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# Pleasant Singapore surprise awaits China

Review Concert

## SCO CHINA TOUR 2014: PRE-TOUR CONCERT

Singapore Chinese Orchestra  
Singapore Conference Hall/Last Saturday

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For the Singapore Chinese Orchestra to bring Chinese repertoire to the cities of Shanghai, Nanjing and Suzhou in its third concert tour of China might be a case of carrying coals to Newcastle or selling sand to the Saudis.

Wisely, the SCO and its music director Yeh Tsung have opted to showcase the genre of Nanyang music, which includes works by South-east Asian composers or music influenced by local styles and idioms.

Its two-hour-long, pre-tour concert was a sneak preview of highlights from its four concerts in China, beginning with locally based Chinese composer Law Wai Lun's *The Voyage from Admiral Of The Seven Seas*. This movement recounted imperial eunuch-explorer Zheng He's outgoing trips of discovery, with a metamorphosis from the pomp of the Ming dynasty court to the exotic and colourful strains of Indo-Malaysian music with the use of gamelan scales and native drumming.

Somewhat less evocative was Liu Xi Jin's *Legend Of The Merlion*, a three-movement gaohu concerto based on a uniquely Singaporean theme.

Like that ersatz chimaera borne from a tourism executive's fertile imagination, the work juxtaposed Chinese melodies with Western compositional form. The slow passacaglia-like opening was contrasted with the tempest-tossed central movement, and the finale's duet of concertmaster Li Baoshun's gaohu and Xu Zhong's cello provided several memorable moments.

Three Chinese soloists, who will feature in the orchestra's concerts in Suzhou, were flown in for two non-Nanyang works. Erhu prodigy Ma Hanxiang, 13, was the confident soloist in Liu Wenjin's *Yu Bei Ballad*, which used several popular Henan melodies. Totally at ease with the work's shift of moods and dynamics, he impressed with a seemingly effortless facility.

The ancient tradition of Kunqu opera was relived in the world premiere of *Broken Dream*, a 20-minute segment from the epic *Peony Pavilion* arranged by Lu Huang.

Even if one did not understand the ancient Chinese words sung by Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin, one could identify with the emotions expressed with various vocal inflections that hovered between speech and song, a fine art that predated the sprechstimme in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* by centuries. Their intimate performance was sensitively accompanied by kundi (a flute variant) soloist Zou Jianliang, who doubled on the vocal lines, and sigu drummer Xin Shilin.

Arguably the most anticipated act was local jazz legend Jeremy Monteiro in *Montage*, the jazz piano concerto by versatile Singaporean composer and Cultural Medallion recipient Kelly Tang. Its three varied movements contrasted different roles a piano might inhabit in a concertante work. The first movement was thematically more diffuse and the piano's voice was mostly submerged within dense orchestral textures.

The gentle central slow movement saw the piano accompany Zhao Jianhua's erhu in a nocturne-like reverie, but all stops were pulled for the free-wheeling hoedown of a finale.

Monteiro's trio, which included drummer Tama Goh and bassist Lee Khiang, with Han Lei's guanxi doing the saxophone imitations, were adroitly accompanied by the orchestra bearing down at full speed. Its grandstanding Gershwin-esque ending a la *Rhapsody In Blue* was a clever touch in this revised edition of the work.

There was time for two rather appropriate encores, Law Wai Lun's *Old Shanghai*, composed as a jazzy prelude to music for the silent movie *The Goddess*, and an equine etude combining Leroy Anderson's *Horse And Buggy* and the Chinese favourite *Racing Horses*, complete with a sequence of synchronised neighing from the instrumental sections. The Chinese audiences are in for a pleasant Singapore surprise.