

Delightful Hakka harmonies

Review Concert

TUNES OF HAKKA

Singapore Chinese Orchestra
Singapore Conference Hall
Last Friday

Chang Tou Liang

Who were the Hakkas? According to The Singapore Encyclopaedia, the Hakkas or Khek, literally "guest people", were a Chinese dialect group that migrated from northern China to the south over the past millennium.

Settling mostly near Huizhou in Guangdong province, they are distinct from the Cantonese and known for their circular community houses or tulou.

This specially themed evening devoted to Hakka music, conducted by Yeh Tsung, was the Chinese counterpart of a Western classical concert highlighting Gypsy and Hungarian music.

Central to the theme was its rigorous song and dance tradition, which began with Lo Leung Fei's Medley Of Hakka Tunes, a celebratory suite of three folksongs. The slow central movement delighted in the pastoral xiao and a lovely melody on the gaohu.

Two Hakka guest singers then stole the show.

Well-known Chinese soprano Huang Hong Ying sang six folksongs, beginning with more traditional numbers such as Profusion Of Olive Blossoms and Faraway Sight Of Your Arrival. Her highland twang and comely demeanour had native Hakka speakers in the audience cooing with joy.

Welcome To Huizhou was an undisguised advertisement of her native city, extolling its virtues, scenery and culinary treats. Even Hakka Yong Tau Foo got an honourable mention.

This and the strophic Boat Song revelled in yodel-like refrains that went something like hei-ya-lo-ti-hei, to which the audience gamely clapped along.

Taiwanese singer-songwriter Huang Lien Yu was more like a country singer, a Khek Kenny Rogers if you will.

He played the guitar, harmonica and crooned along in A Path Of Mountain Songs and Hakka World, songs which reflect the itinerant way of life and how Hakkas are well-adapted to wherever they are.

In Rising Sun, his inebriated guttural grunts were chorus to the joys of waking up with a hangover.

The second half was more serious.

Kuan Nai Chung's Folk Song for piano and orchestra could have easily been called Hakka Rhapsody, for its slow-fast form and Lisztian pianism from the unerring fingers of Clarence Lee, the second-prize winner of last year's National Piano Competition.

The longest work was the world premiere of Wang Ning's Earth House Nocturne, which was more a symphony in one movement.

Xu Zhong's evocative solo cello opened by depicting a sage spinning old yarns from within a tulou. Soon, it evolved into a dance and the film music-like score introduced different groups of instruments, supported by women's voices of the Nanyang Khek Community Guild Choir.

Somewhat overlong by half, the profusion of ideas in its 25 minutes served to usher in the two solo singers, who were united for a final sing-out.

A more grandiose piece de occasion for Hakka pride would be hard to find.