



Nice going Yo-Yo, as SSO conductor Shui Lan salutes the artistry of the great cellist.

# American splendour

CONCERT  
SINGAPORE SYMPHONY  
ORCHESTRA UNITED STATES  
TOUR 2005

Shui Lan, conductor/Yo-Yo Ma,  
cello/Gil Shaham, violin  
Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center  
New York, Wednesday  
Tan Shzr Ee

deceptive harnessing of Chen Yi's difficult and occasionally stunning score Ballad, Dance And Fantasy for cello and orchestra.

It despatched Chen's piece with atmosphere and surprising discipline, even in her cliché-led middle movement that said nothing for Central Asian culture.

The intensely captivating soloist Yo-Yo Ma double-helmed the show on his cello, thus providing the unifying musicality that gave lift to technical assurance on the part of the orchestra.

Chen Gang and He Zhanhao's Butterfly Lovers Concerto was a slightly different outing — it posed not so much difficulty of execution than aesthetic challenges in its overwritten, chinoiserie-meets-revolutionary China gloss.

Kudos, thus, to the SSO and the shining Gil Shaham for making the music better than it actually is, capturing moments of beauty in it, while struggling against monotonous musical texture and mood.

To a large extent, most of these problems — heard most glaringly in Chen Yi and Chen Gang/He — lay in the inadmissible acoustics of the Avery Fisher Hall.

The 1960s venue is still famed today for sending out sound from its stage in an unwashed, texture-less muffle.

But if the richness of sound heard onstage could not be projected optimally into the audience off-stage, the SSO did venture into a more than respectable semblance of finesse and swing in the encore piece of Korngold's Straussiana.

For that delightful choux-pastry-styled musical dessert, Shui and his ensemble deserved every cheer and standing ovation they received. Bravo.

WHAT makes a successful premise of two big stars and four big works of multicultural lineage transcend itself into the reality of a resounding concert?

The answer revolves as much around interpretation and music directorship as choice of repertoire.

As a performance, this New York debut by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra had enough to prove the ensemble and Shui's worth to the notoriously critical American audiences who, perhaps, were this time somewhat unprepared for what to expect.

But it was not necessarily the best that the orchestra or Shui might have done on an inspired day — with Mahler, for example.

To be sure, the musicians played well, energised by the buzz of mingling with VIPs at a coming-out party at the Lincoln Center, and responding to a charismatic and sometimes masterful Shui.

Most conspicuous was Shui's reading of Strauss' Der Rosenkavalier Suite, unpacked by his musicians with verve and formidable oomph, oozing the required decadence in the chocolate mousse of a score, if some tempi and musical rhetoric were a little contrived and the famous waltz not quite swinging.

Less conspicuous — but no less impressive — was the orchestra's

## Stunning debut in New York

Cheers and praise as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra has its coming-out concert in the Big Apple



Tan Shzr Ee  
IN NEW YORK

WHILE half the arts community in Singapore has decamped to London to wow British audiences with their versions of multi-culturalism, the other half has headed to New York — and garnered its fair share of cheers.

On Wednesday, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) made its sold-out debut at the Big Apple's 2,738-seat Lincoln Center, riding on its own ground beyond the coattails of celebrity soloists Yo-Yo Ma and Gil Shaham.

The star-studded event — auspiciously marketed on the Great Performers listing on Lincoln Center's billboards — drew a well-heeled crowd.

In a show of solidarity for an ensemble from Asia and its music director Shui Lan, New York's "Gang Of Four" composers — Tan Dun, Bright Sheng, Chen Yi and Zhou Long — turned up, alongside violinist Lin Chó Liang and Singapore ambassador to the United Nations Gopala Menon.

The concert was ostensibly a coming-out show for the SSO, for there is the popular, if politically incorrect, saying "Once you've made it in New York, you have arrived".

As an exercise in debutantism, the SSO trip was successful on several counts, largely because it was also a highly strategised event in terms of programming as well as culturally — if not always aesthetically.

The repertoire for the evening seemed to have been developed from a balance of artistic director Shui's vision for the orchestra's capabilities, his personal forte and anticipation of American audiences' requirements.

Composer Richard Strauss' Don

Juan tone poem and Der Rosenkavalier Suite were the orchestral showpieces. They were safe works which would demonstrate the SSO's relative dexterity at handling late-Romantic fare compared to classical works.

All things considered, Strauss makes less demanding fare than the orchestra's previous ambitious attempts at reaching the core of greater humanity through Mahler symphonies.

But even the billing of Strauss in the United States had caused slight pre-concert jitters.

Conflicting views on the Austro-Germanic repertoire were heard through whispers between musicians and punters backstage. Would the composer and score be too well-known by a New York audience waiting to disparage alternative readings of his pieces?

Or did it work the other way round — that pro-Russian and pro-American camps emerging as a backlash to the German Romantic wave would disadvantage the ensemble? New York audiences, as SSO violinist Chan Yoong-Han put it, are known "to walk out of concert halls as and when they feel like it".

They have proved themselves tonight with their reading of Chen Yi. As a curious New Yorker though, I would have loved to hear a Singaporean composer on the bill

Mr Frank Oteri, editor of the NewMusicBox publication at the American Music Center

But no matter. There was always de rigueur Chinese-American composer Chen Yi's Ballad, Dance And Fantasy for cello and orchestra, and China composers Chen Gang/He Zhanhao's schmaltzy epic Butterfly Lovers Concerto.

With the SSO were the world's brightest stars. First was the personable Yo-Yo Ma, who skipped post-Oscar

parties in Los Angeles after his Academy Award came on Sunday to attend early SSO rehearsals in New York.

He was then succeeded by the charismatic violinist Gil Shaham.

Over post-concert drinks, a very cheered music director Shui had some ideas on how his latest New York gig was pulled off. "That's what the conductor is meant to do: make the orchestra work," he said.

As SSO's general manager Chng Kai Jin reiterates: "It's not a matter of positioning the orchestra globally, but just celebrating what we have reached in our 26th year of existence."