

THE BUTTERFLY LOVERS

Concerto for Violin

TCHAIKOVSKY

Violin Concerto



Gil Shaham violin

Lan Shui conductor

Singapore Symphony Orchestra

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By Ken Smith

Any musical premiere is fraught with tension, but the showcase of student compositions in Shanghai on 27 May 1959 was especially so. Backstage at the Lyceum, the city's first western-style theatre, the composition student Chen Gang was nervously pacing the floor.

His co-creator of *The Butterfly Lovers* concerto, the violinist He Zhanhao, was playing in the student orchestra, his hands and mind at least occupied. The violin soloist Yu Lina took the stage, her hair cut so short that audiences would later find the player inextricable from the piece, whose narrative concerned a young girl passing herself off as a boy.

After the final notes came interminable silence – then applause, which soon fell into a steady synchronized clapping that refused to let up until the conductor relented and signaled the orchestra to perform the entire

piece again. The next day, news of the concerto's success was all over the radio. A handful of young, unsophisticated students quickly became national celebrities.

Five years later, nearly everyone associated with the piece was in prison.

Just as few countries have suffered such intense, concentrated turmoil as China in the mid 20th century, few artistic works embody such clashing extremes as *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, known in English as *The Butterfly Lovers*. Hailed at its premiere as 'a breakthrough in China's symphonic



Lan Shui, conductor

Lan Shui joined the Singapore Symphony Orchestra as Music Director in 1997. Under his direction, the Orchestra began making its acclaimed recordings, and he has led it on several successful tours.

Lan Shui is passionate about premiering and commissioning works by Asian and Singaporean composers. He is also the Principal Guest Conductor of the Aalborg Symphony in Denmark, and assumes the position of Chief Conductor of the Copenhagen Philharmonic from the 2007/08 season.

Born in China, Lan Shui made his professional conducting debut with the Central Philharmonic Orchestra in Beijing in 1986 and was later appointed Conductor of the Beijing Symphony. In 1990 he conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Summer Festival, where he came to the attention of David Zinman who invited him to the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra as Conducting Affiliate in 1992. From 1994 to 1997, he was Associate Conductor to Neeme Järvi at the Detroit Symphony. In the same

period he assisted Kurt Masur at the New York Philharmonic and conducted the Cleveland Orchestra in Paris as part of Pierre Boulez's young conductors' project.

Lan Shui has conducted many renowned orchestras including the Baltimore Symphony, Calgary Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, Houston Symphony, Malmö Symphony and the Munich Chamber Orchestra. Lan Shui is the recipient of several international awards, including awards from the Beijing Arts Festival, New York Tchernin Society, 37th Besançon Conductors Competition in France and the Boston University Distinguished Alumni Award.

'Master conductor of what has become a world-class orchestra'

American Record Guide, March/April 2007



Singapore Symphony Orchestra

A premier Asian orchestra rapidly gaining recognition around the world, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) is a full-time professional orchestra with 96 members.

The Orchestra's performing home is Singapore's Esplanade Concert Hall, and it also performs regularly at the Victoria Concert Hall and other venues. Performing over 50 symphonic concerts a year, its versatile repertoire covers both popular orchestral masterpieces and exciting cutting-edge premieres. In support of Singaporean talent, local musicians and composers feature prominently in the concert season. Since its inception in 1979, the SSO has toured America, China, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Italy, Japan, France, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

Since Maestro Lan Shui assumed the position of Music Director in 1997, he has

raised the Orchestra's profile and level of excellence and is committed to the performance of new Asian compositions. The Orchestra's recordings of the first-ever complete symphony cycle of Alexander Tcherernin received widespread acclaim, and the SSO has also recorded the music of Chen Yi, Zhou Long, Bright Sheng and Richard Yardumian. Artists heard on SSO recordings include Evelyn Glennie, Cho-Liang Lin, Gil Shaham, Noriko Ogawa, Christian Lindberg and Martin Frost.

'Today it unquestionably ranks among the world's best... A world-class orchestra that can switch between such radically divergent styles with virtuosic ease.'

American Record Guide, March/April 2007

music,' it was later reviled during the Cultural Revolution for its Western influence and feudal Chinese inspiration. Though universally recognized among the Chinese people – and often cited as the most performed concerto in the 20th century – the piece remains largely unknown in the West. A work of undeniable emotional appeal, it also carries with it a history that some of its biggest supporters are still struggling to digest.

Before the premiere

Coming to terms with *The Butterfly Lovers* first requires a grasp of the conflict within the piece itself. Borne of an uneasy union of revolutionary nationalist sentiment and Chinese urban cosmopolitanism, the musical progeny manages to be faithful to both its parents.

