

Taiwan Philharmonic Tours Four Chinese Cities

Shao-Chia Lu



New Halls in Xiamen, Shanghai, and Beijing

Gil French

Five years ago, Music Director Shao-Chia Lu said he would not tour in China with his Taiwan Philharmonic because the audiences were not mature enough. Indeed, in 2006 I was at a concert in Beijing where people walked around during the concert, talked openly, snapped photos, and made calls on their cell phones (at Chinese operas they also coughed and spat on the floor).

But the world is changing fast. From October 29 to November 7 Lu and the TPO did a four-city tour of mainland China. I was eager to see how Chinese audiences are these days and what the new halls are like. Even more, I wanted to know both the current state of the TPO, which struck me as world-class in 2010, and the artistry of Lu, who made such a profound impression with Mahler's Symphony No. 5 in his first concert as music director [Jan/Feb 2011].

Founded in 1986, the Taiwan Philharmonic appears young—only three players with gray hair—but the average age is actually 41. Most players are Taiwanese and display the superb quality of music training there. In fact, during the tour discipline was evident both on and off stage. Rehearsals were efficient, orderly, and quiet, yet the atmosphere

was relaxed and respectful. I never heard a raised voice, an argument, or wild or drunken voices on busses, in hotels, or at meals. No player was ever late for a bus, no luggage was left behind, and the players seemed to genuinely like one another. Yes, respect is a profound instinct among the Taiwanese, but what I saw went beyond custom or protocol. Above all, whether a performance was stellar or so-so and whether a hall was excellent or inferior, the orchestra's ensemble was flawless; rhythms, entries, and intonation were perfect (except for French horns).

Critical comparisons were inevitable because the orchestra toured with two programs: Taiwanese Ming-Hsiu [Ming-Show] Yen's *Flying Toward the Horizon*, Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 1, and Brahms's Symphony No. 2 played in Xiamen (directly across the Formosan Strait from Taipei) and

Hong Kong; and Chinese Huang

Ruo's *Becoming Another*,

Tchaikovsky's Violin

Concerto, and

Rachmaninoff's

Symphony No.

2 in Shanghai

and Beijing.

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whether the per-

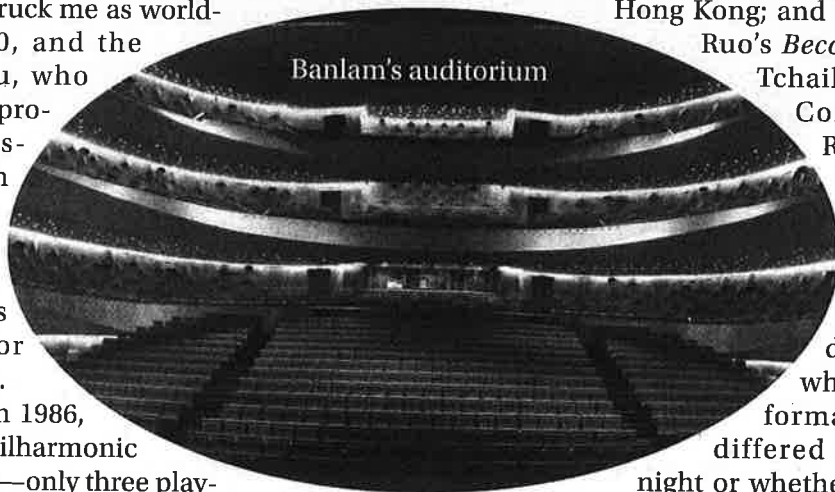
formances actually

differed from night to

night or whether what I heard

was determined by the significantly different acoustics of the halls.

Xiamen's three-year-old Banlam Grand Theater is a 1500-seat mixed-use hall with a proscenium stage, sloping main floor, and wrap-around balconies. It amplifies treble



Banlam's auditorium

sounds, reduces the bass, and bizarrely reflects sound under its balconies. The sound is clear but straight-forward, without ambience; it gives orchestra members no feedback. The backstage area has three gigantic wings that look even bigger than the Metropolitan Opera's.

Hong Kong's older concert hall is in the round. When I heard Mahler's Symphony No. 7 there five years ago from two very different balcony seats, the utterly unblended sound was dreadful, giving a very raw tone to all instruments. This time from a main floor center seat it sounded much better, at least compared to Xiamen.

