

Source:

MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 2015

THE STRAITS TIMES

Melodies with a festive air

Review Concert

STRUMMING & DRUMMING

Singapore Chinese Orchestra
Singapore Conference Hall/Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra's first concert of the year had a festive air about it, even though Chinese New Year is more than a month away.

SCO resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong also served as the concert's host, speaking to the audience in Mandarin and English, which added to the informality of the event.

Young Singaporean composer Wang Chen Wei's *We Soar* combined Chinese melodies with the patented sonata form in a colourful melange, memorable for its second subject first heard on the xun, a blown instrument resembling an ocarina.

The development took the form of a fugue with different groups of instruments taking turns on its cheery principal subject, which made for a rousing opener.

The "strumming" in the concert's title was fronted by Shanghai-based guzheng virtuosa Luo Xiao Ci in two of her original compositions.

Night Thoughts was based on arguably the best-known poem from the Tang dynasty by Li Bai, an exquisite piece of chamber music featuring a duo with SCO principal cellist Xu Zhong. Its evocation of nostalgia and longing built up from a quietly ruminative beginning to an ecstatic climax.

More showy was Luo's guzheng concerto *The Rhythm*, which opened with vigorous tribal drumming before settling down in a meditative solo, discreetly accompanied by serene bell sounds and tem-

ple block. A lively dance soon dispelled the dreamy reverie before closing on a percussive and frenzied high.

Prolonged applause ensured that the audience got to hear her haunting alto voice in a brief encore, *Like A Dream*.

The "drumming" was provided by percussionists Ngoh Kheng Seng and Xu Fan in two concertos for percussion duo. Chung Yiu Kwong's *King Of Qin In Battle* was premiered by Dame Evelyn Glennie and Xie Cong Xin in Taipei in 2010. Both tuned and untuned percussion were employed in this tour de force of exuberance that began in relative calm and escalated into a full-blown frontal assault.

Xu's mastery of marimbas on four mallets, reprising Glennie's role, was a sight to behold. Roles were reversed when Ngoh commanded the tuned percussion in Zhang Yong Qin's *Ji Ji Feng*, which elaborated on a popular motif found in Peking opera. Concertmaster Li Baoshun's jinghu, the highest pitched fiddle, made a small but significant cameo.

The orchestra also performed Jiang Ying's *Daqu*, the final movement of *Impressions Of Chinese Music*, which portrayed the broad vistas and landscapes of Central Asia in a canvas that resembled the film music that accompanied the epic westerns of old.

Gu Guan Ren's *Spring Suite* in five movements was a picture-postcard view of a nascent season, replete with birdsong and multiple dizi solos, culminating in a raucous dance of Silk Road origins.

The ever-energetic conductor Quek then led a clap-along in a newly composed encore piece, Jiang Ying's *Train Toccata*, a railway-inspired piece with suonas that simulated whistles and pistons, which was a big hit with the audience.