

Guangzhou Symphony a Revelation

Switzerland **Wenjing; Chenzong, Wanghua, Lihong, Zhuang; Tchaikovsky** Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra, conductor Lin Daye, Mélodie Zhao (piano), Tonhalle Zurich, 26.1.15 (JR)



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Wenjing: „Folk Song Suite“ for string orchestra

Chenzong / Wanghua / Lihong / Zhuang: Piano Concerto “Yellow River“

Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5

Guangzhou is a city of some 12 million people, on the south coast of China, not very far from Hong Kong. Swiss retail giant Migros kindly supported their current tour to a number of Swiss cities.

The Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra claim to be the only Chinese orchestra to have gone on tour in all five continents. Apparently they send all their musicians to Europe for training and then fetch them back. The orchestra was originally formed in 1957, going professional in the 1990s. They have been conducted by the likes of Charles Dutoit and Vladimir Ashkenazy – Penderecki has said of them that they have the best sound of all Chinese orchestras.

The evening opened with a piece by contemporary Chinese composer Guo Wenjing. He fuses Western with Oriental music, quite successfully by and large. The four movement work for string orchestra blended Chinese folk tunes with Western harmonies; a number of Chinese melodies have a haunting quality. The second movement in particular was unforgettable, a rhythmic dance accompanied by syncopated thwacking on the body of all the instruments, most effective on the sonorous double basses – good fun. The third movement was a lament with added counterpoint, the fourth veered for my taste too much towards film music. Overall, weak on development and orchestration, no hint of modernity, but it made for a tasty appetizer.

The “Yellow River” piano concerto has an odd history. In 1939 the composer Yin Chengzong wrote a piano version of an opera entitled “The Legend of the Red Lantern” and together with three other musicians a concert version was created. Patriotic in style, traditional in composition, it was a work accepted to be played during the

Cultural Revolution: Rachmaninov, Chopin and Gershwin sprang to mind as it unfolded. The slow second movement erred too much into cinematic music, though the third movement was playful with the Chinese bamboo flute a special delight. The final movement was militaristic and brought to mind a marching army on Tiananmen Square.

Mélodie Zhao, the soloist, was born in the French-speaking part of Switzerland of Chinese parents and is a regular pianist here. Sadly she plays little outside Switzerland and on her evident strength and character, not to ignore her impressive technical talents and charming personality, this is an omission which should be remedied. She gave us a lengthy witty and challenging encore which entertained and showed off her skills – and impressively she wrote it herself!

I was keen to hear the sound of the orchestra in the main work after the interval, Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony*. The orchestra was quite a revelation: we no longer marvel at what the Chinese can accomplish, they have quickly overtaken most economies and their drive for equality on the cultural scene is no less impressive. The orchestra is made up almost entirely of young Chinese, roughly equal gender split; only the principal oboe and bassoon were non-Chinese, as far as I could see. Close your eyes and you would think you were listening to a second-rank European orchestra, if not the Concertgebouw, but they will undoubtedly go from strength to strength. Strings could benefit from more burnish, but there were few lip faults and plenty of rehearsal time ensured a flowing, exact performance, falling short only on interpretation. Principal Conductor Lin Daye was a vigorous arm-waver, to good effect.

Two generous encores, one Western, one Chinese, sent out the happy punters into the snowy streets.

John Rhodes