In Taiwan swallows nesting in trees in front of homes or businesses is a symbol of good fortune. Ming-Shui Yen, 35, noticed nests in front of a string of restaurants near her home and followed the birds' progress from birth to the day they flew off. Thus, the title of her 15-20 minute *Flying Toward the Horizon* (2012). Woodwinds twitter against light percussion strokes, swooping string lines mimic the swallows' arching flight patterns, and a seamless transition shifts the music from descriptive to atmospheric, dramatically reflecting the anxious helplessness onlookers felt seeing a dead baby bird hanging over the edge of one nest. As she said, "Flying is not a gesture only but a movement that symbolizes passion, hope, and love."

In Xiamen the clarity of her kaleidoscopic orchestration immediately drew my interest. But it was on second hearing in Hong Kong that a light celeste (an ineffectual piano was used in Xiamen), full-string portamentos in the cellos, suspended brass harmonies, and her dramatic counterpoint developed into a Shostakovich-like moment when my right arm shot up and fear gripped my chest, reflecting

the circle of life of our vulnerable fellow creatures.

Yen, also an award-winning pianist, now lives in Taipei after years of study at the Eastman School of Music and University of Michigan. She keeps fresh by composing works of varying natures—for children, drama-and-light companies, symphonic ensembles, etc. Based on the structural integrity of *Flying*, she's a composer to be on the lookout for.

The hall in Xiamen did Taiwanese pianist Chun-Chien Yen no favors. Mendelssohn's Concerto No. 1 is treble enough to begin with, but here the upper keyboard sounded brittle, and the lower keyboard all but disappeared. In truth, Yen did himself no favors either; his tempos in the outer movements were so fast he couldn't articulate the rhythms, and his left hand was a boring ostinato with no expression. Nor was he aware that in many passages *he* was the accompaniment and the orchestra the primary voice. The second movement was quite lovely but not the last word in subtlety.

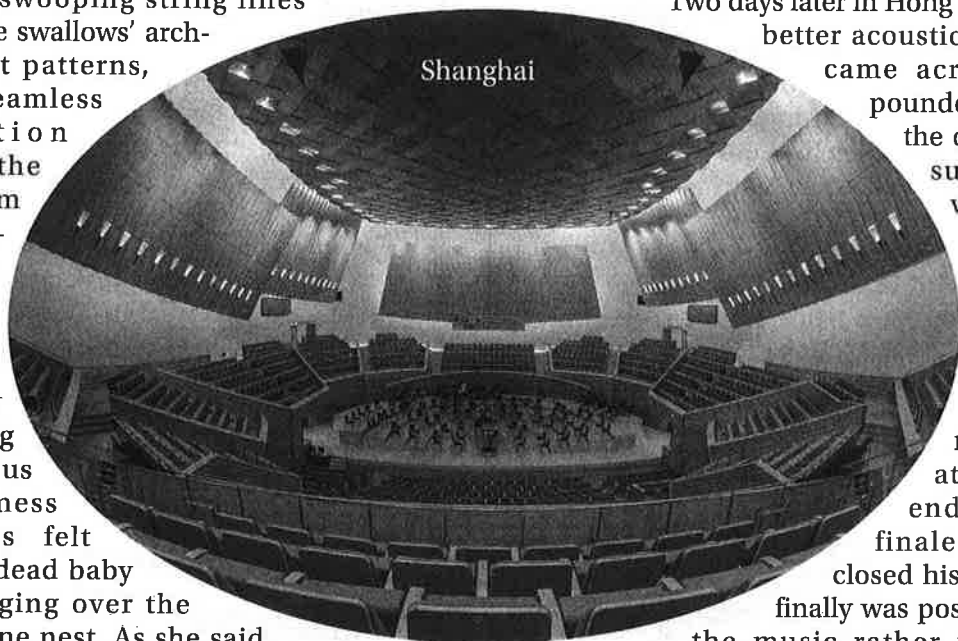
Two days later in Hong Kong with better acoustics, he still

came across as a pounder, though the orchestra's sumptuous violas and cellos charmed him in the second movement, and at the very end of the finale Yen closed his eyes and finally was possessed by

the music rather than the notes. It was Lu's orchestra that was stellar in Hong Kong—hot, blended, and buoyant.

Yen's choice of encore—variations on Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March'—was logical but a grave mistake. His flurry of wrong notes and rushing tempos proved that the monstrous chords, dense scales, and arpeggios, concocted by Vladimir Horowitz, were far beyond his technique.

