

In Zürich Macao Orchestra is a Revelation in Bruckner's Sixth

Switzerland **Yuan/Tieshan, Saint-Saëns, Bruckner**: Macao Orchestra, Lü Jia (conductor), Lionel Cottet (cello) Tonhalle Zürich 18.9.15 (JR)



Yuan/Tiesha: "Dance of the Yao Tribe"

Saint-Saëns: Cello Concerto

Bruckner: Symphony No. 6

"Where's Macao?" I hear you ask. Macao, also spelled Macau, is one of the "special administrative regions" of the [People's Republic of China](#). Macao lies on the western side of the [Pearl River Delta](#) across from [Hong Kong](#), which is about 60 kilometers to the east. With an estimated population of around 640,000 living in an area of only 30 km² (11 square miles), it is the most [densely populated region](#) in the world. Sorry for the geography lesson.

As [Portuguese Macau](#), it was administered by the Portuguese from the mid-16th century until 1999. In 1557, Macau was rented to Portugal from [Ming China](#) as a trading port. The Portuguese Empire administered the city under Chinese authority and sovereignty until 1887, when Macau became a colony. Sovereignty over Macau was [transferred to China in 1999](#). Macao will operate autonomously until 2049. Sorry for the history lesson.

Macao is now one of the world's richest cities, known for its gambling and termed "the Monte Carlo of Asia".

Now to matters musical: the concert opened with one of China's most popular compositions, written in 1952 by two composers working collaboratively. "Dance of the Yao Tribe" has no hint of modernity; it's easy listening, boisterous, an introduction to Western audiences to Chinese melodies without its often shrill sound and unaccustomed instruments.

The Saint-Saëns Cello Concerto is not such easy listening. It has one long movement, in three sections. There are no catchy melodies, rather musical ideas that are explored. Only the first part was recognizably Saint-Saëns; the second was a charming intermezzo where Lionel Cottet, a young Swiss cellist from the French-speaking part of Switzerland, captivated the audience and a fast and furious *Finale* that was hard work for the soloist – he hardly gets a rest. Cottet mastered all the work's technicalities with aplomb, appropriate fervour and a honeyed tone.

Before rewarding us with an encore, Cottet told us in German (but with a thick French accent) that all soloists ought to tell their audience the work they were about to play (hear, hear!), but unfortunately when he announced the name of the composer it was an inaudible gabble of Spanish names, although I did catch that he was a "a friend of Pablo Casals". It was a charming Spanish piece; I preferred it to the Saint-Saëns, which did little for me.

My main reason for attending this concert, I have to admit, was curiosity: how would a Chinese orchestra fare with a mighty Bruckner symphony? The orchestra only became professional twenty years ago. Fewer than half of the players are Chinese: almost all the violinists and violas are Chinese, the rest (as the instruments get larger and heavier) are principally Westerners.

The orchestra had been invited to play a few days earlier at the Bruckner Festival in Bruckner's home town of Linz and then at the Erl Music Festival in Tyrol, before coming to Zürich. They are apparently considered one of the finest orchestras in Asia and on the strength of this performance, I am not surprised.

My last hearing of Bruckner's Sixth symphony was in Lucerne with the Dresdner Staatskapelle under Christian Thielemann. I have to say I enjoyed this performance just as much. Of course, the Macao are no match for the glories of tone and polish of the oldest orchestra in the world, but the Chinese orchestra put in an inordinate amount of effort which paid off. Lü Jia proved wholly in command of Bruckner's rhythm, structure and the nuances

of the score. The brass in particular was majestic and not short of power. Strings had pin-point accuracy, double-basses worked very hard, all was immaculately controlled by the energetic conductor. Admittedly there were some rough edges particularly in the woodwind. The performance was marred a little by the unfortunate copious applause between movements; the number of coaches outside the hall gave away the fact that hordes of Chinese had travelled with the orchestra to witness their orchestra on tour. Their young children had to endure Western music of some length and did not always do so noiselessly.

Thanks go to Migros (the Swiss grocery retailer) for bringing this orchestra to Zürich – they were a revelation.

John Rhodes