

Fun crossover to Gershwin

Review **Concert**

MOSTLY GERSHWIN

Singapore Chinese Orchestra
Esplanade Concert Hall/Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

If there was any prior trepidation about the prospect of an orchestra of traditional Chinese instruments playing the music of 20th-century American icon George Gershwin, it mostly evaporated when the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's music director Yeh Tsung leapt onto the podium to lead *Strike Up The Band*.

Despite some reservations about the timbre of certain instruments transcending the cross-cultural divide, this experiment was mostly a success. Or at least the sizeable audience, judging by the loudness of its applause, thought so.

By performing Afro-American spirituals and songs from Gershwin's opera *Porgy And Bess*, the ensemble was tapping into the universal medium of folk music, the melodies and sentiments within being easily identified by performers across different cultures and creeds.

Listen to how comfortably the erhus and huqins as a group slide into the blues, the flexible portamenti being part of its make-up, much like the human voice. W.C. Handy's *Saint Louis Blues* was such a beneficiary in Law Wai Lun's spirited adaptation.

For the popular *Rhapsody In Blue*, the clarinet's opening wail was taken over by the guan in Phoon Yew Tien's orchestration, which just about worked. Even if one missed the particular quality of wa-wa muted trumpets, that was soon forgotten because the music itself was strong enough to withstand any treatment.

The orchestra overcame initial nerves and soon began to swing as pianist Leon Bates took flight in the solo part. His was the fusion of unabashed bearing of soul and big-boned pianism, and like the jazzman he is, improvised on passages and threw in outlandish cadenzas of his own. The repeated note section following the blues came in for some of the most stunning playing. His deliciously elaborate encore summed up the entire exercise: *Fascinatin' Rhythm*.

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And that was not all as he returned for the *I Got Rhythm Variations*. So how did the central "Chinese variation" fare under a Chinese orchestra? Ironically part of the joke was lost because the original intention was for a Western orchestra to sound like something from the Far East, the notion of chinoiserie itself.

The concert closed with a suite from *Porgy And Bess*, with soprano Kimberly Eileen Jones, baritone Lawrence Mitchell-Matthews and a 60-member choir from the National University of Singapore and Anderson Junior College. All the singers were amplified, which allowed their words to be clearly heard.

Jones impressed with *Summertime* and *My Man's Gone Now*, the classic show of lung power, contrasted with Mitchell-Matthew's more relaxed approach in *A Woman Is A Sometime Thing* and *I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'*.

Together, their duet *Bess, You Is My Woman Now*, was a show-stopper, and the entire ensemble joined in for *Lawd I'm On My Way*, which capped an evening of fine entertainment.

Should the Singapore Chinese Orchestra continue to pursue further cross-cultural collaborations? If these are mounted with such zest and spirit as this, the answer is: Most certainly.