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Taiwan National Symphony Orchestra, National Performing Arts Centre, Taipei — review

Ken Smith Author alerts

Schoenberg's massive 'Gurrelieder' was the unlikely focus of this New Year's Eve concert

The words “New Year’s Eve” and “Schoenberg” rarely appear in the same sentence, but by some quirk of fate (and a rather severe definition of “Viennese gala”) the Taiwan National Symphony Orchestra rang in 2015 with the composer’s massive late-romantic masterpiece *Gurrelieder*.

What it lacked in traditional revelry the evening made up for in gravitas, however, with an augmented NSO joined by a mix of German and Asian soloists and some 250 choristers from various corners of Taipei. Outsized forces aside, the piece’s challenges lay both in its unwieldy structure — a song-cycle morphing into a through-composed cantata — and a distinct change in tone from one part to the other. Simply put, Schoenberg the budding atonalist who finished the work in 1911 was quite a different composer from the youthful late-Romantic who’d started it more than a decade before.

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To his credit, NSO music director Shao-Chia Lü was faithful to both Schoenbergs, rendering the Wagnerian depth of the opening section with almost Debussy-like transparency while letting the later portions unfold with Mahlerian breadth. Of the soloists, tenor Daniel Kirch crossed the broadest stylistic expanse, initially offering the textural subtleties of a true lieder recitalist (alternating in a lengthy lyrical exchange with soprano Anna-Katharina Behnke) and later shifting to quasi-operatic declamation.

By comparison, Taiwanese mezzo-soprano Jo-Pei Weng and tenor Fa-Kai Tang, as well as Singaporean baritone Martin Ng, deftly carried out the simpler task of sustaining emotional tone throughout their respective musical statements. Speaker Wieland Satter brought the piece to an emotional peak with a superb display of the composer’s *Pierrot Lunaire*-era sprechgesang.

Only two elements marred the evening’s brilliance: first, a stage extension that often placed soloists in unflattering positions acoustically, and second, projected translations that unfolded less as a libretto than as a sketchy synopsis with stage directions. The move was justified as letting “the music speak for itself”, although for its first 50 minutes, when *Gurrelieder* unfolds more or less as a traditional song cycle with melodies emerging directly from the text, favouring the music over the words gave the listener only half the story.



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