

# American Record Guide

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# Taiwan Philharmonic in Europe

## Asia's Most European Orchestra

When first writing about the Taiwan Philharmonic in ARG in Jan/Feb 2011, I was struck not only by the world-class quality of the orchestra but of its then new Music Director Shao-Chia Lü, concluding that "he will achieve the place on the world stage the orchestra deserves". Robert Markow followed up with a second article in July/Aug 2012, and now with this one presenting the orchestra on the world stage.

A word about the orchestra's name: at home they are called the National Symphony Orchestra, but that name can't be used abroad because the word "national" connotes mainland China versus Taiwan. In 2011 the orchestra's "foreign" name was the Philharmonia Taiwan, now changed to the Taiwan Philharmonic.—Editor

Robert Markow

Their banner read "The Glorious Return". And indeed it was. After a 16-year hiatus, the Taiwan Philharmonic returned to Europe for performances in Paris, Milan, Udine, Geneva, and Berlin. Yet in some ways this was not so much a return as a new chapter in the orchestra's brief 27-year history. It was originally known as the National Concert Hall Symphony Orchestra, but 85% of its players are new, and they have grown significantly in size, sound, and sophistication.

Having heard the Philharmonic on several recent occasions in Taipei, I knew pretty much what to expect. Yet the tour, which I joined for its entire duration (November 9-18), brought numerous surprises and revelations. The most memorable single event for me was Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 in Geneva. Performances in Milan and Udine were special too, but in Geneva magic happened. Taiwan native Shao-Chia Lü, the orchestra's music director since 2010, proved that hearing this warhorse even for the 1,000th time can still be an exhilarating ride when it is done with the rhythmic precision, carefully calibrated dynamic contrasts, and solid architectural vision he imposed. Every last musician had been drilled to perfection, and the result was breathtaking. In over half a century of concert-going I have never heard a more thrilling interpretation.

Lü graciously acknowledges that the Philharmonic, which is almost entirely Taiwanese—53 women, 43 men—was already a fine ensemble before he took the reins, but compared with recordings made several years ago it is obvious that there has been much progress since. He believes that his main contribution has been to encourage a sense of personal expression among the players. "The Asian mentality is rather passive", he says. "People tend to wait for instructions. But I

want them to be more forceful and assertive in their musical expressiveness. This is especially true among the principals. I have also established a spirit of trust, a sense that we are all equals in our task of making music."

The orchestra's sound deserves special mention: full, rich, rounded, and well-balanced in the tradition of the best German orchestras. The Taiwan Philharmonic may well be the most European-sounding of the major Asian orchestras. (Lü trained in Vienna and conducts often in Germany; many of the musicians studied at top European conservatories.) If you're thinking wood, think mahogany; if you're thinking wine, think Burgundy; and if you're thinking texture, think brushed velvet. The orchestra never puts forth a harsh or coarse sound. Attacks are concentrated and well rounded. The brass never blare, percussion never overwhelm.

A burning curiosity and eagerness to learn informs many of the musicians and staff. I was constantly barraged with questions and was amazed at the level of awareness the Taiwanese have about what's going on in Minneapolis, Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, etc. (Can the same be said of American players about Asian orchestras?) Sightseeing was more often to places like Wagner's palazzo in Venice or Chopin's grave site in Paris than to the Brandenburg Gate or the Eiffel Tower. Some also gave master classes, and composer Ming-Hsiu Yen gave meticulously researched presentations on the history of classical music in Taiwan.

The tour repertory consisted of a pool of nine works from which Lü arranged five programs, no two exactly alike. There were two showpieces (Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* and the Berlioz *Roman Carnival Overture*), two big symphonies (Beethoven's No. 7 and Dvorak's No. 8), two concertos (Sibelius's Violin and



Saint-Saens's No. 1 for cello), two Taiwanese works, and one by contemporary German Christian Jost.

All too often orchestras go on tour and leave the music of their homeland behind. Not the Taiwan Philharmonic. They brought two substantial compositions from living composers plus an encore. All were well worth hearing. From Nan-Chang Chien (b. 1948), one of Taiwan's most esteemed composers, they played *Five Chinese Songs*, which admirably spanned a wide range of moods, colors, and textures, from the grey desolation and poignant astringency of 'Grieving' to the

crackling aridity of 'Longhorned Grasshoppers' to the final 'Star', music of exquisitely delicate textures and haunting austerity that was more evocative of silence than of sound. Taiwanese soprano Meng-Shun Lin conveyed the essence of each song with a voice of angelic sweetness and purity.

Ming-Hsiu Yen (b. 1980) represented the younger generation. Her *Breaking Through*, premiered last September in Taipei, is a 15-minute tone poem inspired by the ordeal of digging an eight-mile tunnel through the nearly 13,000-foot-high Snow Mountain near Taipei (higher than Japan's Mt Fuji). Powerful



rhythmic motifs from the percussion depicting the great tunnel boring machine, somber meditations on the lives lost, and turbulent passages suggestive of the inflow of water that plagued the engineers were all explicitly depicted in tone. The best music came just after the "breakthrough" itself, not a great wall of jubilant sound but a thin sustained line in the high violins "like a beam of light peering through the darkness", according to Yen. As the "beam of light slowly overcomes the darkness", the music is bathed in an impressionist iridescence that eventually rises to an overpowering climax. Yen's mastery of both orchestration and formal structure underscores her studies with such leading figures as William Bolcom, Christopher Rouse, and Steven Stucky.

