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Prom 61, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, review: 'wonderfully fresh'

Zhou Long's orchestration and the often irresistible rhythmic exuberance held the attention at this Prom, says Hugo Shirley

★★★★★



Lan Shui conducting the Singapore Symphony Orchestra

By **Hugo Shirley**

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1 Comment

Like the Seoul Philharmonic last week, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, under Lan Shui, its music director for over 15 years, presented a new concerto – receiving its European premiere – in the first half of its Prom and a Russian symphony, Rachmaninov's second, after the interval. First, though, Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* overture gave an early demonstration of the ensemble's qualities: lean, disciplined strings; crisp, well-balanced brass; mellow woodwind.

All of those characteristics came to the fore in *Postures*, a new piano concerto by the Chinese composer Zhou Long, each of whose three loosely programmatic movements conjures up its own world: the first skittish and rhythmically insistent but giving way to a hazier central section; the second creating an eerie sense of stasis. The finale – evoking, we were told, the Monkey King character in Peking Opera – was appropriately irreverent and boisterous, culminating in a riot of clattering percussion and strident brass.

The piano is given plenty of virtuosic writing – at some moments reminiscent of Bartok, at others even of Rachmaninov, cast off from its rhythmic and harmonic moorings. But for most of the piece the soloist is integrated into the orchestra, employed, as Zhou himself says in the programme, "as a quite delicate percussion instrument".

At nearly half an hour in length, *Postures* probably stretches its melodic material – often fragmented, increasingly pentatonic in feel – too far, but the inventiveness of Zhou's orchestration and the work's often irresistible rhythmic exuberance held the attention. It's hard to imagine a more committed and vivid performance than it received here from the Shui, his orchestra and the pianist Andreas Haefliger.

Shui's Rachmaninov was refreshingly airy and spruce, playing to his orchestra's strengths in a reading that, despite its flexibility, kept the rhythms taut and the textures remarkably clean. His strings made up for what they lacked in voluptuous tone with immaculate phrasing, while the brass were kept on a tight leash, only let fully off at the major climaxes. Ma Yue provided a beautifully hushed and chaste account of the adagio's famous clarinet solo.

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Occasionally, it felt like this clean-up had taken with it the glue that holds together the work's creaky structure; but, without the lugubriousness to which it can be prone, the symphony sounded wonderfully fresh. There were similar benefits for the encore: has a Walton march ever sounded so light on its feet?

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