

# FEATURES

MONDAY, JUNE 8, 2009

PAGE 13

[ THE WEEKENDER ]

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

When I asked Lu Shao-chia (呂紹嘉) over a year ago whether he'd be interested in becoming the new music director of Taiwan's National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) he said that he was extremely busy in Germany and that, if such an offer were made, he'd have a lot of things to consider. But last week he was announced as the heir to Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬) in exactly this position.

So presumably he's thought and thought and finally decided that it's possible. Chien himself spent half of every year away, also in Germany, and it seems likely that some such provision has also been made in Lu's contract. But the NSO administration understandably hasn't made any such details public.

"The musicians are happy with this choice," I was told. "He's the natural successor to Chien since they are the only two local conductors who possess the skills required for the job. Their styles are very different, though."

"They do have things in common — both from the same generation, both students of former Taipei Symphony Orchestra maestro Chen Chiu-sheng (陳秋盛), both superb opera conductors, both with acclaimed careers in Germany — and that's a sure proof of ability in anyone."

"But basically Chien is more angular and precise, Lu more flowing and with an eye on the long-term musical structure. It really can be heard in performance, even though things may look the same. But that's the magic of music-making."

Lu will begin as music director designate in August. He'll give three concerts and lead the NSO on its Hong Kong tour in November. He'll then start a five-year contract as music director in August 2010.

The NSO has had a long search for a new leader since Chien's departure in July 2007. At one point, two finalists in an audition process gave public concerts, but neither was appointed.

Gunther Herbig has acted as a bridge-figure, but everyone will be relieved that this long wait has finally ended with a widely welcomed choice.

The NSO under Chien made a name for itself in opera, introducing many famous works to Taiwan for the first time. There are high expectations that this tradition will be continued under Lu. As general music director of the Hanover State Opera from 2001 to 2006 he conducted a wide range of operas including *Aida*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Wozzeck*, *Pelleas et Melisande*, *Rosenkavalier*, *Salome*, *Elektra*, *The Makropulos Case* and *Jenufa*, and he's recently conducted *Madame Butterfly* for Opera Australia and *Katya Kabanova* with Sweden's Gothenburg Opera. Taiwan, it seems, has a lot to look forward to.

One of the best places to listen to Lu's work with the NSO is on two promotional CDs entitled *NSO Live*. These weren't issued for public sale but are easily available via the orchestra. They're recordings taken from public concerts, and the longer of the two features Shostakovich's Symphony No. 4 and Richard Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero's Life). Both are absolutely fabulous. The Strauss tone-poem displays a marvelous orchestral balance and delicacy, while the Shostakovich symphony is an exceptionally powerful and thoughtful account of an oft-denigrated work. The other CD contains the fourth movements of Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony* and the fourth movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 9.

First and foremost, these CDs display how well the NSO plays under Lu's direction. But they also show Lu's independence of mind. *Ein Heldenleben* is sometimes considered as a display piece, but Lu makes it a sensitive and almost introverted work. And Shostakovich's Fourth, rarely highly regarded, is treated as a profound piece of soul-searching.

Lu was born in Taiwan, studied music in Taipei, and continued his education in

Bloomington, Indiana, and at Vienna's College of Music. He then won first prize in conducting competitions in Amsterdam, Besancon, France, and Trento, Italy. He consolidated this promising beginning by working largely in Germany, in many ways classical music's high temple. A major post was in Koblenz where he was appointed music director in 1998.

He continued orchestral and operatic conducting in Berlin, Stuttgart, Frankfurt and Munich, as well as in London and Brussels. All in all, Taiwan is lucky to get him back.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, the Taipei Symphony Orchestra (TSO) has been less successful in its search for a new music director. Martin Fischer-Dieskau was never confirmed in the post, despite announcements of his victory in the contest for the job and a never-to-be-forgotten operatic double-bill of *Il Segreto di Susanna* and *Gianni Schicchi* in September. He continues as visiting conductor, but his plans for a centenary production of Strauss' 1909 opera *Elektra* have sadly been abandoned.

