

Strings pulled by birdsong

Review Concert

THE LITTLE ADVENTURER 3

Singapore Chinese Orchestra
Singapore Conference Hall
Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

Arts organisations that wish to grow their audiences need to think seriously about out-reach concerts.

In this respect, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra has got its formula right.

Its three concerts in The Little Adventurer series this weekend for primary school children and pre-schoolers were sold out and a fourth session had to be arranged.

It also helped that the orchestra's resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong is unafraid to act the clown. Attired like an Oriental cross between Indiana Jones and Crocodile Dundee, his livewire act as host and conductor was hard to dislike.

The fact that the hour-long show was conducted mostly in English for the benefit of non-Chinese audience members showed a true desire to connect.

This was the third instalment of an ongoing series to introduce the traditional instruments of the Chinese orchestra and the focus was on bowed strings.

Armed with a bow and foam rubber arrows, Quek went on his mission of discovery, introducing the legendary blind erhu player Ah Bing, whose modern-day counterpart is Ah Qiang, played by Ling Hock Siang. His rendition of Erquan Moon Reflections by Hua Yuan Jun proffered the popular erhu as the voice of melancholy.

The mimicry of birdsong is a speciality of the strings and this was no better illustrated in Yi Jian Quan's Birds Returning To The Woods, an exquisite bit of chamber music that brought out the unusual sonic qualities of the gao hu (the highest pitched string family member), the yehu (crafted from a coconut shell) and the revolutionary gehu (a hybrid of the erhu and cello).

An excerpt of Grasslands Fantasia by Law Wai Lun and Tan Kah Yong was played by Tian Xiao on the zhonghu, which has a mellow, throaty timbre resembling a viola.

As there are no Chinese instruments with lower registers, the Western cello and double-bass were appropriated into the ensemble, represented by performances of The Swan and Elephant from Saint-Saens' Carnival Of The Animals respectively.

Erhu soloist Ling then returned to demonstrate how his instrument could simulate the human voice by accompanying Tang dynasty poet Meng Haoran's poem Chun Mian Bu Jue Xiao (Spring Dawn), which in turn was recited by children in the audience. What better way is there to learn about Chinese poetry and music at a single go?

More sound effects came in Rimsky-Korsakov's Flight Of The Bumble Bee (erhu duet) and Chen Yao Xing's War Horses Racing (massed erhus), and to press home the point further, Lalo Shifrin's Mission Impossible Theme and Hans Zimmer's Kung Fu Panda music found more fertile soil in the young listeners' minds.

The next instalment of this popular series next season highlights the family of plucked stringed instruments.

It appears that the Singapore Chinese Orchestra is guaranteed a loyal following after this evening's successes.