Lu's interpretation of Brahms's Symphony No. 2 was much the same in both performances. In Xiamen the acoustics kept the orchestra



at a clear but objective distance; it was in Hong Kong that I was able to be embraced by the instrumental colors Lu elicited as he sustained two or three terraced levels of activity at once. Horn phrasing was highly expressive, especially Cindy Liu's solo at the end of the first movement; and the cello introduction to the second movement was utterly sumptuous. Some players describe Lu's conducting as octopus style—lots of rotating arms rather than pinpointed downbeats—but they read him with precision, and those arms wrapped the first two movements into integral flowing wholes. The final two movements, though, were especially striking. Taken at almost metronomic tempos, the conductor infused the third with a waltz-like lilt, while he made the first and second themes in the fourth, played at identical tempos, contrast brilliantly.

Chinese audiences in all four cities applauded gently but persistently until an encore was played, here Brahms's Hungarian Dance No. 6 in Martin Schmeling's brilliant orchestration. The hall in Xiamen made it sound like a crazed shout, but in Hong Kong its teasing virtuosity did rouse the audience from their seats. In all four cities they just kept on applauding until either the soloist or conductor told the concertmaster, "No more encores" and led the orchestra offstage.

In Xiamen the audience of only about 400 was mainly families with young kids, teenagers, and middle-age couples. (The orchestra didn't feel slighted; Zubin Mehta and the Israel Philharmonic drew only 800 to the same hall.) Cell phones, constantly held up to take photos, were instantly red-dot lasered with military swiftness; I would have preferred they lasered the 30-something in front of me who, when not talking to his wife, kept whipping open his giant iPad screen. What a relief the sophisticated Sunday afternoon Hong Kong audience was—mainly couples in their 30s to 60s who were genuine classical enthusiasts.

The two most interesting halls on the tour were in Shanghai and Beijing. Shanghai Symphony Hall, which opened in September 2014, is in an old, fashionable section of Shanghai that has the feel of the brownstone sections of Manhattan or Boston's Newbury Street, with the streets arched over with sycamore trees. The gracefully landscaped hall with its concave roof and brick exterior seems small only because the auditorium itself is several stories below ground, yet its lobbies still have garden

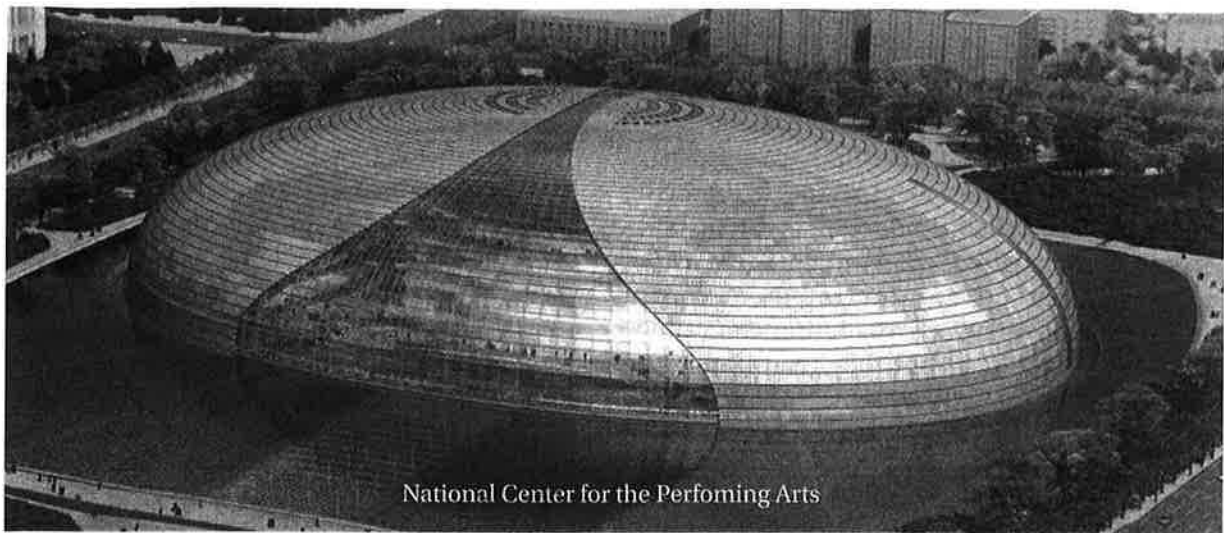
views open to the sky. Seating 1200, it is shoebox shaped but with no right angles—all walls and ceilings are joined by large curves. Attached to pale green-gray plaster walls and ceiling are what look like blond bamboo wood panels. The stage, only about three feet off the floor, is surrounded on the sides and rear by six rows of seats.

