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Home is where the heart is for conductor Lan Shui



In a photo taken in 2016, conductor laureate Lan Shui is seen leading the Singapore Symphony Orchestra during a performance in Berlin. PHOTO: SINGAPORE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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Mr Lan Shui
Conductor Laureate, Singapore Symphony Orchestra
Public Service Star

When conductor laureate Lan Shui took over the reins of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) in 1997, its performance home was the Victoria Concert Hall (VCH), which had vastly inferior acoustics to what is heard there today, following extensive refurbishments.

Ground-laying for the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay complex had also just taken place.

The SSO was a respectable but unremarkable Asian orchestra. To attract a wider audience, it decided to stage a Casual Concerts series featuring more popular classical fare.

Mr Shui admits to feeling nervous about Singaporeans' response to the concerts then.

He says: "We were just thinking about how we could reach more people and let them know that music is for everyone, instead of only a small number of music lovers."

ADVERTISING

Twenty-two years later, the SSO has played at both the Esplanade and VCH, achieved international standing through worldwide tours and recordings, and commissioned 40 new works by local composers.

"Most of our concerts achieve 70 per cent to 80 per cent audience attendance," he says, observing that this is no mean feat.

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Home is where the heart is for conductor Lan Shui

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"Even classical music groups in the West have a hard time surviving and selling tickets."

The orchestra's openness to feature different composers and musical styles has broadened Singaporeans' musical palate.

Mr Shui, who was born in Hangzhou, China, says: "When I first came to Singapore, audiences barely noticed music by composers like Gustav Mahler. Now it's always full house when an orchestra here plays Mahler."

He credits SSO's technical excellence to the commitment of its musicians. "They already know the piece so well, but they still always dig deeper during rehearsals."

It also helps, he says, that Singapore Symphony Group chairman Goh Yew Lin understands both music and business.

"Many Western orchestras have boards that provide funding, but (these boards) take no interest in music. But in SSO, everyone is involved."

Although he travels frequently between Europe and Taiwan for conducting engagements, his love affair with Singapore is unique.

Mr Shui, 61, says: "This is the only place in my life I feel so connected with. It's my home. Nothing before has been like it, and nothing after will be like it."

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