Although the composers themselves are at pains to trace their own traits within the offspring, the seed stems from violinist He Zhanhao's Nationalistic Style Experimental Group, a rather grand name for a handful of like-minded violinists at the Shanghai Conservatory in the late 1950s who were inspired by Soviet efforts in creating a national style and became similarly determined to make the Western violin a familiar icon to the Chinese people. Daytime

lessons with their Russian-trained teachers were balanced by night-time busking on the Bund, where Chinese tunes adapted to the violin would regularly draw crowds. 'Very soon we realized the problem wasn't the instrument,' recalls violinist Yu Lina. 'It was the Western repertory they didn't understand.'

Under Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward (1958-60), when heady slogans encouraged the people to 'change the face of China' and 'catch up with Britain and America,' cultural advancements were encouraged along with greater factory and farm production. Musical developments at the time included grouping traditional Chinese instruments in Western symphonic formation, as well as new musical forms integrating Western compositional techniques with Chinese traditions.

It was early in this campaign, as China was preparing to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic, when the senior Party official at the Shanghai Conservatory called for students to develop an appropriate musical tribute. His short violin tunes had proved effective enough to inspire talk of a full concerto, though for structure and orchestration the project would require a trained composer. At that point, the discussion turned to Gang Chen.

Although Chen's devotion to the Party was hardly in question, having served as a soldier in the 1949 Liberation at the age of fourteen, his background was a world apart from Chinese peasantry. Strains of Indian heritage wafted in his biological family background, and his father, having been adopted by the Chen family at birth, later met an Islamic woman and renounced the family's Buddhist beliefs. More musically relevant was that his father was Chen Gexin, the composer of 'Mei Gui Mei Gui Wo Ai Ni,' an anthem of bustling 1930s Shanghai that later became a best-selling single in the West as 'Rose, Rose, I Love You.' On every level, Chen Gang was clearly a product of urban Shanghai culture, a brief window in history when Chinese and foreign influences uniquely mingled.

With Chen now in place, the team began discussing suitable themes to celebrate the Communist Party. After briefly considering an account of Chinese laborers smelting steel and a tribute to women cadres in the Communist Party, the group turned to the story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, an ancient operatic tale that had gained new resonance after Sang Hu's 1953 film – the first color film ever made in China – had clearly infused the feudal tale with the values of the People's Republic of China.

The story, which traces back to the Jin Dynasty (265-420), concerns Zhu Yingtai, the young daughter of a rich landlord who, forbidden to study the classics because of her gender, dresses as a boy to attend school. There she meets Liang Shanbo, a fellow student, and their attraction grows. After discovering that she is a woman, he pledges his love, but the girl's parents have arranged her marriage to a wealthy man, and Liang dies in grief. On her wedding day, Zhu has the procession pass Liang's tomb, which opens at her arrival. Zhu throws herself inside, and soon the two re-emerge as butterflies fluttering freely into the air.

For He, who had performed Shaoxing opera in his youth and had drawn heavily on traditional tunes in his earlier violin pieces, Liang-Zhu provided musical material already recognizable to audiences. For Chen, it offered a familiar narrative structure ready-packed with romance and drama. "It was not necessarily the safest choice," Chen admits. "It was a story from the feudal past about a clever scholar and beautiful woman, so naturally it was open to criticism."

As Hu's film had shown, however, the story could easily be read as a tale of female empowerment and an effective criticism of Confucian values, bringing it firmly in line



Gil Shaham, violin

Gil Shaham is internationally recognized as one of today's most virtuosic and engaging artists.

He is sought after throughout the world for concerto appearances with celebrated orchestras and conductors, as well as for recital and ensemble appearances on the great concert stages and at the most prestigious festivals.

In addition to his many orchestral engagements, Mr. Shaham regularly tours in recital with pianist Akira Eguchi. He enjoys bringing together friends and colleagues in chamber music, and also has the good fortune to enjoy musical collaboration with his family, including his wife, violinist Adele Anthony, his sister Orli Shaham and his brother-in-law, conductor David Robertson. Among his more than two dozen concerto and solo CDs are a number of international best-sellers. These recordings have earned prestigious awards including multiple Grammys, a Grand Prix du Disque, a Diapason d'or and *Gramophone* Editor's Choice.

Mr. Shaham was born in Illinois in 1971, and later moved to Israel where at the age of seven he began violin studies at the Rubin Academy of Music. In 1981 he returned to the USA and began studies with Dorothy DeLay and Jens Ellerman at Aspen. In 1982, after taking first prize in Israel's Claremont Competition, he became a scholarship student at Juilliard, where he also worked with Hyo Kang. He has also studied at Columbia University.

