



Considering that he has endured weeks of college tours, press conferences and interviews to promote his film *Beyond the Arctic* (征服北極), veteran documentary director Yang Li-chou (楊力州) looked admirably cheerful for our interview at Spot — Taipei Film House (光點台北).

The 75-minute documentary follows three Taiwanese athletes, Kevin Lin (林義傑), Albert Liu (劉柏崗) and Jason Chen (陳彥博), on their grueling 650km-trek to the Magnetic North Pole as part of the 2008 Polar Challenge, an international race that takes place between mid-April and mid-May each year.

"Nothing can beat me now. I survived the Arctic Circle," said Yang.

The morning interview took on a frolicsome tone when the 22-year-old Chen arrived shortly after. Banter and teasing ensued between Yang and Chen who laughed at each other's jokes. It almost felt like a scene transplanted from the movie in which the three voyagers remain upbeat in the face of extreme weather conditions and life-threatening situations.

The Taiwanese crew was one of the three teams, out of nine in total, to finish the race. Chen became the world's youngest athlete to make it to the Magnetic North Pole.

Taipei Times: Which question do you hate being asked the most after returning home?

Jason Chen: "Is there prize money?" Or the favorite question from the elders in the family: "Why did you go if you couldn't get money for it?"

Yang Li-chou: Mine is "Did you take a bottle of condensed milk with you? You could have eaten all the shaved ice you wanted!" In the Arctic, ice is the source of pain. You never ever want to touch it.

TT: Let's start with filmmaking in the Arctic then. What was it like struggling to make a film under such extreme weather conditions?

YL: My first priority was not to shoot footage but to keep my body in one piece, my fingers especially. We had to wear four pairs of gloves to keep our hands free from frostbite. But my hands couldn't function under four gloves because they were

Documentary director Yang Li-chou and athlete Jason Chen spoke to the 'Taipei Times' about their 21-day expedition inside the Arctic Circle

like Doraemon's paws. I couldn't hit the buttons on my digital camera [laughing]. It was frustrating. To capture important moments, I took off three gloves and stuck my hands, heating-pad covered, inside the camera protection bag to maneuver. I only had two to three minutes before my hands lost the feeling of pain and turned black.

TT: How did you keep the camera in workable condition?

YL: I took five digital cameras with me since there was no 3C (Tsann Kuen, 燦坤實業) around if they broke. Every day when I pressed the power button and saw the camera light turn on, I thanked God for giving me another chance. But it didn't mean that I could get images on tapes for sure.

The most common situation would be, say, I was filming Jason passing in front of the camera. He passed by, but I could still see his image lingering on the monitor. It felt like it was so cold that even the electricity current was slow. I could never be sure if the images were in focus or not.

(Yang followed the team for its five-day trudge from the base camp at Resolute Bay, Canada, to the race's starting point at Polaris Mine. Once the race officially started, Yang

The athletes featured in *Beyond the Arctic*, from left: Albert Liu, Kevin Lin and Jason Chen. Director Yang Li-chou (not shown) secretly wanted to abort filming after the team's first day inside the Arctic Circle. PHOTOS COURTESY OF GOOD FILM WORKSHOP

wasn't allowed to visit the athletes unless they were within 30km from where the director and organizer were camped. Chen, the youngest of the trio, was tasked with filming the whole contest.)

TT: Jason, how did you record the race while trying to ski and stay alive at the same time?

JC: I would do hand warm-up exercises, such as moving up and down along the ski sticks, for one to two hours. Then I took off the gloves, unzipped my coat and got the camera out to tape for one minute before I lost the feeling in my limbs.

It was excruciating to merely get your hands out. Besides, my teammates weren't too happy when we stopped to film [as the cold was unbearable when the athletes stopped moving and generating heat].

TT: What was in your mind while traversing the vast frozen expanses?

JC: Life flashed before my eyes. For nearly 20 hours a day, I was alone, hearing no sound except that of the wind. The absolute sense of solitude made me recall memories, in minute detail, that had been long forgotten.

(Their daily itinerary included over 12 hours of skiing, with a five-minute break every three hours to take in chocolate, beef jerky and peanuts, five hours of setting up the tent, boiling water and preparing meals, and four to five hours of sleep.)