It would appear, therefore, that appointing music directors in Taiwan's crowded classical music scene is not without its difficulties. The NSO management is thus to be congratulated in having, albeit after many delays, negotiated the stormy waters, and with such palpable success.

Lu Shao-chia assumes the post of National Symphony Orchestra's music director designate in August.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NSO



Despite his youth, Miguel Fernandez, right, also known as El Yiyo, has mastered the poise and self-command required of flamenco thanks to lessons with his teacher Manuel Jimenez, left. PHOTO COURTESY OF NOVEL HALL

## Flamenco flair

BY DIANE BAKER  
STAFF REPORTER

The Novel Hall 2009 Dance Series wrapped up with a bang this weekend, or rather some thunderous oles for 13-year-old Miguel Fernandez — El Yiyo — and his adult colleagues in *New Flamenco Generation*.

The theater was packed on Friday night, which should have been no surprise to those who have attended productions by Ballet Tetra Espanola de Rafael Aguilar and other flamenco companies in recent years. There are a lot of flamenco fans in Taipei, thanks to teachers and enthusiasts such as Lien Ho (賀運華), Lee Shin (李昕) and Lin King (林耕).

But given the smaller audiences for the first two events in this year's dance series, this weekend's shows must have been a huge relief for Novel Hall staff.

While some audience members were disappointed they weren't seeing something along the lines of *Carmen*, the crowd stayed in their seats, clapping for repeated curtain calls at the end of the show. The applause was well earned, for while the youth of "El Yiyo" may be the hook that draws the crowds in, *New Flamenco Generation* gives each member of the seven-member cast a chance to shine.

There was something for everyone to enjoy, whether you like flamenco guitar, the singing or the dancing. The evening began with a beautiful solo by guitarist Jose Andres Cortez, alone on a blackened stage, lit just by a spotlight. Next the three singers were introduced — Joaquin Gomez (El Duende), Jose Antonio Martin (El Salvo) and Juan Mansion (El Coco) — and while all three men have wonderful voices, it was the power and emotion of El Duende's singing that carried the night.

The passion and intensity of the three dancers — El Yiyo, his teacher Barolo (Manuel Jimenez) and Yolanda Cortez — was wonderful to watch, though each were very different. It was fascinating to see the interplay between each dancer and the singers.

