



PHOTOS: SINGAPORE CHINESE ORCHESTRA

Tsung Yeh (left) will conduct the Singapore Chinese Orchestra in the Mostly Gershwin concert, which features (from far left) singers Kimberly Eileen Jones and Lawrence Mitchell-Matthews, and pianist Leon Bates.

Chinese take on Gershwin



Classic numbers such as I've Got Rhythm are rearranged for Singapore Chinese Orchestra

Akshita Nanda

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra will show it has got rhythm at its Mostly Gershwin concert on July 20 at the Esplanade Concert Hall.

The performance is conducted by music director Tsung Yeh and features 20th-century American composer George Gershwin's best-known numbers, such as I've Got Rhythm and Rhapsody In Blue. These melodies with a distinct blues and jazz feel will be performed for the first time by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and have been rearranged for the ensemble's instruments by local composers.

Some may raise their eyebrows at the programme, but Singapore Chinese Orchestra music director Yeh, 62, laughs. "Don't forget, we are the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, not the People's Republic of China Orchestra, so we must reflect Singapore," he says. "Now that we've played Celtic music, gypsy music and jazz, we're ready to play Gershwin and the blues."

Since he took over the Chinese orchestra in 2002, the ensemble has often presented East-West fusion concerts. It collaborated with Chris Brubeck's Triple

Play jazz trio in 2007, as well as with Singapore-based jazz musicians, the Jeremy Monteiro Trio, in 2009.

Last year, the orchestra performed with Scottish percussionist Evelyn Glenie in May and did Fiddle Fiddle International last July with Celtic violinist Christopher Stout and Singapore Symphony Orchestra violinist Alexander Souptel.

Maestro Yeh says Gershwin's melodies are an even more obvious choice for a Chinese orchestra, since both styles are rooted in folk music.

"Gershwin is largely self-taught, a sort of folk composer," he says in a telephone interview from his Chicago home. "I feel there are parallels between his music and Chinese orchestra music."

He points out that the melodies for Gershwin's 1935 musical Porgy And Bess were written for folk instruments such as the banjo, which are not part of the normal Western symphony orchestra, but which are very similar to three-stringed Chinese instruments such as the sanxian, or even the four-stringed pipa.

"It's not just the music, but there are parallels with the instruments as well." I've Got Rhythm and Rhapsody In Blue have been rearranged for the Chinese orchestra by Singaporean musician Phoon Yew Tien and will be performed by visiting American pianist Leon Bates.

Songs such as Summertime and I Got Plenty O'Nuttin from Porgy And Bess have been rearranged by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's composer-in-residence Law Wai Lun. American singers Kimberly Eileen Jones and Lawrence

Mitchell-Matthews will perform them, supported by Singaporean chorale ensembles, NUSChoir and Anderson Junior College Choir.

All the invited American musicians have worked with Yeh previously.

Bates has been a friend and colleague since the mid-1980s, when he did piano solos - of Gershwin, of course - for the St Louis Symphony Orchestra in Missouri, which Yeh conducted for three years.

Jones and Mitchell-Matthews have performed with the South Bend Symphony Orchestra, the Indiana-based ensemble Yeh now conducts in the United States. Soprano Jones was a soloist for a performance of British composer Benjamin Britten's War Requiem in April, while baritone Mitchell-Matthews sang the part of Porgy in a February concert presenting highlights from the musical.

The singers will also perform traditional African-American hymns here such as Every Time I Feel The Spirit, rearranged by Singaporean composer Tan Kah Yong.

"The melody sometimes is almost pentatonic, so it goes very well with a Chinese orchestra," says conductor Yeh.

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Book it

MOSTLY GERSHWIN

Where: Esplanade Concert Hall
When: July 20, 7.30pm
Admission: \$28, \$38, \$48 and \$68 from Sistic (call 6348-5555 or go to www.sistic.com.sg)