Stadium-style seats rise up behind the first six rows of main-floor seats. In effect, there are no overhanging balconies. Almost all seats offer a mellow blended tone with warm bass presence, but there's a hitch.

Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2, performed with no cuts, came across as a wall of sound, making all inner details indistinct. Even the snare drum and light cymbals in the second movement were inaudible. Balances seemed neglected, enunciation of phrases was weak, and climaxes didn't really peak. Even brass rhythms didn't punch through, and all the triplets in the last two movements were inaudible. The encore, Tchaikovsky's 'Dance of the Jesters' from *The Snow Maiden*, came across as a bangy, unsubtle job. What's shocking is that the acoustics are by Yasushiha Toyota, who designed the stunning acoustics in Los Angeles's Disney Hall. The architecture by Isozaki Arata, on the other hand, is truly beautiful, especially at night with outside lighting illuminating the landscaping and building.

The hall was mostly filled in Shanghai, and the audience was as sophisticated as in Hong Kong. In fact, fans there are so dedicated that the next evening about 400 people—mostly elderly who couldn't afford symphony hall tickets—stood in a downpour for an outdoor wind concert that was eventually moved indoors. That's Shanghai, China's most sophisticated and artistic city, where avant-garde architecture mixes with well-preserved turn-of-the-century warrens and luxurious art deco hotels and shops in tree-lined neighborhoods.

What a difference two nights later at "The Egg" in Beijing. Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2 is anything but transparent to begin with. Its thick orchestration defies delineation of inner details. The acoustical contrast to the hall in Shanghai was a lesson in how a hall shapes what one hears. In Shanghai the symphony's introduction sounded wooden and stagnant; in Beijing it breathed with expression as Lu's windmill gestures linked all the parts into a seamless whole. The main theme had not just flow, depth, and delicacy but the kind of full-



National Center for the Performing Arts

ness created by atmosphere. Subtle violin phrasing made all the difference as Lu slipped into full waltz mode. Even when tempos relaxed, a definite pulse linked all the parts together.

It was in the second movement that I became aware of the Beijing hall's only drawback. While the mellow sound in the front of the hall was crystal clear, blended, and very generous, it didn't embrace me. Even superb Principal French Horn Cindy Liu was aware of this; try as her section did, they simply could not adjust their tone to give it a rich bloom. In the third movement, unlike in Shanghai, I could hear the famous opening clarinet solo supported by rippling triplets and enriched by tone color (too bad it was played with limited expression and awkward breathing that broke the line's seamless character). Nor were the principal oboe, English horn, and tuba soloists eloquent. Nonetheless, Lu here put aside his baton and wove the movement's multiple lines into climaxes that peaked with strong emotion. The finale was bright and fast—almost too fast—but horn triplets cut through effectively, and the wind-up in the final section was toe-tappingly tight with full-throated dynamics. The total effect left me unable to speak for several minutes. The hall's clarity made Tchaikovsky's 'Dance of the Jester' a clear, rhythmically incisive, detailed virtuosic romp.

The relatively unsophisticated Beijing audience of mostly people in their 20s through 50s seemed more accustomed to popular music. They applauded between every movement and at the end clapped less out of enthusiasm than for yet another encore, until the concertmaster led the orchestra offstage. Some in fact left this two-and-one-half hour concert

at the two-hour mark as if that were some ritualistic termination time.

The National Centre for the Performing Arts is an icon in the true sense of the word. It opened in December 2007, consists of an underground 2,019-seat concert hall, 2,398-seat opera house, 1,035-seat theater, and 556-seat multi-functional theater. Underwater corridors, a grand foyer, and exhibition halls are all covered by an immense dome ("the egg") surrounded by a circle of water that makes it appear to float in the landscaped park immediately west of the Great Hall of the People (the massive hall where the politburo meets) that borders Tiananmen Square. Enormity overwhelms one at first. After passing through security, the question is which way to go! But the walkways are broad, the color and lighting muted and calming, and in some areas it is the outside pool above that forms the ceiling, spelling yet more tranquility. The effect from the outside is one of utter quiet and serenity. It completely concentrates one's inner spirit, as if rendering one open to what is to be encountered within. In brief, the NCPA is stunningly beautiful, and the concert hall was the best of the four we visited on the tour.

