances, and there were problems with intonation. But I also noted the superb musicianship of several woodwind soloists and the enthusiasm, dedication, and generosity of spirit emanating from every player. Here was definitely an orchestra with a promising future and the potential for greatness.

Three main factors contributed to realizing that potential. One was the continuing presence and meticulous hard work of Music Director Lan Shui, who has been at the helm since 1997 (only the second music director in the orchestra's history, following Choo Hoey, who regularly returns as guest conductor). The second was the move to the concert hall at Esplanade, which opened in 2002. Until then, the SSO had been performing in the city's handsome but acoustically challenged Victoria Hall, a century-old, 900-seat historical building named in honor of the eponymous monarch. Esplanade gave the musicians not only a fresh injection of pride but also the ability to hear each other on stage and in a hall that did justice to what they were actually producing. The orchestra's sound, both at home and on tour, is now perfectly balanced and homogeneous, there is nary an out-of-tune note, and entrances are immaculate and razor-sharp. The third factor was the orchestra's recording activity. (More on that later.)

The Singapore Symphony has 89 members, of which nearly two-thirds are either Singaporean by birth or acquired citizenship. Others come from almost every corner of the planet—New Zealand, Australia, England, Hungary, Russia, China, Kazakhstan. Eight are Americans. They enjoy a 52-week contract with six weeks paid vacation. The main concert season is divided into two halves: July through December and January through May. Even though Singapore is only about 10 percent Christian, there is a hefty dose of Christmas programming, including *Messiahs* and carol sing-alongs. Pre- and post-concert talks are offered at selected events. As with most American orchestras, there are children's concerts and community outreach programs, many of them free, given at the botanic gardens, the zoo, the race course, and on university campuses.

There are no weak sections in the SSO, but the strings are unquestionably its greatest pride. Aside from the warmly burnished violas, it does not feature a particularly dark or heavy sound, nor is it overly brilliant. Rather, it combines qualities of both extremes, glowing with a richness and intensity that can be associated with only a tiny handful of orchestras in other lands. The orchestra's tour performances of Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony made this abundantly clear. Lan Shui could not have chosen a better vehicle to show off his orchestra's crowning asset: the first movement was darkly brooding; the second, crisp and brilliant; the third, imbued with a deeply poetic vein; and the finale, absolutely exhilarating.

Every orchestra has a handful of star players, and the SSO is no exception. Principal oboist Rachel Walker is one of them, as is English horn-player Elaine Yeo, who makes poetry out of every note. Then there is Jamie Hensch, one of the most powerful fourth horn-players in the business, principal trumpet Laurence Gargan, who can cover the orchestra with tidal waves of sound, and the entire low brass section that breathes and plays like a single musical organism.

Small wonder, then, that a major European label is regularly traveling 6,000 miles to record this orchestra. BIS began recording in Singapore in 1999 with a typically unusual choice of repertoire, the first-ever recordings of all four symphonies of Tchaikovsky, followed a few years later by the same composer's six piano concertos with soloist Noriko Ogawa. To date BIS has released 16 CDs with the SSO, many of them containing music by American, Singaporean, Chinese, or Sino-American composers. These include Chen Yi, Bright Sheng, Zhou Long, Bernard Tan, Richard Yardumian, Steven Stucky, and Alan Hovhaness. Recent releases include "Seascapes"—water music by Debussy, Bridge, Glazunov, and Zhou Long (see *Fanfare* 31:2); "Under the Sign of the Sun"—French works for saxophone and orchestra (*Fanfare* 31:3); and Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with the poems sung in original Chinese. Due for imminent release are an all-Stucky disc with

soloist Evelyn Glennie and a program of tuba concertos (Vaughan Williams, Arutunian, and John Williams) featuring Oystein Baadsvik with Anne Manson conducting. BIS has been averaging two productions a year with the SSO, an agenda it expects to maintain, making the SSO connection the label's most ambitious venture in Asia by far.

"It is evident that recording activity does improve the artists, especially when subjected to the demands of a BIS team," says the label's founding producer Robert von Bahr. "The hall in which the orchestra plays really affects its quality and inspiration; this was proven by the huge leap the orchestra made when it moved to its new location at Esplanade, and the evidence is there on the new SACD 'Seascapes.' It is wonderful to work with an ensemble and a conductor that are so open to 'different' repertoire. This repertoire obviously includes music by certain Asian and Sino-American composers in which the SSO is truly expert, since the musicians know how traditional Chinese instruments are supposed to sound when simulated by Western instruments."

Much of the SSO's current stature can be credited to Shui. Born in Hangzhou, just south of Shanghai, he studied initially at the Shanghai Conservatory and the Central Conservatory. In 1986 he attended Boston University, followed by stints working with the major orchestras of Los Angeles, Baltimore, Detroit, Cleveland, and New York as associate, assistant, or affiliate conductor. Although he could easily develop an important American career if he wished, he divides his time almost entirely between Singapore, where he conducts 16 weeks each year, and Europe, where he spends much of his time in Denmark with the Aalborg Symphony and, as of last fall, the Copenhagen Philharmonic. "I do this for geographic reasons," explains Shui. "I just don't see coping with jet lag and fatigue all the time. I prefer to limit myself to just two focal points where I can work efficiently and give my best."