Gil Shaham was awarded the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant in 1990. He plays the 1699 'Countess Polignac' Stradivarius, and lives in New York City with his wife and their two children.

elusive, devoid of folk material rather than incorporating musical vernacular, and initially defined as 'unplayable' by its dedicatee, while Chen Gang had worked closely with violinist He Zhanhao in their own piece. Perhaps most divergent, though, was its failed premiere compared to the immediate success of *The Butterfly Lovers*. (Tchaikovsky could recite the Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick's entire merciless review – '...music that stinks to the ear...' – for the rest of his life.)

That said, the two pieces, which Gil Shaham and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra paired in performance during the orchestra's 25th anniversary season in 2004, do come together rather as a pair of musical bookends to a lush Romantic sound world that stretches traditional concerto form to the limits of recognition. In part because of Russian and Russian-trained professors at the Shanghai Conservatory, the Russian repertory served as an obvious model well

into the mid 20th century. Right from its opening movement, the Tchaikovsky concerto provides a memorably lyrical soloistic foreground against a luxurious orchestral backdrop, allowing for frequent virtuosic runs over nearly the full range of the solo violin.

These contrasts of melodic sweetness and bravura excitement, along with the soloist's occasional dialogue with other instruments – particularly the clarinet and oboe – come to a head in the third movement in a masterful bit of musical storytelling. Its intent, however, couldn't be further from that of *The Butterfly Lovers*. As a formidable composer for the opera and ballet stage, Tchaikovsky was no stranger to telling a story; on the concert stage, however, his narratives unfold on strictly musical terms.

Ken Smith is a New York correspondent for *Gramophone* and the Asian performing arts critic for the *Financial Times*.

with Mao's attacks on the ancient sage as the cause of everything that was wrong with the country's past. From condemning arranged marriages to fully utilizing women in factory production, Mao preached gender equality as a cornerstone in China's socialist transformation.

But still, there were those butterflies, a bit of 'superstitious imagery' that began stirring controversy even as the piece was being written. At an early rehearsal, in fact, the composers offered a preliminary version that avoided the final transformation altogether. "It didn't work," Chen says plainly. "The Western concerto form needs a final transcendence, and without the butterflies there is no concerto."

After the premiere

Any initial complaints about the piece – that its source material was silly, the orchestration not forceful enough or that, with only one movement, it wasn't a 'real' concerto – were easily drowned out by the rush of acclaim. Audiences in China couldn't get enough, and when the Central Philharmonic went to Russia in 1960 as part of a cultural delegation *The Butterfly Lovers* went with them. The composers were highly praised at home, and Ms. Yu was regularly summoned to play for visiting dignitaries.

That all changed overnight in 1964 when *The Butterfly Lovers* – along with Tchaikovsky, Beethoven and Debussy – was branded as 'bourgeois.' The youngest of the collaborators, Ms. Yu escaped merely with public humiliation for 'spreading poison to the people.' On the eve of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the party official who had supervised the work prior to its premiere was dragged out and publicly accused of 'crimes worse than murder,' Chen recalls. "The guards said, 'Factory workers hear your themes and can no longer operate their machines. Peasants have no strength to lift their ax. Soldiers can no longer shoot'."

After serving two years in prison, Chen himself spent the next few years under house arrest at the Shanghai Conservatory with manual labor in the mornings and self-criticism sessions in the afternoons.

Despite officially being persona non grata, the composer eventually found underground support in the city's violin community. "There were thousands of violinists in Shanghai alone with little music to perform," he says. "Liang-Zhu was banned, and they couldn't play Western music, so eventually they began asking me to compose works that they could play."

It was only after the Cultural Revolution, when the conservatories reopened and the creators returned to public favor, that the indomitable spirit of their piece truly became known. One story, most likely apocryphal, told of a team of Red Guards breaking up a group of young people secretly listening to a recording of *The Butterfly Lovers*, only to discover that the listeners were the children of local cadres. Once the Shanghai Conservatory reopened in the late 1970s, Ms. Yu – now a violin professor – found a whole generation of young players who had been drawn to their instrument after hearing her recording of the work. Even today, she says, people seek her out to express their thanks for giving them hope.

Because its source tale has remained a cornerstone of Chinese culture to this day, in recent versions as varied as Hong Kong film director Tsui Hark's postmodern retelling 'The Lovers' (1994) and a Disneyesque co-production by Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-chin and the Shanghai Animated Film Studio (2004), it is no surprise that the concerto has become a repertory mainstay in China. Arrangements exist for solo erhu (the traditional two-stringed fiddle) and zheng (the Chinese zither), as well as for full orchestras of traditional Chinese instruments. And thanks to the

championship of a handful of non-Chinese players, the piece has soared even further afield from its native land. "People often say the more national you are the less you can reach out," says Chen. "But I believe the more you know your own culture, the more international you can become. With the right platform, you can reach the world."

