

Music

Playing to the home crowd

Its 45th year sees the HK Phil turn its gaze closer to home, with Chinese musicians featuring prominently in its concerts, writes **Rob Garratt**.

As the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra moves into the middle third of its landmark 45th season, a certain welcome theme can be detected, with several high-profile home performances giving key platforms to Chinese composers and soloists. Meanwhile, the ensemble's musicians are preparing to go on a somewhat symbolic journey through the cities in Guangdong province on the Chinese mainland.

On Jan 13, the HK Phil will travel to the Zhuhai Huafa and CPAA Grand Theatre to present a concert entitled "Discover Classical Romance" two days after performing the same approachable program at Tsuen Wan Town Hall in the New Territories. With the clear intention of enticing new converts to classical music, the program presents Mozart's famous Don Giovanni Overture and the melodious Sinfonia Concertante alongside the late romantic Symphony in E by Hans Rott, a classmate of and inspiration to Mahler. Shanghai-born principal horn Lin Jiang will undoubtedly prove one of the star attractions.

While there was no formal announcement, HK Phil's chief executive Michael MacLeod has shared details of a coming concert in Guangzhou in early March. That such engagements come as increasing attention is paid to growing opportunities for regional integration seems notable. "We are very much looking forward to sharing our finest music-making with the audience in the Greater Bay Area," added MacLeod.

At the Guangzhou concert, MacLeod promises an appearance from Rachel Cheung, the Hong Kong pianist who won the Audience

Award at last year's career-making Fifteenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, held in Fort Worth, Texas.

Cheung is perhaps the brightest star among the homegrown talents on display in this season's programming. On May 10 and 11 the pianist will perform again alongside the HK Phil, this time at its usual home in the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, presenting Ravel's Piano Concerto in G under HK Phil music director Jaap Van Zweden's baton. The same program will see the maestro conduct the world premiere of a new and specially commissioned work by the Hong Kong composer Wong Chun-wai.

Local talent

The line-ups follow what appears to be a growing trend for showcasing home-grown composers. Earlier this year, the HK Phil presented its second performance of Hong Kong composer Austin Yip's *Metamorphosis*, a piece premiered and commissioned by the orchestra during its 2016/17 season. Yip's work preceded Shanghai-based soloist Wang Zhijiong's National Day performance of China's best-loved classical export, The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto, penned by Chen Gang and He Zhanhao.

These premieres build on the success of a competition for local composers held last year, Van Zweden told China Daily at the start of the season. "What we try to do is locate in our series the local talent which is absolutely necessary for the future of Hong Kong music-making," said the Dutch maestro, who also serves as music director at the prestigious New York Philharmonic. "Today, we have local talent making an interna-

tional career."

Cheung and Wong may be looking to the growing wave of Chinese soloists and composers who take centerstage in this season's program. Earlier this year Guilin-born violinist Jing Wang performed Brahms' Violin Concerto, while January will see performances by leading pianist Zhang Haochen, a 28-year-old prodigy from Shanghai who won the Van Cliburn in 2009 and was called on to replace Lang Lang at the China NCPA Orchestra's Carnegie Hall debut when the superstar's arm was injured. In Hong Kong, Zhang will perform Rachmaninov's physics-defying Piano Concerto No 1 on January 18 and 19.

Zhang's key work and Chen's music will both symbolically follow the baton of Yu Long. Hailed as the "most powerful figure in China's classical music scene" by The New York Times, Yu Long commands widespread recognition for his role as artistic director and chief conductor of the China Philharmonic Orchestra. The 54-year-old figurehead has previously been called on to conduct several of the world's most storied ensembles — including the Munich Philharmonic and Orchestre de Paris — without wavering in his domestic commitments, where he is also chairman of the Artistic Committee of the Beijing Music Festival, music director of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra, and vice president of the Chinese Musicians' Association.

Midway through his fourth year as HK Phil's principal guest conductor, Yu Long finds time for four appearances this season, the first of which took place last weekend when he pointedly opened the program with a piece loaded with meaning. Taking broad jingoistic cues from the drama of cinema, Guo Wenjing's driving *Riding on the Wind* was written 21 years ago to celebrate Hong Kong's return to the motherland and premiered under Yu's own baton on July 1, 1997.

Such regional programming marks a significant departure for an ensemble founded in Hong Kong's colonial days and one that has built its reputation on interpreting the European-centric classical canon. On the global stage, the HK Phil has been making headlines lately



HK Phil's principal guest conductor Yu Long chose Guo Wenjing's *Riding on the Wind* to open the first of his four appearances this season at Hong Kong Cultural Centre last week.

thanks to the recent release of its *Der Ring des Nibelungen* boxset, which collects all four parts of Wagner's epic opera cycle over 14 discs, recorded in the city during the past four years. The HK Phil has previously faced criticism for not doing

more to reflect Hong Kong's unique geography, but MacLeod says the orchestra is dedicated to showcasing local talent.

