

Zhao: Concerto for Pipa and Cello (US premiere)

Wu, Ma, New York Philharmonic

A broad swath of Chinese talent was on display at the New York Philharmonic's March 7 concert, including the conductor, the composer of a colorful new work, and two riveting soloists. This was not a Lunar New Year or other ethnic event where Chinese music was cordoned off by itself, but a normal subscription concert that included two repertory pieces, a sign of how Asian culture is now part of American concert music. (As I write this, Westminster Choir College, where I teach, is possibly on the verge of being subsumed by a Chinese corporation.) One could see the phenomenon simply by looking at the large number of Asian players in the Philharmonic, something Michael Gilbert (former Music Director Alan Gilbert's father and Philharmonic violinist who retired a few years ago) told me he has "changed the culture of the orchestra".

The maestro was Long Yu, 54, who presides over the Shanghai Symphony, China Philharmonic, and Guangzhou Symphony. In the longest work on the program, Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique Symphony*, he maintained rigorous control and careful balances, allowing the powerful Philharmonic brass to play out at climaxes without blating over everything else. Most impressive was the march, one of the most exciting I've heard in a long while. Tempos in all movements were brisk, articulation sharp; Yu seemed determined to avoid schmaltz and hyperbole. But he unfortunately left out nuance, charm (in the second movement), and most important, soul. Tchaikovsky

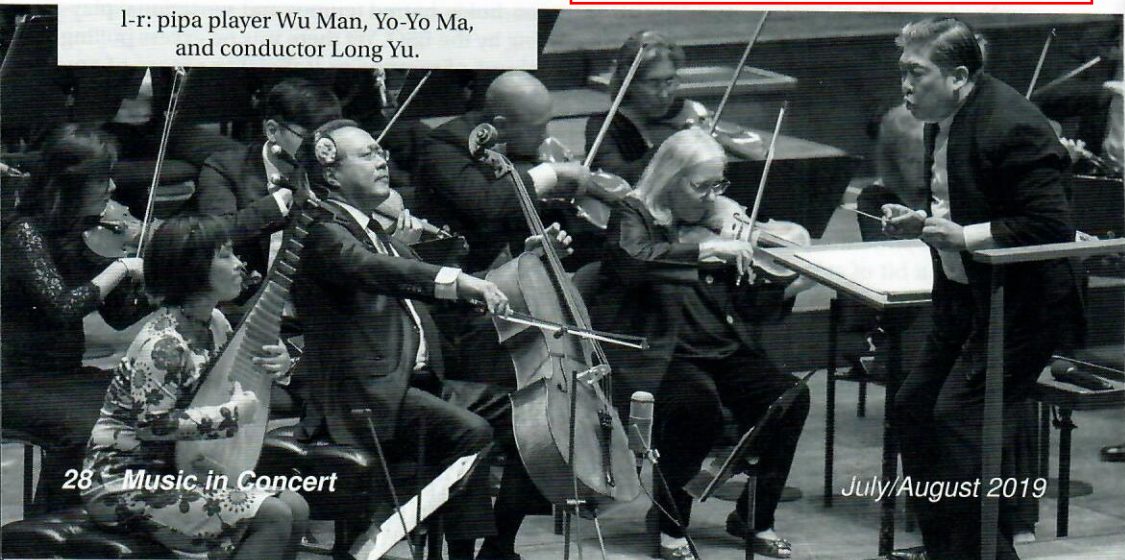
called this his most "sincere" symphony, an utterance "deeply subjective", but there was little emotional depth in this mechanically correct, straight-ahead interpretation.

A similar chill afflicted the opener, Mousorgsky's Prelude to *Khovanshchina*, where there was excellent playing from the winds but little atmosphere. A *Khovanshchina* Prelude without atmosphere? Something was definitely amiss.

But everything came to life during the US premiere of Zhao Lin's *Happy Excursion: Concerto for Pipa and Cello*, a New York Philharmonic co-commission with the Beijing Music Festival and Hangzhou Symphony. Like many of his contemporaries, Zhao blends Chinese and Western musical traditions. In his case, the latter is cinema music, a genre that runs in the family. His father, Zhao Jiping, has composed some 50 film scores, including for the exquisitely lyrical *Raise the Red Lantern*; he also has written music for (among others) *Together and A Woman*, *a Gun*, and *a Noodle Shop*. *A Happy Excursion* is certainly cinematic, full of sweeping melodies, lush colors, unabashed sentiment, and majestic fanfares.

