

# Conducting cultural exchange

China and Singapore strengthen people-to-people relations through classical music concerts and arts events

By **LOW SHI PING** in Singapore  
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

It was a delight for the auditory senses when the top-rated China Philharmonic Orchestra (CPO) performed in Singapore last year on the evening of Nov 26.

In addition to the orchestra's founding conductor, music legend Long Yu, conducting, the audience was treated to 12-year-old violin prodigy Paloma So playing Saint-Saens' *Violin Concerto No 3 in B minor*.

Although this was the first time the orchestra performed in Singapore, it has strong links with the country through the classical music scene.

The Singapore Symphony Orchestra's (SSO) music director Shui Lan has conducted the CPO several times, while SSO founder Choo Hoey is collaborating with the CPO for the first time during the 2017-18 music season.

Importantly, this relationship is a reflection of the strong cultural exchange that Singapore has with China — something the two countries ardently encourage.

"Cultural and people-to-people exchanges bring greater mutual understanding. Peoples from both China and Singapore are visiting each other more frequently," said Fang Xinwen, charge d'affaires of the Chinese embassy in Singapore, in an open letter published on Oct 1 in Singapore's *The Sunday Times*.

The statistics speak for themselves. On average, more than four cultural events "showcasing the close bond between our peoples" are held in China and Singapore every day, wrote Fang.

These are facilitated by more than 700 flights between China and Singapore on a weekly basis. Not surprisingly, China was the city-state's largest source of tourists last year. It overtook Indonesia as the No 1 market for arrivals to Singapore.

Kwok Kian Chow, an associate professor of Arts and Culture Management (Practice) at the School of Social Sciences at the Singapore Management University (SMU), described cultural exchange between Singapore and China as "excellent".

"This is because of the range of programs and activities, both in bilateral and multilateral and also multicultural contexts, along with many parallel networks of exchanges," he said.

"These include national institutions such as collaborations between the China Art Museum and the National Gallery Singapore, to region-specific or even shared historical arts programs, such as the traditional *Nanyin*, a musical form kept well alive and even contemporary in Singapore.



**Long Yu**, founding conductor of the China Philharmonic Orchestra, led a performance of the orchestra in Singapore last year. China and Singapore enjoy strong cultural links through the classical music scene. AFP

"We are looking at the richest possible array and multi-tiered cultural exchanges between Singapore and China."

Also facilitating this are two major Chinese cultural centers in Singapore — the China Cultural Centre and the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. Both facilitate a broad spectrum of cultural, academic and community programs.

The former — a modern 10-story building that blends cultural elements with contemporary style — was unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping when he visited Singapore in 2015.

"When I first saw it, I was really impressed. As director of the center, I am proud of working here. My job also gives me a sense of responsibility to deepen cultural exchanges between the two countries," Ma Hongying, the center's director, told Xinhua.

According to Allison Liu, managing director of the Song Art Foundation, culture and the arts is a neutral topic that does not incite conflict or violent disagreement.

She pointed to artist Yeo Hoe Koon as an example. "He was born (in 1935) in Hainan, (southern) China, educated in France, a citizen of Malaysia and resident of Singapore. His oil and ink paintings are more artistically abstract.

"Art collectors from China, Europe and Southeast Asia all like his works, as do Muslims from Indonesia and

Malaysia. From this, it is evident how the cultural differences across so many countries converge through art."

In June last year, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between Singapore's National Heritage Board and China's Palace Museum, also known as the Forbidden City.

The first of its kind between both organizations, it will cover five years and see the two collaborate in the areas of exhibition and loan exchange; exchange of information relating to collections management and conservation; curatorial and conservation staff exchange; research and publication; and retail opportunities. The possibility of a joint exhibition to be held in Singapore is being discussed.

"The signing of this MOU further cements the strong cultural relations between our two countries, and paves the way for more partnerships in the future," said Singapore's Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, Grace Fu, who witnessed the ceremony.

"I look forward to the upcoming collaborations that will showcase the best of China's and Singapore's culture, and add vibrancy to both our heritage sectors."

Promoting cultural exchange between the two countries just as enthusiastically is the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO).

Executive Director Terence Ho

noted three significant concert tours the SCO has embarked on — taking in Chinese cities including Beijing, Guangzhou in the south, and Nanjing and Xiamen in the east.

"Every one of the concert tours deepened and sharpened the relationship with our Chinese counterparts. Our conductors also guest-conduct with Chinese orchestras, guiding them to perform Nanyang (a cultural term referring to the region south of China) and Singaporean pieces in China," said Ho.

"Good music touches the heart and soul of the people. We inspire the Chinese audience with the beauty of our music."

Song Art's Liu is just as eager. Her foundation specializes in promoting overseas Chinese art masters, who can be relatively less well-known in the Chinese mainland despite the fame they have achieved elsewhere. Examples, in Singapore, include Yeo Hoe Koon and the late Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng.

"These artists were born and educated in China, and blended the Chinese culture and traditions into their art creations throughout their lives," said Liu.

"They have acted as very good cultural ambassadors of China. Through the curation of exhibitions, and writing and publishing their books, we bridged the gap of understanding between the Chinese and Singapore markets."

Liu remembers curating an exhibi-

tion on Chen in 2015 with Beijing's Poly Art Museum, featuring 250 artworks spread over six decades: "The response to the exhibition was overwhelming."

Despite all that has been done, there is still room for growth and progress. SMU's Kwok believes opportunities abound.

"On the foundation of the excellent array and multiple frameworks of cultural exchange between Singapore and China, the furthering of activities and even joint experimentation in new art forms and economy-linked initiatives can be additionally explored," he said.

Already, his university is involved in many collaborations with academic institutions in China such as Fudan, Tsinghua and Shanghai Jiao Tong.

"It is also keen to include conversations in cultural programming, developing the cultural and creative industries, and ways to enhance exchanges over even greater historical and geographical spheres," Kwok revealed.

The SCO's Ho feels that more MOUs can be signed at a strategic level to deepen and strengthen the bilateral relationship. "One area can be in how Singapore can play an active role in facilitating the cultural aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative," he suggested. The Belt and Road Initiative is the China-led plan to boost Asia's connectivity with Europe and Africa with a trade and infrastructure grid that revives the ancient Silk Road routes.

Ho was recently invited to present a paper on the SCO and development of Southeast Asian music as part of a Belt and Road conference at the Xi'an Music Conservatory, in Northwest China's Shaanxi province. While there, he realized there was so much the Chinese wanted to know about the region.

"They were curious about the orchestration of our music, the thinking and story behind our arts, the multicultural and multiracial blending in our arts, how we come together to perfect the voice and sound of our music — the idea of unity and harmony in diversity."

Liu said collaborations at the level of civil society are important, both in terms of quantity and quality, as they would be "softer and more neutral".

"I have a plan to establish a high-end Asian art institute for elite members from all over the continent, to provide postgraduate art and culture education, and enhance the studies of the business elite and renowned families in the areas of cultural heritage," she said.

"Culture is a life-long career and there is no retirement from it. That is why this is a life-long plan. Culture is also the best heritage to pass on between generations."