The concert hall itself resembles Shanghai's in shape, except that this one has 800 more seats. While the sophisticated audience in Shanghai almost filled the hall, in Beijing the hall was only 65% sold. Another difference is that, while in Shanghai the organ has a modest visual display of pipes, in Beijing the front wall is entirely consumed by pipes. The shocking difference in acoustics between two halls, almost identical except for size, is startling.

The concerts in Shanghai and Beijing began with *Becoming Another* (2015) by Chi-

nese composer Ruo Huang. His opera *Paradise Interrupted* was premiered at Spoleto USA in 2015 [Sept/Oct 2015], and *Dr Sun Yat-Sen* had its US premiere at Santa Fe Opera in 2014 [Nov/Dec 2014] (its Canadian premiere by Vancouver Opera will be in 2017). *Becoming Another*, which had its world premiere in Taipei in October, begins with a growl in (I think) the key of F. Its shimmer, rumblings, and clusters seem to be a set of variations that rise in half-steps. Even in Beijing it struck me as a self-conscious collection of effects that never moved beyond a growl ("Becoming Nothing" as one TPO player called it).

Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, with Leopold Auer's many cuts in the finale, was the middle work on both concerts. Lu reduced the orchestra for both this and the Mendelssohn concerto; I would have appreciated more beef for the Tchaikovsky. Soloist Cho-Liang Lin, who was born in Taipei and gave up years of living in New York City to join the faculty at Rice University in Houston, suffered from abysmal jet lag and was unable to sleep at night, resulting in a really rough Tuesday performance in Shanghai and a considerably more artful but hardly flawless first movement at the Saturday performance in Beijing. The middle movement was really lovely both nights, despite appalling French horns. Both Lin and Lu made the finale in Beijing really tight and exciting, except for Lin's tendency to make slower sections a bit sappy. His encore both nights was the 'Winter' Largo from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, elegantly played with the orchestra's front row strings.

Following the tour I remained in Taiwan for three weeks that included two more Taiwan Philharmonic concerts at their home, Taipei's National Concert Hall, which is easy to mistake for a classical Chinese royal palace with its temple-like roofs, sweeping entrances, and red carpets. (In fact, it was inspired by palaces in Beijing's Forbidden City.) It

is in a park in central Taipei that also holds the Chang Kai-Shek Memorial and the National Theater. The serene, gorgeous area is another icon in the true sense of the word. From my time there in 2010 I remember the acoustics to be highly resonant, very clear, and, above all, like two arms that reached out and embraced me in their warmth.

What a surprise on November 18 when Neville Marriner, who turns 92 on April 15, conducted. The hall had just reopened after a summer renovation. The stage floor was replaced and the seats reupholstered. From the same seats where I sat five years earlier, the sound retained its clarity, warmth, and rich distinct projection of the cellos and string basses; but the ambience now has a hollow, echoy, swimming-pool edge. Like the hall in Beijing, a rich mix of sound filled the stage itself, but those arms no longer reached out and embraced me.

In Mozart's Symphony No. 35 (*Haffner*) downbeat entrances were splayed and rhythms soggy and tempos became slower and slower. It took the startling Chinese cellist Bonian Tian, who turns 30 this year, to inspire Marriner to a more disciplined and dramatic accompaniment in Schumann's Cello Concerto. Lu first heard Tian in Germany, where both live. His appearance here showed him to be an intimate yet passionate player with flawless technique and an ear for colors, soulful drama, and sublime lyricism. He is an artist worth searching for. Marriner gave Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony* more spine than the Mozart,

but his style still lacked edge and drama. As I exited a lady said to her companion, "Is the orchestra tired from its China tour?" I wanted to answer, "No, it's just Marriner's conducting."