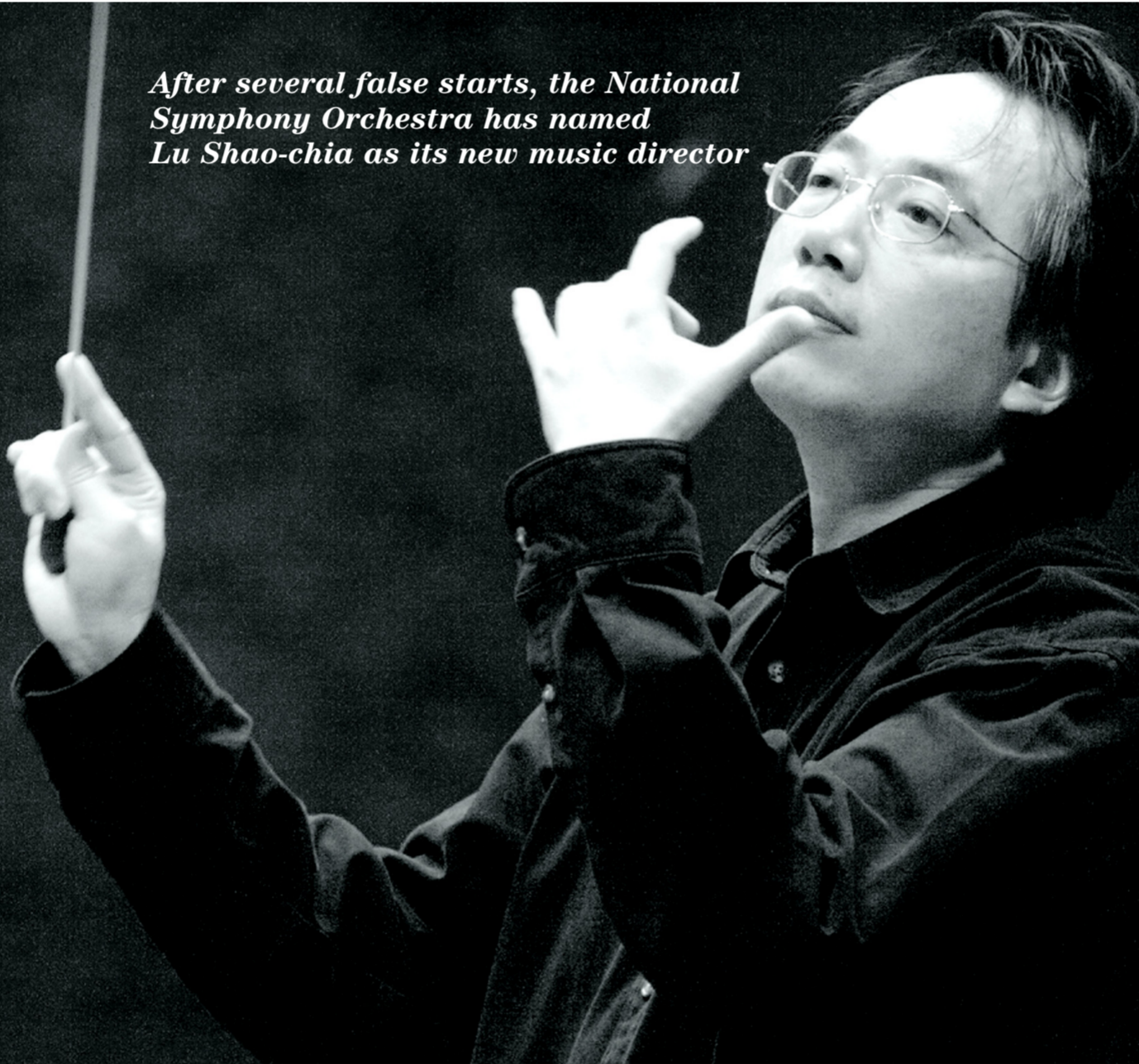
Cortez was pure smoldering passion, the kind that can lead to suicidal plunges or knife fights, with long looks out into the audience that drew people into her world. Barolo's passion, on the other hand, was more inwardly focused — though that could be because his flowing hair often obscured his face. His graceful, almost liquid hand movements counterbalanced the power in his steps.

He has passed those wonderful hand gestures on to El Yiyo, for it was the youngster's arms and hands that I noticed more than his footwork, at least at first. Having seen many young dancers perform over the years, I was struck by El Yiyo's poise and self-command on stage, though every so often he seemed close to losing control over his explosive footwork. One can only hope that he will never outgrow his love for flamenco because he offers such promise for years to come.

Audiences in southern Taiwan have two chances to see *New Flamenco Generation*. The group performs tonight at 7:30pm at Pingtung County Art Center (屏東縣藝術館), 427, Heping Rd, Pingtung City (屏東市和平路427號) and tomorrow at 7:30pm at Chiayi Performing Arts Center (嘉義縣表演藝術中心), 265, Jianguo Rd Sec 2, Minsiyong Township, Chiayi County (嘉義縣民雄鄉建國路二段265號).

## Podium notes

After several false starts, the National Symphony Orchestra has named Lu Shao-chia as its new music director



## PLANETPOP

Pop diva A-mei (阿妹) is lending her voice to a campaign to fight global hunger in commemoration of the kindness she experienced from strangers during her impoverished youth.

