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**FRANZ LISZT**

# Taiwan National Symphony Orchestra, National Concert Hall, Taipei — review

*The season opener broke the mould with a smooth organ fantasia and premiere from the new resident composer*

by: **KEN SMITH**

Season openers are famously formulaic — a world premiere, a rediscovered rarity, a timeless classic — but even a cookie-cutter can sometimes carve a superb morsel. The Taiwan National Symphony's rarity last Friday, celebrating the reopening of the National Concert Hall after a four-month renovation, was Franz Liszt's *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*, an organ fantasia later orchestrated by Marcel Dupré, played only once during Dupré's lifetime and not much more frequently since.

Dupré's version may not be a first-rate composition but, to paraphrase Richard Strauss, it's a first-class second-rate composition. The rigour of Liszt's fugal writing (from Meyerbeer's opera *Le Prophète*), draped in the velvet of Dupré's sensuous sonorities, seems calculated to win over any musical taste or expectation. Under organist Christian Schmitt, the instrument was on full display, leaving conductor Shao-Chia Lü to flaunt the hall's acoustical subtlety, smoothly balancing moments of bombast with delicate intermingling of orchestral lines. The sole

distraction was Schmitt's black-clad assistant, who flitted from side to side turning pages and changing organ registrations with such regularity that she should have shared the soloist's bow.

Friday's programme also served to introduce audiences to Huang Ruo, the orchestra's new resident composer. (The Chinese-born, New York-based Huang also holds a similar position this season with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.) The world premiere of Huang's *Becoming Another* — constantly alternating between stillness and motion, as the composer explained in his programme note — opened with the low-brass equivalent of a yoga drone unfolding into flashy fanfares of disquieting understatement. The piece did everything expected of a concert opener while quietly subverting the formula; and yet, Huang's anti-overture lulled listeners into a contemplative mood more effectively than most conventional models.

After the interval, Schubert's "Great" Symphony echoed the C-major key of the Liszt/Dupré while finally planting the evening on traditional ground. From its opening moments, Lü rendered Schubert's lyrical sweep with full symphonic heft, though the music's greatest distinction — indeed, what distinguished the playing from nearly any orchestra in mainland China — lay in its slowest moments. Under Lü, slow tempi were not simply downtime until the next loud, fast section but meaningful ends in themselves.



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