

## Review Concert

## FIDDLE FADDLE INTERNATIONAL

Singapore Chinese Orchestra  
Esplanade Concert Hall/Last Saturday

## Chang Tou Liang

Although not emblazoned on the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's mission statement, one of its passions is bringing diverse musical cultures of the world closer together. This concert conducted by Yeh Tsung celebrating string playing from Chinese, Gypsy and Celtic traditions may be judged as its most successful cross-cultural experiment to date.

A concert opening with Leroy Anderson's Fiddle Faddle transcribed for Chinese instruments already suggests some-

## Cross-cultural experiment succeeds

thing quite extraordinary. Although the huqins maintained a hushed sotto voce presence through most of this perpetual motion, Chen Ning Chi's slick orchestration kept the winds and percussion busy to marvellous and mercurial effect.

The first fiddler to step up was Alexander Souptel, concertmaster of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and already well known for his forays into gypsy music. Freed from his usual strait-jacketed role, he gave a most irrepressibly unbuttoned showing in Gypsy Rhapsody orchestrated by Phoon Yew Tien.

There were portamenti (slides and

slurs) galore, and every impulse was to improvise on the spot and dazzle with cheeky play on harmonics and overtones. In melodies such as Monti's Csardas, Whistling Hora and Russian favourite Dark Eyes (Ochi Chorniye), a free-spirited wizardry held court while the orchestra manfully kept pace with his rather elastic concept of timing.

While Souptel pranced on stage at every turn, Chinese erhu virtuosa Wang Xiao Nan was his polar opposite, maintaining a stolid, rock-like posture for her pieces. In Chen Gang's Sunshine Over Tashkhurgan and a rhythmic Tibetan medley called Paradise, her playing exud-

ed an amazon-like physicality, sturdy and unflinching in tone yet nimble and agile in her virtuosic passage-work.

After the interval, Celtic fiddler Chris Stout impressed with a heartfelt amble in the slow and meditative Da Trows Jig before segueing into the tear-jerking strophic hymn of Michaelswood, both original compositions of his. Then came six Celtic melodies in Eric Watson's foot-tapping medley Fiddlers Free, which saw him flying full throttle, while luxuriating with the familiar O Waly Waly as its glorious centrepiece.

All three fiddlers were united in Watson's A Confluence Of Voices, a work

where the greatest challenge was to engage each instrument at its own idiom and forte, while uniting them sensibly as in a triple concerto. Souptel, Wang and Stout first played in unison, and then their parts separated with chances for individual display. As in the price of globalisation, it was inevitable that each had lost a bit of its uniqueness but gained a little something from the others.

It closed with a hearty jig where all three greatly relished their roles, continuing into the encore-like Race Of Three Fiddlers, orchestrated by Watson and based on the erhu-classic Horse Racing.

It was a neck-and-neck tussle, with more ad-libbing before all instruments on stage broke off with the loudest session of synchronised neighing. The result was a photo finish, but with three equal winners.