Being "the biggest arts group in the city and also Asia's foremost classical orchestra", the HK Phil,

MacLeod adds, is committed to promoting the work of composers from both Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, as well as having talented local musicians perform their works — "locally, nationally and internationally."



Yu Long conducting a solo rendition of Samuel Barber's Cello Concerto, Op 22 by Alban Gerhardt at a recent concert.

Films

Audiences called the shots in 2018

By ELIZABETH KERR

You can always tell what was happening in the world by the movies that flooded its theaters that year. Japan has been wrestling with the Fukushima meltdown for years, and Daiichi rears its head in everything from *Shin Godzilla* to agitator Sion Sono's *The Land of Hope*. UK director Ben Wheatley's fractured family drama *Happy New Year*, *Colin Burstead* could be read as a Brexit analogy.

The biggest single factor influencing traditional Hollywood blockbusters now is how to guarantee a release in the Chinese mainland. In 2013 Marvel's *Iron Man 3* became the first giant film to shamelessly pander to Chinese audiences, which went as well as might be expected. The only people surprised that useless extra characters and scenes with zero narrative impact would be met with scorn were those at Marvel. Nonetheless, pandering reached a fever pitch in 2018. *Pacific Rim: Uprising* — the sequel made only because the first film proved lucrative in China — failed by desperately trying to find a way to make the Chinese tech industry save the world. It lost sight of basics like storytelling and Chinese audiences didn't fall for it. *Escape Plan 2: Hades* was a Sylvester Stallone vehicle with no Stallone and cynical amounts of Huang Xiaoming. Slightly better was *The Meg*, which pandered in a more amusing, goofy way and

earned more RMB because of it. The most egregious example of the year was Dwayne Johnson's *Skyscraper*, whose splashy PR stops in Hong Kong and Beijing couldn't save a bad movie. Its earnings stalled at \$98 million, half of which came in the opening weekend.

Notably, James Wan's *Aquaman* opened in China ahead of most markets, including the United States, and most definitely marches to the beat of its own creative drum. It has no Chinese characters shoehorned into the narrative and no extended sequences set in Shanghai. *Aquaman* follows its own (nonsense) story logic and stays true to itself, and Chinese audiences recognized that. They were so unconcerned about being pandered to that they bestowed the film with \$190 million in a week. Hollywood has yet to learn that its best tactic is respecting Chinese audiences' singular tastes.

Elsewhere the fallout from the Harvey Weinstein scandal contin-

ues to rain down, now falling on the South Korean and Indian industries, and #TimesUp and #MeToo are trickling into the final product we see on screens — or don't, as the case may be with the prestigious Venice Film Festival. Earlier this year Venice refused to sign a gender parity protocol, which Cannes and Locarno did, and which events like Toronto and Sundance are actively addressing. Festival director Alberto Barbera told The Hollywood Reporter he would quit before accepting quotas. He blamed the industry for a lack of films by women and added, "It's not up to us to change the situation."

Against this landscape Gary Ross's *Ocean's Eight* — the Times Up Ocean's film — proceeded to aggressively drop the ball. Cast with three of the world's most powerful actresses, an international pop star and endowed with roughly a dozen Oscars, BAFTAs, Emmys and Golden Globes, *Ocean's* was so lazy and low energy it was as if the cast and crew didn't even bother with a

script. The zeitgeist was on its side, so no one had to try, it seemed. Wrong. December's *Widows* is about much more than gender politics, but in the grand scheme of things, it's everything *Ocean's Eight* should have been.

Finally: representation. The idea that there are not enough black, brown, LGBTQ, Asian, female, or old people on screens is as old as the hills. When a movie about black women on vacation (*Girls Trip*) or a shimmering gay romance (*Call Me By Your Name*) are hits, Hollywood boardrooms erupt with confusion. Representation isn't just about seeing the self on screen: it's about good business.

When Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* earned a truckload of money last year, it was proved that audiences everywhere put story and character first and that the hero didn't have to be a straight white man.

Black Panther had *Avengers*' associations on its side, but it's also one of the Marvel series' most distinct entries.

Bland teen rom-coms got a jolt of fresh blood with *Love, Simon*, which swapped out two boys for the usual boy/girl mechanism. Hong Kong got in on the act with the transgender drama *Tracey*, a modest success. And love it or hate it, only 40 percent of *Crazy Rich Asians*' audience was Asian-American on opening weekend, meaning the majority was not. Asian people are not the kiss of death for a movie. Bad filmmaking is.

