

# Butterfly Lovers soar on Chinese Youth Day

Review by Gabrielle Ruttico Photos Michael Grebla

United by the universal language of music, Chinese Youth Day was celebrated on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> of May by people of all nationalities, amid the beautiful surrounds of St. George's College in Perth. What began as an idea to commemorate the day with a single concert soon turned into a huge festival and celebration, thanks to the efforts of the Confucius Institute of the University of Western Australia and the Director of Music of the college, Michael Grebla.

The original plan had been for a single performance of the famed Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto, as part of the College's regular autumn concert series. However, there was so much interest in the concert it was decided to run the program twice on the same day (with the second concert selling out soon afterwards). To complement the main event, the Confucius Institute of WA, together with the College, organised a Chinese cultural festival complete with kung fu demonstrations, fan dancing and calligraphy.

Beneath an eclectic yet beautiful array of Chinese lanterns and Old English chandeliers, the eager audience was treated to world-class performances – and unbelievably, all for free. To open the celebrations, Grebla had learned a small amount of Mandarin, and welcomed the audience members in both English and Chinese. While it may not have been perfectly fluent, those who could understand applauded the host for this good-natured gesture.

The first half of the concert was programmed with short pieces that had originated from or been inspired by China. Grebla's own composition, Night River, was performed by a piano trio made up of violinist Alexandra Isted, cellist Krista Low and pianist Raymond Yong. The only criticism of this piece one could muster is that the blissful melodies and tranquil atmosphere ended all too soon. It is remarkable that such a sublime work could have been written by a student.

Jeremy Huynh, an engineering student at UWA and accomplished cellist, then performed two pieces with Yong accompanying on piano. San Tong's Fantasy is a sublime piece that requires delicacy and utmost concentration, qualities that both Huynh and Yong had no trouble producing. They enchanted the audience further with Ding Fu Xiang's North West Dance. Like its predecessor it

features many slides and plucked notes that imitate traditional Chinese instruments, but nonetheless sound fascinating on a cello.

Next, Alexandra Isted performed Fritz Kriesler's Tambourin Chinois, also accompanied by Yong on piano. While this work is German in origin, the composer used special Chinese compositional techniques throughout to give it a distinct exotic flavour. These techniques also make the piece extremely difficult to play; the extremely talented Isted, however, made it look easy.

A string quartet made up of violinists Emma Yole and Madeleine Antoine, violist Eunise Cheng and cellist Jeremy Huynh then performed two more traditional Chinese folk songs for the audience. The first was Bu Bu Gao, an uplifting piece that warmed the hearts of the listeners. The second was called Jasmine Flower, a peaceful song well known to many Chinese children. It ended the first half of the concert perfectly.

The atmosphere inside the hall after the interval was electric, with the audience barely able to contain their excitement. The next and final piece – the Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto – was what everyone had come to see.

We were certainly not disappointed.

The beautiful soloist Alexandra Isted excelled herself that afternoon. Every emotion, from joy to bitter despair, flowed through Isted's fingers, transfixing the audience and not letting go until the very end. She was a magician as well as a violinist, transporting the spellbound audience back to the Eastern Jin Dynasty, and showing them the story of the Butterfly Lovers as it unfolded.

However, a soloist is only as great as the orchestra that supports them. Raymond Yong, now conducting, united the ensemble and helped Isted fly to new heights. The orchestra was made up of both music students and recent graduates from the UWA School of Music, but one would be forgiven for thinking they were a professional orchestra. It was clear that they had worked very hard to polish their performance as their musicianship was flawless.

The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto is based upon the ancient tale of the same name, and was written in 1959 by Chen Gang and Zhanhao He. Prior to the performance, Michael Grebla introduced the legend of Zhu Yingtai, the brave

young woman who disguised herself as a man so that she could attend school. In the music, Zhu is represented by the violin while the orchestra has the task of setting the scene. On the way she meets another student named Liang Shanbo, who is symbolised by a solo cello from the orchestra. The two become instant friends, even making an oath of fraternity in a pavilion before reaching school in Hangzhou. Zhu's excitement at meeting Liang is symbolised by a fast and very technical passage for the solo violin, brilliantly played by Isted.

