

Drums roll for rowdy evening

Review Concert

DRUM YOU UP

Singapore Conference Hall
Last Friday

Chang Tou Liang

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra's opening gala concert for the 2013-14 season re-sounded with the terrific din of percus-

sion. As if the cumbersome and awkward title was not enough, the first work, Chew Hee Chiat's *Let The Thunder Of Drums Roll VII*, greeted the hall with a parade of 26 drummers doing their best to ensure the swift sales of ear plugs.

Two orchestral drummers with *dagu* flanked conductor Yeh Tsung on stage, while two dozen young beaters from seven schools occupied the aisles and balconies to create a stereophonic effect. Well trained and disciplined to a fault, they responded accurately on cue and hardly missed a beat in this impressive showing.

Zhao Ji Ping's film music for *The Family Legend*, incorporating *Moon Over Lugou River At Dawn*, gave concertmas-

ter Li Baoshun's *jinghu* (the highest-pitched bowed stringed instrument) a chance to sing, and there was even an interlude for a repetitious *pipa* melody. Not to be outdone, the orchestral percussion dominated a central rhythmic section before the *jinghu* had the last word.

Chen Ning Chi's *Tales Of The Walled City Suite* was picture postcard music, inspired by scenes from the infamous Kowloon Walled City, a century-old and crime-ridden ghetto that was demolished in the 1990s. Its movements included a scherzo-like dance of women with bound feet, a nocturne-like romance and a *Pirate's Song* with a drunken and shifty rhythm.

The second half of the concert was

dominated by solo percussionist Li Biao, who commands teaching posts at the conservatories of Beijing and Berlin. His *Dance Of The Century*, co-composed with Meng Ke, and arranged by Simon Kong, was a tour de force of percussion technique and versatility. Here the musical idiom ambled through Chinese music, world music, New Age music and back, with purists scratching their heads as to where it truly belonged.

It is probably pointless to attempt classification, and better to be swept by Li's seemingly effortless virtuosity as he rocked a set of modern drums, tinkled on pitched percussion, namely a marimba and vibraphone, plucked a thumb piano (a handy contraption with resonating met-

al strips) and sat with a quartet of orchestral percussionists for a session of improvisation. Even conductor Yeh joined in with a diminutive rattle. An almighty race between bass drum and orchestral percussion ended this breathtaking piece in three movements.

Xu Chang Jun's *Dragon Dance*, prompted by watching the Chingay procession, was a predictable racket, but it still held interest as Li's pitched battle with orchestral percussion continued, with both parties operating at different rhythms and independent meters. The audience also held its collective breath as Li's two encores, ragtime and blues numbers, closed the rowdy evening with an almost unnerving quiet.