The two soloists, cellist Yo-Yo Ma and pipa master Wu Man, were equal partners, sometimes in dialog, sometimes going their own way, sometimes interweaving delicate polyphony. The twangy, mandolin-like sound of Wu's pipa blended with the dark sonority of Ma's cello to produce startling color combinations, especially the pipa tremolos trembling above the cello's soulful melodic line in the opening movement. Both players were fun to watch, Wu bobbing and weaving in graceful rhythms, Ma swooning and caressing his cello in a carnal embrace.

l-r: pipa player Wu Man, Yo-Yo Ma, and conductor Long Yu.



There is a bit of John Williams in the bright, upward-reaching harmonies in the first movement, but the piece has its own personality and sonority. The best movement is the second, a tender serenade based on an ancient pipa melody; the least is the finale, which is meant to represent the bustle of contemporary life but is oddly undeveloped and a bit out of place. Still, the movement unleashed a crowd-pleasing climax for the orchestra, spectacularly played by brass and percussion; and the audience screamed and cheered, something they rarely do for a new work.

Some of the enthusiasm was undoubtedly for Yo-Yo Ma and his singular charisma. I remember the audience reacting the same way a few years ago after Esa-Pekka Salonen's Cello Concerto, a far more dissonant and less accessible work. It's impossible to underestimate the importance of star power, even in classical music. A beaming young Philharmonic string player told me after the concert that performing with Ma was "a lifelong dream". That's all she wanted to talk about.

JACK SULLIVAN

Deutsch: *Okeanos* (US premiere)

Paul Jacobs,

Cleveland Orchestra/ Welser-Most

Haydn and Tchaikovsky symphonies bracketed an important new organ concerto at Severance Hall March 14-17, creating a hodgepodge of a program, but demonstrating the stylistic flexibility of Franz Welser-Most and the Cleveland Orchestra, as well as the breathtaking technique and musicality of organist Paul Jacobs.

Viennese composer Bernd Richard Deutsch, 42, was on hand for the US premiere of his *Okeanos* for organ and orchestra, the centerpiece of this series of concerts. I heard the performance on March 17; the piece had had three previous outings and sounded confident and settled. Its Greek title refers to the mythological Titan who rules over the oceans; and its four movements invoke the primal elements of earth, air, fire, and water. That's "an idea of immense (and sometimes unfathomable) greatness and breadth," as Deutsch wrote in his program notes, and it led him to the organ.

The combination of a large orchestral-style organ and a huge symphony orchestra gives Deutsch a broad tonal palette to work with, and he delights in its vast color and dynamic possibilities in *Okeanos*. The organ sometimes comes to the fore as a soloist, but just as often it blends its own sounds with fascinating instrumental combinations to produce new hues and textures, enhanced by a whole battery of judiciously scored percussion instruments, pitched and not. Now and again, Deutsch lets the organ loose in idiomatic toccata-like sections, but he uses the instrument in novel ways as well.

Jacobs was in complete control of his daunting organ part, which required him to play virtuosic repetitive figures and several pedal notes while making frequent stop changes. The conductor was efficient in his stage manager-like role, cuing entrances and adjusting balances.

The audience seemed raptly engaged in the new work, awarding Jacobs and the composer an enthusiastic ovation. Here's hoping that enterprising orchestras will give the organist other opportunities to play a piece that he so obviously believes in and has mastered.

You'd think that after a hundred years in business, one of the world's great orchestras would have already made its way through all of Haydn's 104 symphonies. Not so with No. 34, written around 1765, which had its first Cleveland Orchestra outing at these concerts. Notable for its Adagio first movement, which stays in D minor—the rest of the work shifts into the major—it made a lovely opening gesture on the program and a complete contrast with Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 at the other end.

Welser-Most and the orchestra brought transparency, grace, and charm to the Haydn and robust sonic magnificence to the Tchaikovsky, a work that figured importantly in the orchestra's March-April Asia tour. It should have made a big impression with its brooding introduction, gorgeous horn solo in the slow movement, glorious waltz, and triumphant finale—especially if the ending had been allowed to become spacious and grand. But the conductor whipped it into a frenzy, very likely setting a new speed record.

DANIEL HATHAWAY