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Shanghai surprise, by way of Singapore

REVIEW:
The Goddess
Singapore Chinese Orchestra
Tsuen Wan Town Hall

The Lion City's top Chinese ensemble made its long-awaited Hong Kong debut on Saturday night with a lavish modern sound that surprised traditional fans.

The 80-plus Singapore Chinese Orchestra, under its dynamic music director Tsung Yeh, showcased a fusion of East-West music with a unique flavour.

The music set to *The Goddess*, the Old Shanghai silent film starring the tragic Ruan Lingyu in her prime, conjured up nostalgia for Hong Kong too, especially in the scores by Lincoln Lo. Under the baton of Shanghai-born Yeh, the lush music brought about an exquisite bygone sentiment that elevated the 1934 film with a post-colonial-era relevance.

The concert opened with an overture specially written by Lo's uncle, Law Wai-lun, a co-composer of the music.

The bouncy tone set the scene with a detailed documentary tracing the history of Shanghai and its film industry, ending in Ruan's suicide in 1935. The musical lines in plucked instruments such as harp, guzheng and pipa produced an impact reminiscent of the balalaika in *Dr Zhivago*. But the band drums, piano and saxophone brought out the Old Shanghai in nascent modernity.

Yeh treated us to a surprise encore, *Below the Lion Rock*, the quasi-theme song for Hong Kong, played by an orchestra from Singapore – a memorable moment in this tale of two cities.

Oliver Chou