

Pipa virtuoso Fang leads WSO back to classics

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It was back to the classics Saturday for the Windsor Symphony Orchestra, but the spirit of the recent Windsor Canadian Music Festival lingered in a contemporary Chinese work.

WCMF unveils new Canadian compositions with often unconventional or experimental instrumentation.

While Tan Dun's Concerto for String Orchestra and Pipa is not Canadian, it was performed by Montreal-based pipa virtuoso, Liu Fang, and called upon the string players to beat the tops of their instruments at times and shout Chinese words.

It was particularly striking in the context of the rest of the program of works written before the first decade of the 19th century.

Chinese-born Tan Dun is the Grammy and Oscar-winning composer of such film soundtracks as *Hero* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. His use of traditional Chinese instruments in the context of Western musical idioms has earned him a special place among the new generation of

composers living in the United States.

His pipa concerto is classically structured and borrows liberally from the concerto tradition, including having a cadenza. But the instrument itself is decidedly exotic in sound. Pear-shaped like a lute but lacking a sound hole, the pipa has a percussive quality and is plucked with plectrums, although there is a considerable amount of chord work and strumming involved, as well.

Liu Fang mastered the tricky slow and fast passages with the dexterity of a flamenco guitarist.

Meanwhile, the string orchestra followed suit, performing a series of pizzicatos, glissandos and tapping the strings. At one point, it sounded as though the orchestra was tuning up, and concertmaster Lillian Scheirich even stood up as she normally does to start a concert.

The 33-year-old Liu Fang is renowned for her virtuosity and has recorded seven albums. A native of China, she has been living in Canada since 1996.

Her encore was a traditional Chinese melody, titled *The Ambush*, a showy and programmatic piece which could easily serve as background music for one of the warrior epics of contemporary Chinese film.

The major work on the program was Beethoven's *Symphony No. 4*, a cheerful composition that suffers by comparison with the two symphonies that bookend it, the third and fifth.

But it is far from lightweight, and conductor John Morris Russell once more proved his mettle in the classics by delivering a rapturous, vibrant reading.

The orchestra's woodwind section shone, notably the bassoons and clarinets.

Opening the concert was Carl Maria von Weber's rarely performed overture and march from Schiller's play, *Turandot*, a Chinese story that also inspired the Puccini opera. Its quaint orchestration included a solo piccolo at the outset.

Mozart's magnificent overture to *The Magic Flute*, another Oriental story, began the second half. WSO is in its



CREDIT: Scott Webster, The Windsor Star
Pipa player Liu Fang performs with the Windsor Symphony Orchestra Saturday night.

element performing Mozart and Beethoven, although its excursion into the late-20th century on this night was fruitful.

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