Christian Jost's *Taipei Horizon* was composed in Taipei and was presumably inspired by that city's character, though to my ears its unrelieved turgidity, dark colors, and high volume levels became wearisome and seemed more appropriate to a war zone than to the vibrant, thriving city. Jost has an enviable reputation in Europe; his opera *Hamlet* was chosen "World Premiere of the Year 2009" by *Opernwelt* magazine, but *Taipei Horizon* did him no credit.

By coincidence, halls got bigger as the tour progressed, and all were sold-out or nearly so. Audiences were casually dressed in Paris, Geneva, and even fashion-conscious Milan, but very well turned-out in little Udine and in Berlin. Not one cell phone went off (nor were pre-concert reminders necessary), audiences were invariably stone-quiet, and the sincerity of their applause was not spoiled by gratuitous standing ovations.

PARIS—First stop. Still jet-lagged and without access to their instruments for five days, the musicians nevertheless pulled off an amazing performance in Salle Gaveau. From the first notes of the *Roman Carnival Overture* it was obvious they had been trained to the cutting edge of technical perfection. Gaveau's stage was too small to accommodate the full string section (60 strong), but the 1,000-seat hall is a stunning masterpiece of Baroque extravagance. An oddity of this hall is the seat numbering on the main floor: Row A is at the back.

MILAN. The concert here was in the hall of the conservatory, yet few students attended, despite the ultra-low ticket price (under \$30 for adults, half-price for students). The concert opened with a frisky, playful *Till Eulenspiegel*, full of delicate nuances and lyricism that made the work more than a mere showcase for orchestral virtuosity. Viviane Hagner was soloist in Sibelius's Violin Concerto, but it was the orchestra that invariably commanded

more attention with an opening shimmer from 30 violins that seemed to come out of nowhere, sensuously shaped lines from the woodwinds in the opening of the slow movement, perfectly balanced horn quartets later in the same movement, and velvety rich sound from the entire string section in the big moments.

UDINE. One could be forgiven for asking "Where is Udine?" It is a city of barely 100,000 in the far northeastern corner of Italy, but it has a beautiful theater modeled after La Scala (though smaller) and a line-up of distinguished visiting artists that would do credit to a city ten times its size. The Czech Philharmonic, Claudio Abbado, and Martha Argerich are just a few of the big names that have passed through recently. Unfortunately, the acoustics are dreadful. Yet the event was sold out—largely by an audience from nearby Austria, I was told.

GENEVA. This was the site of that Beethoven Seventh that was thrilling beyond words. I will also remember the *Till Eulenspiegel* here for its sprightly horn calls, the manic screams from the E-flat clarinet in the trial scene, and the huge range of dynamics Lü brought to the score. Here is an orchestra not afraid to play as softly as others do loudly. Equally impressive was cellist Wen-Sinn Yang, whose performance of Saint-Saens's Concerto No. 1 was as sweeping and musically imaginative as any I can remember. In technique he is second to none, and there was music in every note. Taiwan's First Lady, known for her unflagging support for the arts, flew over to attend the event.

BERLIN. So many great orchestras have played in the Philharmonie that one could reasonably anticipate the possibility of a half-empty house for a hitherto little-known orchestra from Asia. Not the case. The 2,500-seat hall was nearly sold out, its audience obviously in no doubt that the Taiwan Philharmonic belonged in the upper echelon of world-class orchestras. One local critic called Taiwan's brass section the equal of any of Berlin's orchestras save the Philharmonic. Following a classically-poised Symphony No. 8 by Dvorak (the melting sweetness of the third movement was extraordinary), the orchestra again gave the two encores it had presented elsewhere: a fiery Slavonic Dance No. 8 and a bittersweet Taiwanese folksong arrangement—the perfect ending to a concert and to a hugely successful tour.

From concert to concert, the Taiwan Philharmonic wrapped itself in glory, with audiences applauding enthusiastically and demanding encores at every stop. Another "Glorious Return" is surely in the works.

## Here & There

Appointments, Awards, & News



Mark Fewer

The Minnesota Orchestra and its musicians ratified a new three-year contract on January 14, effective February 1, ending the longest work stoppage of a major American orchestra. It demolished the entire 2012-13 season and half of the current season. The average annual salary drops from \$135,000 to \$114,000. Terms include a 15% reduction in salaries from the 2012 level; minimum base salary for 2014 is \$96,824, rising to \$102,284 in the third year, keeping the orchestral pay scale among the "Top 10" nationwide. Also, many positions will remain vacant; over three years players' numbers will rise from the current 77 to 84 with a long-term goal of the pre-lockout 95. Higher health costs for players and scheduling flexibility were also agreed on. And the players' demand of a guaranteed minimum of 20 weeks per year of classical performances retains the organization's mission, which was

under threat. Music Director Osmo Vanska resigned October 1; both sides agreed that that issue will be handled separately.

Canadian Mark Fewer succeeded Scott St John on January 1 as a violinist with the St Lawrence Quartet. The classical and jazz performer was concertmaster of the Vancouver Symphony 2004-08. He now has moved from Montreal's McGill University to Stanford University, where the quartet is in residence.

Milan-born Riccardo Chailly, 61, will be Daniel Barenboim's successor at La Scala, becoming principal conductor in 2015 and music director in 2017. His contract extends until 2022. Since 2005 he has been principal conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, where his current contract runs through 2020.