The 36-year-old singer, real name Chang Hui-mei (張惠妹), was in Singapore to support the local chapter of the Christian charity World Vision in its efforts to raise awareness about starvation around the globe.

"When I was very young and living with my tribe, my family was really poor and our tribe had really poor facilities," she told reporters ahead of a 30-hour Famine Camp involving 1,000 students that ended late Saturday.

Edison Chen is taking his first steps on the road to redemption.

PHOTO: AP

The event, featuring A-Mei as a guest celebrity, was staged to give some of the affluent city-state's teenagers a taste of what it is like to starve. The participants were restricted to taking water only for 30 hours.

"These big brothers and sisters would bring food such as flour and rice for us, bring us to lessons and revise our schoolwork with us," recalled A-Mei, a member of the Puyuma tribe.

"At the time, we thought, 'why were these outsiders so nice?' And whenever they gave us stuff, I felt really grateful and happy."

A-Mei, who overcame poverty to become one of the biggest sensations in the Mando-pop music scene, was born in the mountains of eastern Taiwan and the third youngest of nine siblings.

"This camp would allow them to experience what less fortunate people in other parts are going through at this moment," said the singer.

Thai police yesterday defended their handling of the investigation into the death of

David Carradine after the US actor's family urged the FBI to step in and assist the probe. Police say they suspect the star of the 1970s television series *Kung Fu* died in a sex act that went wrong after his naked body was found on Thursday in his Bangkok hotel room with rope tied around his neck and genitals.

A lawyer for the brother of the 72-year-old actor said at the weekend that the actor's family had met US Federal Bureau of Investigation officials to ask for help to discover exactly how Carradine died.

"I am confident we are working on the right track. US embassy representatives saw every step of the investigation process in the hotel room," said Colonel Somprasong Yenthaum, who is leading the probe.

Police are still awaiting the results of laboratory tests that will take between three to four weeks to come through before they can make an official conclusion about the cause of death.

An initial autopsy report

revealed that the actor died from a sudden lack of oxygen and his body showed no signs of struggle.

Film studio Universal Pictures rejected charges against comedian Sacha Baron Cohen on Friday, saying it has a video that proves that the actor did not physically harm a woman while filming his latest movie.

Richelle Olson, executive director of Desert Valley Charities, and her husband are suing Cohen and Universal for a stunt that took place in a bingo hall during filming of the satirical movie *Bruno*.

The suit alleges that Olson had been told that Bruno was a celebrity and would call the numbers at a charity bingo game she ran for the elderly in Palmdale, California.

Olson also says that Cohen "offensively touched, pushed and battered" her, causing her to fall to the ground.

In a statement, Universal Pictures called the allegations "completely baseless."

"Filmed footage of the full

encounter, which took place more than two years ago, clearly shows that Ms Olson was never touched or in any way assaulted by Sacha Baron Cohen or any member of the production and suffered no injury," the statement read.

Actor-singer Edison Chen (陳冠希) says widely circulated Internet photos of him in various sexual positions with female Hong Kong stars were a youthful indiscretion.

"When you're young, you do a lot of things you don't quite comprehend. You think it's fun. You do it. You don't really think about the outcome," Chen told CNN's *Talk Asia* in an interview that aired late Wednesday, the

first time he has spoken at length about the scandal that shocked the Chinese entertainment world last year.

"When you're young and when you're a celebrity, and you have this and that, I think maybe you go overboard a little bit," the 28-year-old Chinese-Canadian said.

Chen said he never showed the pictures to anyone else besides the women who were in them. He said the pictures were all taken with consent.

Chen appeared in the 2002 hit Hong Kong police thriller *Infernal Affairs* (無間道) and in the 2006 horror movie *The Grudge 2*. He also had a cameo in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Dark Knight* released last year.

—AGENCIES

Stop press: Bruno accused of man-handling female director.

PHOTO: APF

