

Concert Singapore SO/Shui Festival Hall

★★★★☆

They journeyed from Zhou Long to Bernstein and Bach via Mendelssohn, Rachmaninov and Debussy: this was the 32-year-old Singapore Symphony Orchestra on tour. They hadn't visited London for 20 years, were making their Festival Hall debut and were clearly eager to impress.

You'd have had to read the programme note to know that making an impression was not the sole purpose of Zhou Long's *The Rhyme of Taigu*. It's an explosive 12 minutes of drumming, juddering strings, temple bells, coiled clarinet solos and trumpet tattoos, all in a patterning of relentless jazzy rhythms that seem to summon up the spectre of Gershwin.

What the music's "about", believe it or not, is East-West fusion. For Chinese musicians living in America, ever the twain shall meet — and Long is no exception. This piece fleetingly celebrates atonality, jazz — and the introduction into Japan of Chinese *taigu* drumming. So the pounding dominates, though this is also a veiled clarinet concerto, complete with cadenza in which the instrument imitates the *guanzi*, a double-reed pipe used in temple ensembles.

The orchestra's fine principal clarinet, Ma Yue, had the pleasure of being deliciously accompanied by Stephen Hough during one of the two works of the evening that really impressed. Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No 1 in G minor was the centrepiece, and both Hough and the conductor Lan Shui focused on the exciting physicality of the work: in scintillating piano figuration, elegant and tender turns of phrase, and a momentum you could feel in the viscera. As accompanist, Hough was an exquisite chamber musician; as soloist and leader, he forged a way through the finale, holding back the galloping octaves with a perfection of timing that brought an irresistible smile to the face.

After the interval, Shui's ability to sense out the innermost energies of a work, communicate them compellingly and draw them out of his players was revealed in a dark and urgent performance of Rachmaninov's last symphonic poem, *The Isle of the Dead*. The pull of the oars and the tug of the waves was palpably felt as the boat approached the tomb-like island of Arnold Böcklin's inspirational canvas.

On the crest of the wave, and into Debussy's *La Mer*, played with exuberant flair — and then, as an encore, a roaring upbeat into Bernstein's *Candide* Overture (a tribute, doubtless, to Shui's mentor) — and then, equally unexpectedly, a velvety envoi in Bach's Air on a G string. Come back soon.

Hilary Finch