

SSO shows Taipei heaven

The cheers didn't stop until most of the musicians had left the stage

Robert Markow

HONEST critics don't get to use the word "sensational" very often.

But that was the only way to describe the concert given by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in Taipei last Thursday.

The audience in the National Theatre Concert Hall cheered, unwilling to leave until well after conductor Shui Lan had led most of his orchestra offstage.

A few musicians stayed behind to play an imitation music box number which provided just the right playful fillip to send the audience home.

The interaction of musicians, audience and performing venue is often a delicate and sensitive one. The afternoon rehearsal



PHOTO: SSO

SLOW START: But the SSO's performance was pitch-perfect.

had not gone particularly well, and the conductor was worried.

The hall occupies an enormous volume of space, yet is notoriously fickle acoustically, allowing for maximum sensitivity to nuances of colour and dynamics. Similarly, it has the potential to exaggerate problems of balance and reverberation.

But the musicians played to the hall's strengths, and the audience, which filled a good three-quarters of the 2,100-seat

hall, sensed it was getting something special.

Right from the opening notes of Samuel Barber's Overture To The School For Scandal, the orchestra was spot-on in a performance that crackled with excitement.

American violinist Gil Shaham gave what was perhaps his best interpretation yet of the Butterfly Lovers Concerto, in which his sensitivity to nuances of colour and phrasing was breathtaking.

The audience demanded – and got – an encore in the form of Sarasate's Carmen Fantasy, laden with the kind of thrills and chills associated with a high-wire act and no safety net.

Then came Rachmaninoff's gorgeously romantic Second Symphony. Here Shui pulled out all the stops.

The 63-strong string section poured forth glorious waves of sound, the low brass played with the balanced mellowness of a superbly tuned organ, the violas shone with a darkly burnished glow, and solos from English horn player Elaine Yeo had a rare haunting beauty.

If there was a single missed or out-of-tune note all evening, it escaped these ears. This was a performance made in heaven.

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