

Rainbow of poetry in motion

Review **Concert**

RAINBOW VERSES

Singapore Chinese Orchestra
Huayi - Chinese Festival of Arts
Esplanade Concert Hall/Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra's contribution to this year's Huayi - Chinese Festival of Arts was a unique concert uniting poetry and music. Whether ancient verse, dating over a millennium to the Tang and Song dynasties, sat easily with the far more contemporary art form of symphonic music was not even a doubt

once the performances got under way.

The juxtaposition worked so well that one wondered why this had not been attempted more often. This was a first-time collaboration with the National Theatre of China, whose thespians recited the verses with an air of authority and authenticity that could hardly be bettered.

The selection of poetry and music, overseen by conductor Yeh Tsung and National Theatre of China director Tian Qinxin, was both eclectic and wide-ranging. First to be heard were Su Dongbo's Nian Nu Jiao (Reminiscing At Red Cliff) and Li Bai's Invitation To Wine, both well-known classics, accompanied

by Liu Wen Jin's Great Wall Capriccio and Zhao Ji Ping's dedicated musical setting, respectively.

Zhao Jian Hua's evocative erhu solo was the perfect foil for stage veteran Han Tongshen's highly dramatic recitation of Red Cliff, complete with the "evil" laughter often caricatured in movies. Wang Nan's take on the pleasures of alcohol was to be no less gripping.

The romantic notion of poetry reading by moonlight with soft atmospheric music was exemplified in Tang dynasty poet Zhang Ruo Xu's Spring Blossoms On A Moonlit Night.

Actress Fan Zhibo appeared like some celestial being dressed in pale blue, her soothing mezzo tones accompanied by just two instruments, Yu Jia's pipa and Xu Hui's guzheng. The sheer intimacy of the moment was a highlight for this

moonstruck listener.

The concert's nod to Singapore took the form of Wu Yin's Legend Of The Merlion, aptly helmed by two younger actors Dong Chang and Jin Ge, who were sassy and upbeat to the Nanyang-flavoured music of Rambutan from Simon Kong's suite Ispirazione II.

The connection between Chinese and English music came in Xu Zhi Mo's 1928 poem, Farewell Cambridge, read by Tao Hong and accompanied by Eric Watson's Midsummer Common. Its melody Lady Joan is familiar for those who know Vaughan Williams' Fantasia On Green-sleeves. Interestingly, Watson's Tapes-tries I - Time Dances also provided uncannily excellent counterpoint to Gu Cheng's I'm A Wilful Child, a confessional read with great conviction by Zhao Xiaosu.

The masterpiece of the concert was Bai Ju Yi's famous Chang Hen Ge (Song Of Everlasting Sorrow), an epic inspired by the suicide of Tang imperial concubine Yang Guifei. The tandem of Wang Weiguo and Li Yunjie was poignantly mirrored by two huqins of Zhou Ruo Yu and Wu Ke Fei in Yang Chun Lin's music.

Barely had this sober music ended when the incongruous sight of the heavily tattooed Chinese rapper MC J-Fever leapt centre stage to lead the entire cast for Spring.Summer.Autumn.Winter, a medley of poems set to symphonic rap music by the orchestra's composer-in-residence Law Wai Lun. Purists might balk at its inclusion, but it was very well received by the audience. Here is evidence that Chinese poetry and music need not be moth-balled like museum pieces and consigned to antiquity.