Shui's "best" includes two qualities rarely found in conductors these days. One is the ability to shape a large work or a long movement so that it takes on almost tangible shape. He sees the entire musical architecture from the beginning, constantly maintains momentum, brings meaning to every line and phrase, and knows where the biggest climax of all is going to come so that when it arrives, it nearly lifts you out of your seat. The slow movement of Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony is a case in point. With unflinching logic, he paces his progress through the music so that when the orchestra reaches the highest peak in the mountain range, the sound is so glorious it takes your breath away. The other is the way Shui makes the orchestra *sing*, drawing on a huge dynamic range and coaxing a wide palette of colors from the musicians so as to infuse a sense of life and vitality in every line and phrase. Shui demonstrates time and again the difference between a routine performance and a true musical event.

Though now 50, Shui retains a boyish face, smiles readily and exhibits none of the pomp, haughtiness, or impatience found in many of his colleagues. Instead, he radiates an aura of calm, courtesy, and sincerity. Despite a wealth of knowledge and experience, he shows a ready willingness to learn from others, and often solicits advice, suggestions, or recommendations from his players. When asked to name his greatest accomplishment in the 10 years he has led the SSO, he replies without hesitation, "the confidence and respect we have built together. Any musician in the orchestra can speak his or her mind about a musical matter. I don't run a dictatorship here. The soul of an orchestra comes from trust and cooperation. There have been very few changes in personnel during my tenure in Singapore. Morale is very important. We work like one big family." True to his word, at each pre-concert rehearsal on the recent China/Taiwan tour, there were frequent discussions with—not orders from—Shui about matters of balance, projection, and ensemble.

When asked about programming, Shui replied, "I like a creative approach." This claim is borne out not only on the BIS recordings but in concerts as well. One program last season (November 2006) saw movements of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* interspersed with movements of Ives's *Holidays Symphony*. Haydn is a composer Shui particularly likes because "his music is so good for training orchestras." Among contemporary composers, Christopher Rouse is a favorite. "I want to bring more good contemporary music to Singapore audiences, but I have to do so gradually. Audiences are wary of modern music, and corporate sponsors don't like to see empty seats. Rouse's Requiem and the Trombone Concerto are works I'm hoping to do soon."

Shui notes, "The orchestra is now at a point where it has the flexibility to play anything." This is no idle boast. Encores on the China/Taiwan tour included such diverse works as the subdued "Solweig's Song" from *Peer Gynt*, which was rendered with haunting beauty, and a Strauss waltz (*Voices of Spring*) the Vienna Philharmonic might well have applauded. Indeed, the SSO has come a long way in 28 years. Associate Concertmaster Lynnette Seah, the only remaining member who played the SSO's first concert back in 1979, recalls that in the orchestra's early days, "our sound was much thinner, it wasn't well blended, and there was no body to it. We had half the number of string-players we have today. The entire woodwind and brass sections came from Eastern Europe. But we matured very quickly. We now have a distinctive sound and a vibrancy seldom found even in older orchestras."

Yet, observes principal oboist Rachel Walker, there is still room for growth. "In England, where I come from, we are trained to deliver with little or no rehearsal. In Singapore, it's a longer road from the first rehearsal to the finished product compared to more experienced orchestras. But we do get there. We all give 150 percent for Shui, and we regularly invite back the conductors who are good at raising our standards—David Atherton, Gerard Schwarz, Thierry Fischer, Nicholas Cleobury—each with his individual stylistic strengths." The newest member of the orchestra, Canadian horn-player Marc-Antoine Robillard, comments: "What really amazes me about the SSO is the level of enthusiasm here."

The extraordinary level of sensitivity of the SSO musicians and their finely tuned ability to listen and adjust was driven home at the concert in Taipei. This was the third time I had heard them play the Rachmaninoff symphony on the tour. Somewhere in the midst of that long, gorgeous clarinet solo in the third movement, Ma Yue decided, on impulse, to play one particular note much more softly than he had in previous performances. In a millisecond, the entire accompanying string section dropped from *pp* to *pppp*. It was a tiny detail but a significant gesture that revealed an orchestra at the very cutting edge of professionalism.

This professionalism was also much in evidence at a concert I heard a month later (November 22) in the orchestra's hometown, an all-Strauss program led by principal guest conductor Okko Kamu. Despite Kamu's lame, almost non-existent interpretation of the immensely colorful *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the orchestra nevertheless played magnificently, with an almost galvanic intensity from the strings, high-voltage brass-playing (trumpet-player Laurence Gargan's high C's were spine tingling), and overall tremendous depth of sound at the big moments. Essentially, the orchestra led the conductor through this performance.

The SSO brims with pride, enthusiasm, and a level of energy that characterizes the entire city. It has learned, in a remarkably short time, how both to dazzle the ears with technical brilliance and to touch the heart with expressive beauty. Orchestras just don't get much better than this. Singapore should declare it a national treasure.

(Programs for next season can be found at www.sso.org.sg.)

Classical Recordings

ABBREVIATIONS

acc	accordion	hg	hurdy-gurdy	sax	saxophone
alt, a	alto	hn	horn	Snf	Sinfonia
arr.	arranged by	hrm	harmonium	sop, s	soprano
attr.	attributed to	hp	harp	spkr	speaker
bar	baritone	hpd	harpsichord	St	State
bbar	bass-baritone	kbd	keyboard	Str	Strings
bc	continuo	kd	timpani	Sxt	Sextet
bdn	bandoneón	LPs	long-playing records	syn	synthesizer
bh	basset horn	lt	lute	tb	tuba
bn	bassoon	man	mandolin	thn	trombone
bp	bagpipes	mez	mezzo-soprano	ten, t	tenor
Br	Brass	mmb	marimba	thb	theorbo