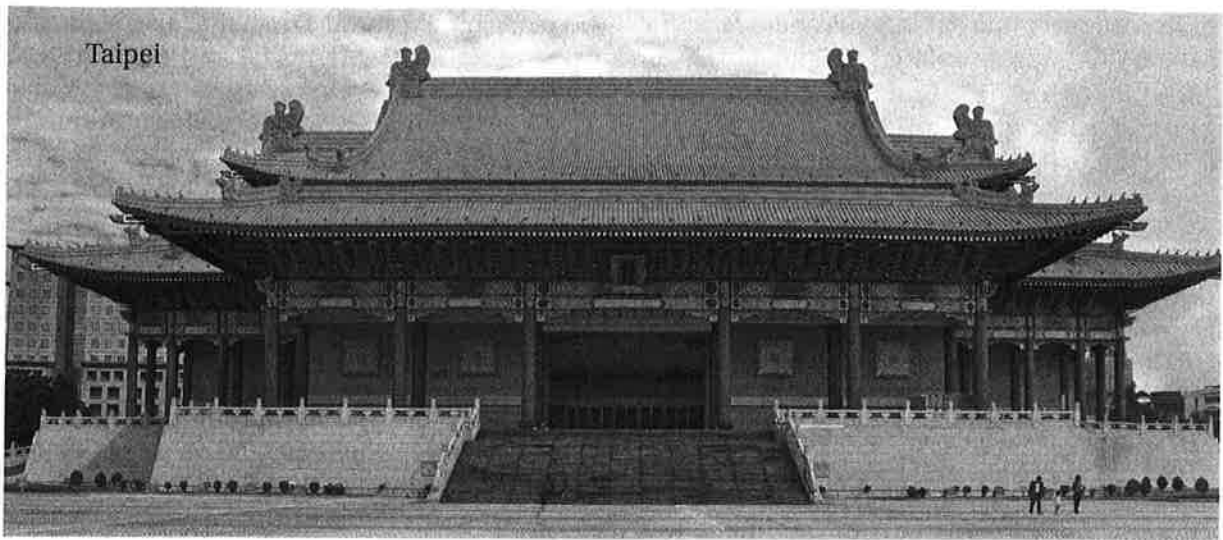
On my last night in Taiwan Shao-Chia Lu conducted an ingenious program where each work echoed the others: Stravinsky's *Fireworks*, Scriabin's Piano Concerto and then *Poem of Fire (Prometheus)*, fol-



Cho-Liang Lin and Shao-Chia Lu

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lowed by Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* (1919). While *Fireworks* could have used more fireworks, the sumptuous orchestra was the clear star in the piano concerto. Artist-in-residence, Korean pianist Kun Woo Paik, who turns 70 on March 10, was inaudible in the first movement, partly because of the hall's acoustics and partly because the opening is poorly written—mostly keyboard arpeggios against a rich, romantic orchestra. Even in the gorgeous *Andante* Paik remained self-contained without the communicative touch of panache necessary to catch the subtle inflections, for example, of seven notes alternating with six in a repeated phrase. What a contrast he was to Lu's deep-breathed expression and ample rubato. Only in the last movement did Paik finally catch fire, matching the orchestra's.

The *Poem of Fire* is a product of Scriabin's late self-obsessed phase, seemingly variations on a single motif that "catches" again and again, growing eventually to a space-odyssey climax with voweled chorus and pipe organ (both used here). It was here that Paik made a brilliant decision to place the piano not within the orchestra but in standard concert position. This time the piano truly colored this "Color Symphony" (a machine projecting a spectrum of colors was originally intended), practically sparking different colors like a fireworks display, depending on which particular brilliant ever-changing array of instruments he was doubling. Even though the motif itself can easily wear out its welcome, Lu's grasp of form, dynamic growth, and lyricism proved that *Prometheus* is a *physical* work that can be fully appreciated only in performance, not on recordings.

In Stravinsky's *Firebird* Lu was the true

master of movement and lyricism. So disciplined yet flexible were his tempos that the music really felt like ballet. The 'Round Dance' and Lullaby were supremely lyrical, the 'Infernal Dance' excitingly wicked, and the tempo changes in the Finale have never been so perfectly judged.

Lu signed a second five-year contract at the start of this season. His violins remain flawless, the sumptuous violas and cellos are second to none, and the eight string basses (six of them women) supply a rich, firm, articulated foundation to the orchestra. The flutes and bassoons are firm, and the trumpets are stellar. But the French horns, except for principal Cindy Liu, should be fired. They usually played melodic solos accurately, but the simple stuff, like playing the tonic and dominant tones in a Mozart slow movement, they destroyed regularly at home and on tour.

The biggest compliments about the Taiwan Philharmonic came from both Kun Woo Paik and Neville Marriner, who appreciated the players' flexibility. Marriner was more specific, saying that some German and Japanese orchestras are fixed in "the way it's always done", whereas the TPO can do anything they're asked. The TPO has toured Asia and Europe but has yet to tour North America. Their recent recording of Gordon Chen's *Symphony No. 3* and *Cello Concerto No. 1* on Naxos is their first to be released in the US. The big question is: which major US orchestra will be smart enough to offer Shao-Chia Lu his American debut with two or three weeks of concerts? Odds are they'd have clever programs performed with interpretations leading to immediate re-engagements.