'The Tchaikovsky Concerto of the East'

Chen Gang and He Zhanhao's symphonic version of this ancient tale draws on a broad range of musical inspirations both Chinese and Western. Its melodic content stems largely from Yueju, or Shaoxing opera, the highly lyrical tradition native to Shanghai, while its symphonic language owes much to the late Romantics – particularly Tchaikovsky, with his extension of concerto structure and expressive programmatic freedom in fantasies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, which *The Butterfly Lovers* in no small way resembles.

Among violinists, *The Butterfly Lovers* is often called 'the Tchaikovsky Concerto of the East,' and to hear Chen and He's creation as a case of Tchaikovsky with Chinese characteristics we need look only at the melodic material, which not only borrows from the Shaoxing tune-type *Mei-mei ya* but, as He has admitted, alludes to the inflections

of a particular singer, Yin Guifang (who made her reputation, appropriately enough, playing male roles). Ornamentations in the solo violin also draw heavily on erhu technique.

Likewise, Chinese elements run through the structure itself. Melodic phrases frequently appear in pairs, for example, mirroring the closeness of its central characters. "Often these elements don't make purely musical sense," admits Chen. "But when we had to choose whether to be true to the story or to musical structure, we always chose the story."

A programmatic concerto in one movement, *The Butterfly Lovers* divides into three distinct sections – 'Falling in Love,' 'Protesting the Wedding' and 'Transformation'. The music, however, unfolds in several episodes, and this recording is tracked to make the story easier to follow.

[1] The young Zhu, dressed as a boy, sets off for Hangzhou on a sunny spring day when she meets her fellow schoolmate Liang Shanbo, their encounter told in the violin's dialogue with different instruments in the orchestra. **[2]** The next three years pass quickly, and their friendship continues to grow despite Liang having no clue of Zhu's

true gender. **[3]** As the end of their schooling draws near, Liang and Zhu grow sad as they realize that their time together is nearly over. In order to continue to see Liang, Zhu tells him of a 'sister' at home that he should marry. **[4]** Zhu returns home to find that her father has promised her to the son of a rich family, her protests represented as the solo violin struggles against the forces of the orchestra. **[5]** Liang visits Zhu's home, discovering her true gender and painfully learning about her impending marriage. The two bid a tearful farewell, represented in the interplay between solo violin and cello. **[6]** Amid the heartbreak (and Chinese operatic percussion), Liang's health deteriorates and eventually he loses the will to live. After his death, Zhu agrees to the marital arrangement on the condition that the wedding procession passes Liang's grave for her to pay her respects. A storm approaches, and as they approach the grave a bolt of lightning strikes open the tomb. Zhu then jumps in. **[7]** The lovers are reunited, and in a muted reprise of the opening material the violin flutters as the woodwinds vividly paint the two transformed butterflies happily flying side by side.

At first glance, Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto* is a world away from *The Butterfly Lovers*: musically extrovert while the latter remains



Gang Chen
(b.1935)
Zhanhao He
(b.1933)

**The Butterfly Lovers,
Concerto for Violin**

27:21

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| 1. Adagio cantabile | 4:58 |
| 2. Allegro | 2:46 |
| 3. Adagio assai doloroso | 2:50 |
| 4. Pesante – Più mosso
– Duramente | 3:44 |
| 5. Lagrimoso | 2:31 |
| 6. Presto risoluto | 5:33 |
| 7. Adagio cantabile | 4:59 |

Jonathan Fox, gu ban (1-7)
Nella Hunkins, cello solo (1-7)
Ta Jin, flute solo (1-7)
Gulia Mashurova, harp (1-7)

**Pytor Il'yich
Tchaikovsky**
(1840-1893)

**Concerto in D major for
Violin and Orchestra, Op.35**

36:34

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-------|
| 8. Allegro moderato | 18:56 |
| 9. Canzonetta: Andante | 7:06 |
| 10. Finale: Allegro vivacissimo | 10:32 |

Gil Shaham violin
Lan Shui conductor
Singapore Symphony Orchestra



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Booklet text in English. Disc made in Canada/Printed and assembled in the U.S.A.
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Total playing time: 64:09
Recorded at the Esplanade Concert Hall,
Singapore, in September 2004.
Producer and engineer: Da-Hong Seetoo
Publisher (Chen/He): HNH International/
Universal Music Publishing
Cover photography: Mark Gardner, Imaginary Forces
Calligraphy: Dr Chu Wanghua
Design & artwork: Knifedge
Cover image: Timothy Bird