This friendship is strengthened throughout the years that they spend studying and living together, with Liang never realising that Zhu has been disguising herself all this time. Soon, Zhu finds herself falling in love with Liang – but Liang doesn't notice her advances. This part of the story correlates to the most difficult part of the music, where the soloist and orchestra have to play with techniques that take years to properly master.

These happy times are shattered without warning when Zhu is requested to return home by her father. On the journey home, the loyal Liang accompanies Zhu for many miles, who along the way subtly attempts to tell Liang her real identity. Liang still remains oblivious.

When it is finally time to part, Zhu makes Liang promise to visit her when he has completed his studies – and once he does, Zhu reveals that she is a woman. Rather than be angry at this deception, Liang is overjoyed and they instantly vow to spend the rest of their days together.

Unbeknownst to the pair, Zhu has already been betrothed by her family to another nobleman and so is unable to marry Liang. The solo violinist and cello play a haunting duet that represents the sadness of the lovers when they are told the truth. Heartbroken, Liang leaves to find work elsewhere. He gradually becomes more and more ill until at last he dies of a broken heart.

On the day of her arranged wedding, Zhu processes past the cemetery where Liang lies. Unable to continue on, she visits his grave and weeps, crying out to the gods to open the grave so she may see him one more time. With a mighty clap of thunder the gods answer her request, and without a moment's thought Zhu leaps into the grave. The violinist plays a very high note which is drowned by the rest of the orchestra, representing her leap of

faith.

The orchestra finishes the piece quietly as the two lovers are reborn as butterflies, sharing a love so strong they never part again.

As the last notes of the piece faded into silence, the musicians were greeted with thunderous applause. The qualities of hope, faith and strength embodied in the concerto were made all the more poignant by the fact that it was Chinese Youth Day. Even members of the crowd who were unfamiliar with the occasion were touched.

After the first concert had finished, the audience and musicians were treated to a festival in the quadrangle of the College, set up by the Confucius Institute of WA. First, spectacular fan dancers clad in matching pink and blue outfits performed for the crowd. They lightened the somewhat gloomy weather to no end, putting a smile on every face. There was also a powerful and very impressive kung fu demonstration and, to the delight of the crowd, the master then generously taught a group of volunteers Tai Chi.

While these performances were going on, a variety of Chinese cuisine was passed around for the crowd to sample. Volunteers from the Confucius Institute performed calligraphy demonstrations, writing names and blessings in Mandarin for residents and friends of the College, who treasured these special gifts. Another stall was host to a variety of games and challenges (requiring very skilled use of chopsticks).

By far the most wonderful aspect of the afternoon was the friendship exhibited both by the host College and the Confucius Institute of The University of Western Australia. This was a rare opportunity for the residents and friends of St. George's College to immerse themselves in Chinese culture, and everyone learned something new; the audience and festival-goers kept pinching themselves, unable to believe that people would volunteer their time so selflessly to exhibit this fascinating country. The effort they went to was certainly not in vain, as all who attended the Butterfly Lovers festival were inspired by and had their minds opened to the riches of Chinese culture. Ultimately, it was a very fitting celebration for Chinese Youth Day, promoting peace and understanding between all youth – Chinese and otherwise.



A group of keen volunteers learn Tai Chi from a Kung Fu Master (centre in white) as the crowd watches on.



Jeremy Huynh performs exquisite Chinese folk songs with Raymond Yong on piano.



Soloist Alexandra Isted soars effortlessly to a high note in the Butterfly Lovers Concerto.



Stunning calligraphy, crafted right before people's eyes, was gifted to members of the audience.



The orchestra looks up as Raymond Yong leads them blazing on into a new section.



Georgian family, from left: Richard Tan (Georgian; CEO of AABW), Michael Grebla ( Director of Music), Ian Hardy (Warden) and Mrs Hardy (photo by Adam Tan)



The magnificent St. George's College in Perth, perched on the edge of the Swan River.