

Mahler in Beijing: classical luminaries celebrate centenary in China

China's growing influence in the world is mirrored by its flourishing classical music scene



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East to west: Long Yu conducts the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra in New York's Central Park. Photograph: Mike Coppola/FilmMagic

The great Swedish mezzo-soprano [Anne Sofie von Otter](#) is giving a lieder master class to a group of talented young students. She politely berates the accompanying pianist for not using enough pedal and gently coaches one of the singers to evoke more innocence: "The character matures, gets pregnant and dies soon enough in this cycle. But at this point, she is still a little girl." The standard master-class drill, in fact, except that Von Otter, energetically attired in a powder blue tracksuit, is imparting her knowledge not in a conservatory or concert hall, but in a luxury car showroom in Beijing adorned with both high-end Audis and huge images of [Gustav Mahler](#).

"I did know beforehand that the venue was called the Audi Forum," she later laughs. "But when I came in I couldn't believe my eyes. I didn't think we would actually be in the middle of all these fantastically macho cars. It felt like being in a James Bond movie. I'm not used to the smell of so much leather and rubber when singing lieder."

Von Otter was in [China](#) as one of the star turns of the 14th [Beijing Music](#) festival and in many ways her master class typified the ethos of the whole event. Serious music-making from a stellar cast delivered within the very modern Chinese context of glittering new venues, enthusiastic young audiences and an unapologetic embrace of business. In China along with Von Otter were such luminaries as Riccardo Muti, Charles Dutoit, Christoph Eschenbach, Daniel Harding and

Matthias Goerne. They played with some of the best Chinese and other Asian orchestras to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Mahler's death.

"It is plainly a moment of political and economic change in the wider world," observed Muti, who conducted the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra in the festival's closing gala. "And to see that reflected so clearly in music is fascinating. During my career the way people think about music has completely changed. When I started out there was the idea that Germans were the best at German music and Italians were the only ones who could really play Verdi and so on. It was never really true. Toscanini, for example, was a great Wagner conductor. Now the idea seems preposterous."

Muti says the stereotype that China's rapid musical advances had given them "technique, while we, the west, still have the soul, is now very outdated. They are certainly running rather than walking with regard to technique, but they have demonstrated that their classical musicians also have soul. Of course I can see the commercial and political motivations for making links with other cultures, but when you do that via Beethoven, Verdi, Vivaldi and Mahler, people communicate in a way that will go beyond the commercial and political. The sense of universality we so value in the great tradition of our music is just that. It belongs to them as much as it belongs to us."

But even for a music culture developing as fast as China's, isn't such a high-profile series of more than 20 Mahler concerts – as well as associated talks, education-outreach sessions and master classes – quite a leap? Not on the evidence of this festival, say local musicians and visitors alike. In fact Mahler is a peculiarly apt choice for such blanket exposure. It is almost exactly 100 years to the day that the first complete performance of his vast "symphony" for orchestra and voices, *Das Lied von der Erde* ("The Song of the Earth"), was heard in [Munich](#). He set the 8th-century Tang dynasty poet [Li Bai](#) – who was later adapted by Ezra Pound and many other writers in the west – and the work is musically full of Chinese motifs. The Chinese-American conductor [Lan Shui](#) was brought up in Beijing in the 70s and 80s and is now chief conductor of the [Singapore Symphony Orchestra](#), as well as the principal conductor of the Copenhagen Philharmonic. He says that at the time Mahler was composing, the links between east and west were comparatively open, certainly more so than in many of the periods before and after. "As a student it took me much longer to connect with the music of, say, Bach than Mahler. Perhaps in practical terms because there was not too much church music here when I grew up, but also because the emotions felt more distant. Mahler's musical language seemed to contain universal emotions and much of his work, not just *Das Lied von der Erde*, appeared similar to Chinese poetry in that it seemed to have both a free form and a strong structure."

Von Otter was noticeably aware of Mahler's impact at her recital. "The concert culture is a little different here from the west and I detected more noise and movement in the audience than is usual. But when I got to those six Mahler songs it suddenly became extremely still. Either they knew the music well, or the music was speaking to them in a special way."

The history of [classical music](#) in China has been long and sometimes tortuous. There was a professional orchestra in Shanghai as far back as 1879, albeit one packed with European players performing to an expat audience. Classical music survived the 1949 revolution, came under Soviet influence and ebbed and flowed according to the state of relations between the two countries, before being banned and musicians persecuted during the 1966-69 cultural revolution.

Its slow re-emergence began after Madame Mao allowed some of her personal favourites – Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, Beethoven's *Pastoral* – to be played. Eugene Ormandy's Philadelphia Orchestra toured the country in 1973, and education reforms in the late 70s opened the discipline up again, although well into the 1980s students were still hand-copying scores not on the official curriculum, including those of Mahler.

Now tens of millions of Chinese children are learning piano and violin, and the music is heavily supported at home by local and national government and promoted abroad through organisations such as the British-based [KT Wong Foundation](#), whose efforts have resulted in a Beijing production of Handel's *Semele* and will see a young Chinese-cast version of Britten's *Noye's Fludde* in Belfast as part of next year's Olympic celebrations. At the elite level of international music-making, Chinese players, conductors and composers have become part of the furniture, or in the case of pianist [Lang Lang](#), a global phenomenon.

A key figure behind the recent expansion of Chinese classical music is the conductor, and close associate of [Lang Lang](#), [Long Yu](#), who, remarkably, is music director of three of China's most prestigious orchestras and was a co-founder of both the Beijing Music festival and the China Philharmonic Orchestra. Since it was founded in 2000 the CPO has toured extensively throughout China and played the first official concert in a church since the revolution – a performance of Mozart's *Requiem* to mark the composer's 250th anniversary – as well as playing in New York's Central Park and for the Pope at the Vatican: "He was very surprised when I spoke to him in German," chuckles the Berlin-educated Yu.

"I am part of the first generation to have grown up through the cultural revolution, then to have gone abroad to study and work, and then to have returned home. We have a different view of the world at a time when China is opening up to the world. Classical music is not so much a western import for us, more an obvious way to communicate."

Yu is well connected both musically and politically and his take on the political, cultural and personal role music could play in the new China is an almost uniquely informed one. It offers a tiny philosophical straw in the wind, as he explains that historically in China what was good for society was regarded as also being good for the individual. But now, maybe what is good for the individual can also be good for society.

"Of course economics, business and money are important. But we also need spiritual nourishment. For the past 30 years we have paid a lot of attention to the development of the economy. All over Asia, people are very good at business, but how we balance life and society is increasingly questioned. For me the music is like water and people are vases of all different shapes. The music is the same, but people's individual responses release their own imagination and creativity. And surely more imaginative and creative people are more useful within society and happier within themselves. So my job is to provide them with the very clearest water. What shape they then make of it is entirely up to them."