

## When music meets fengshui

Review Concert

**YAO XIAO YUN PIANO RECITAL**  
Lee Foundation Theatre/Last Saturday

### Chang Tou Liang

Singapore's strategic position as a hub for regional music education excellence has seen many overseas students of local musical institutions graduating and settling here to further enhance the music scene. China, in particular, has provided the largest body of fine foreign young musicians to grace our concert stages.

Shanghai-born pianist Yao Xiao Yun, an alumnus of the **Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts**, was the first prize winner in the Artist Category of the National Piano Competition here in 2005.

She has gone on to distinguish herself as a teacher and performer.

On the strength of this recital last Saturday at the Lee Foundation Theatre, she has lost none of her passion or fire that marked her out to be a special talent.

The evening began with two fast Scarlatti Sonatas, which allowed ample display of a crisply articulated technique that made light work of the rapid staccatos and running passages. The piano's imitation of strummed guitars and clicking castanets could not have sounded more vivid.

Beethoven's Sonata In D Minor Op. 31 No. 2, nicknamed the Tempest, was taken at a very deliberate tempo in the first movement's introduction. This aura of mystique served to heighten the main subject's agitated outburst, however some accents were exaggerated to the point of sounding mannered. The slow movement plodded but relief came in the finale's perpetual motion, which ended so subtly that the audience was totally caught by surprise.

Romantic music was more her forte. In Spanish composer Granados's Requiémbros (Flatteries) from the suite Goyescas, she laid on the rubato with a shovel and that helped the cause of the ardent suit-or in the music's amorous narrative. It was not difficult to fall for this Spanish nobleman's indulgent and swooning gestures.

Even better was her account of Chopin's Third Sonata In B Minor Op. 58, which helped her win the grand prix all those years ago.

Yao was born to play Chopin, as her grasp of the Pole's idiom was totally natural and instinctual. She caught the ebb and flow of the music without resorting to her exact contemporary Lang Lang's self-regarding distortions. The ruminative slow movement was ideally judged and the finale thrillingly rode on a crest of a tidal wave.

The descriptive music she performed was well-characterised, like the raucous birdsong and trills of Wang Jian Zhong's A Hundred Birds Paying Respect To The Phoenix, before closing with an effervescent voyage in Debussy's L'Isle Joyeuse.

The latter was inspired by Watteau's painting of bacchanalian revelry and Yao's performance was accompanied by a projection of an impressive 8m-long scroll painting by her father Yao Hai Cheng.

The colour scheme of the ink brush images of sea and rural scenes was determined by principles of the I-Ching and Chinese geomancy, which took into account the birth dates of composer, composition and pianist.

As it is, this year marks the 110th anniversary of L'Isle Joyeuse, which is some cause for celebration, one supposes. When music meets fengshui, anything is possible.

## Reliving ancient music and poetry

Review Concert

**OF POETRY AND MUSIC**  
Ding Yi Music Company  
Esplanade Recital Studio/Last Saturday

### Chang Tou Liang

The Song and Tang dynasties represented a golden age of the literary arts in China, which flourished until its conquest by the warlike Mongols of the Yuan dynasty.

Its poetry inspired no less than the likes of Gustav Mahler in his autumnal lyric symphony The Song Of The Earth.

This concert last Saturday at the Esplanade Recital Studios by the Ding Yi Music Company conducted by Lim Yau, with music by Zechariah Goh Toh Chai, was somewhat less ambitious while attempting to encompass similarly epic subjects.

An added dimension to this production was the projection of calligraphy by former **Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts** president Choo Thiam Siew, who is also chief executive of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. Narrator Lee Yong Tick read the poems in Mandarin as a prelude to each of the sung movements.

The first part comprised three poems, beginning with Butterflies Over Flowers, with hushed plucked strings (ruan, pipa, cello and bass) creating a suitably serene atmosphere for tenor Jeremy Koh's impassioned song and recitation.

Women's voices from the Nafa Chamber Choir were unaccompanied in Li Bai's Qing Ping Diao (Pure Serene Music) and a mixed choir incanted the word fei (Chinese for flight) countless times in Peng, a segment from Zhuang Zi's Xiao Yao You (Carefree Wondering).

Of course, such polyphony in composer Goh's scores was foreign and even non-existent in those times, but his intention was not to recreate ancient music, but to relive its spirit through modern compositional techniques.

He succeeded with a combination of idiomatic choral writing and coherence in conception, even if the choir was at times not always spot-on in intonation.



The Ding Yi Music Company melded poetry and music in its concert. PHOTO: DING YI MUSIC COMPANY

The second part was Da Feng Ge (Song Of The Rising Wind), conceived like a six-movement cantata on the subject of war and ancient chivalry.

Two bare-chested drummers opened the work with a pugilistic show of belligerence, heralding tenor Koh's Song Of Gai Xia, a show of anger and indignation that had both spoken and sung elements, accompanied by chanting male voices.

Soprano Su Yiwen provided the most glittering display of vocal prowess in Reply To Xiang Yu, the concubine Yuji's song of anguish and despair.

Two purely instrumental movements set the scene for the grand finale. Kenny Chan's sanxian led the charge in Besiege From All Sides, while the stage was bathed in blood red light in Battle Of Gai Xia, where the strident winds and high pitched strings chillingly depicted scenes of carnage.

The closing Song Of The Rising Wind for full choral and orchestral forces was a glorious paean to ultimate victory, but a nuanced one where reflection stood in parity with celebration.

This 30-minute work could be considered a Singaporean-Chinese answer to Prokofiev's war-inspired cantata Alexander Nevsky and that is saying quite something.