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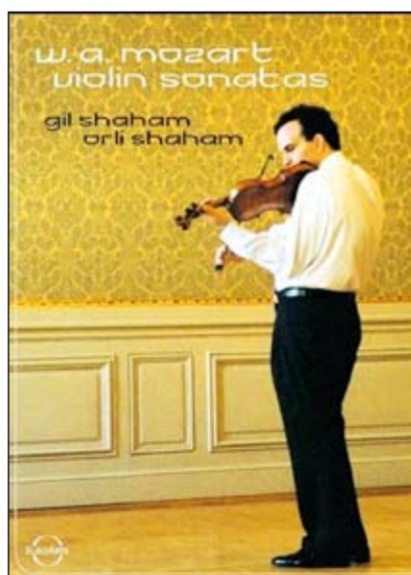
Arctic warriors

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

[CLASSICAL DVD REVIEWS]



BERNSTEIN/BEETHOVEN
Missa Solemnis etc
Deutsche Grammophon
DGM 00440 073 4501



MOZART
Violin Sonatas
Gil and Orli Shaham
EuroArts 5055188



LA CENERENTOLA
Rossini
Bartoli, Houston Grand Opera
Decca 00440 071 4449



PELLEAS ET MELISANDE
Glyndebourne Festival Opera
KULTUR D3117

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

At the end of last year Deutsche Grammophon released an important DVD of Leonard Bernstein conducting Beethoven in Europe during the 1970s. It features his 1978 performance of the *Missa Solemnis* (Solemn Mass), together with two briefer Beethoven choral items.

Beethoven's approach to the ancient liturgical text was far from conventional — no one could imagine his version being performed as part of any traditional church service. Instead, he imposed on these Christian words a positively cosmic tone. The stars, the planets, and the universe itself seem to explode with a violent but joyful energy, expressing both Beethoven's own non-doctrinal deism and the revolutionary impulses of his turbulent era.

This was perfectly suited to Bernstein's extrovert, supra-romantic personality. His performance, given with

Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra, is as a result especially memorable.

With his tousled hair, and tears always seeming ready to pour down his face, he appears to be celebrating his own continuing life as well as lamenting his assured mortality. He's as much trying to educate his audience as guide his orchestra, too, and the thought that outside the concert hall Amsterdam was at that date awash with half the world's hippies, who might have been happy to endorse Beethoven's general sentiments but would almost all have yawned at his music, forms a curious backdrop to watching the event today.

DRAMA AND PATHOS

Coming hot on the heels of the release of Bernstein's Mahler cycle from the same era, this DVD is historically important. The *Missa Solemnis* is something of a white elephant, after all — probably more revered than loved,

accorded its due by Beethoven scholars but not that often performed. Leonard Bernstein sets out to change all that, though, and if you think any version might succeed in bringing out the work's drama and pathos, this prophetic rendering is certainly one to try.

It's sometimes said that mediocre Mozart is a lot less interesting than mediocre Beethoven. (There's no mediocre Bach, so he can be excluded from the picture.) And the five Mozart violin sonatas performed by Gil and Orli Shaham on a DVD issued by Kultur in 2006 are unlikely to be considered in the top category of that composer's products. The two musicians, however, do all they can to make them lively and accessible. They play them in a sumptuous room in Vienna's Daun-Kinsky Palace and, with their smiles and exchanged glances, the music's intimate and affectionate character is successfully brought out.

When I wrote last month about two

samples of the revived interest in Rossini's early non-comic operas, I didn't mean to suggest that his established comedies were any less interesting. *La Cenerentola* (Cinderella) is characterized by the simultaneous difficulty and frivolity of its music. Few arias can be as difficult to sing as some of those it contains, yet the music appears to go to great lengths to avoid any real seriousness. There are echoes of Mozart's sublime comic operas, but a total absence of Mozart's highly characteristic blending of high spirits and melancholy. Rossini's comic operas are all icing and no cake, you might say.

The famous version of *La Cenerentola* from Houston Grand Opera needs no new praise here, but it does stand as an example of the nature of the genre. Houston's opera house is vast, and for Cecilia Bartoli's US debut it was packed tight with enthusiastic fans. They weren't disappointed, and the performance recorded here remains a classic one. But

it also demonstrates once again what Rossini's operatic comedies have, and what they lack.

Some of the vocal writing is extraordinarily intricate — listen to Bartoli's final aria for a typical example. Floridity was central to opera's attraction in that era, and listening to its female soloists was the equivalent of watching Chinese acrobats. (Later, with Wagner, they became female matadors, but that's another story.)

VOCAL TRIALS

But nothing is too much for Bartoli's formidable talents, almost matched — though the demands on them are slightly less — by the other soloists. It's as if Rossini isn't giving them opportunities to display their soulfulness or vocal richness, but challenging them. They succeed, of course, and if they'd failed Rossini would have been as much the loser as anyone. Extreme technical skill

is displayed in all the big ensembles, when everyone has to be florid, but with different vocal lines, at the same time.

Even so, the performance I enjoyed most was by Michele Pertusi, singing the work's only wholly serious character, Alidoro. But Raul Gimenez is also wonderful as the prince, Don Ramiro.

Bartoli is quite superb throughout. There's something almost sexual in the way Rossini introduces his demure heroine singing a homely little song, when everyone in the audience knows full well what extraordinary trials, albeit only vocal ones, she'll be made to undergo before the end.

Lastly, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* may be unreasonably static as operas go, but it does benefit from repeated hearings. For that the DVD format is ideal, and the 2005 version from the UK's Glyndebourne Festival Opera, starring among others John Tomlinson, can be safely recommended.