

AROUND TOWN

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Felix Chen and 'Rigoletto' return to the Taipei Symphony Orchestra

After leaving the orchestra seven years ago in controversial circumstances, the conductor surprised many by taking up the baton again at his old stomping ground

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

By far the most interesting aspect of next weekend's production of Verdi's opera *Rigoletto* is the name of its conductor, Felix Chen (陳秋盛).

Chen was the music director of the Taipei Symphony Orchestra (TSO) for 17 years. As such he conducted, and sometimes also directed, numerous Western operas. This was before the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) began staging operas in Taipei, and Chen's productions, apart from invariably being excellent in themselves, were consequently almost the only Western operas that Taiwan then knew.

Even before taking up his post with the TSO, Chen was one of the leading figures in Taiwan's classical music world. He taught both Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬), the NSO's innovative musical director from 2001 to 2007, as well as the same orchestra's current maestro Lu Shao-chia (呂紹嘉).

Then, in late September 2003, Chen was the subject of articles in Taiwan's *Apple Daily* newspaper accusing him of financial irregularity. The Taipei City's Department of Cultural Affairs, which finances the TSO, felt it appropriate to instigate an investigation. Soon afterwards Chen offered his resignation, and many believe he was told he had to do so.

While all this was going on, Chen and the TSO were preparing a major opera production, Richard Strauss's *Salome*, in the National Theater. At the end of the last performance Chen was on stage, along with the cast, receiving the applause of the audience. I watched astonished as half the TSO musicians stood up and offered him red roses, while the other half sat immobile in their seats. Chen moved from the TSO soon afterwards, and the orchestra, beset by seemingly endless problems over the appointment of its subsequent music directors, never appeared to return to its former eminence, leaving the NSO as the unchallenged leader in the field.

According to many in Taipei's classical music scene, not a shred of evidence involving Chen in any wrongdoing was ever discovered. He meanwhile returned to university teaching, making occasional appearances here and there as a guest conductor.

Now, suddenly and unexpectedly, Felix Chen is back conducting an opera for the TSO. Things appear to have run full circle. Whatever the reason for this extraordinary turn of events, it constitutes an exceptionally welcome development.

So then, to *Rigoletto* itself. When the TSO last staged it, under Chen in the National Theater more than 10 years ago, the production was distinguished by an amazing effect, a shooting star that curved down across the sky at the end of Gilda's Act Two aria *Caro Nome* ("Dear Name"). No information is available at the time of writing as to what kind of production we can expect at the Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台) next weekend. But there are hints.

The director, Robert Lummer, has issued a

statement in which he gives it as his opinion that the heroine, Gilda, is the victim of an oppressive father, the hunchback Rigoletto, and that her tragedy is, in effect, his fault for denying her her sexual freedom. This is supported by a reference to the writer of the Frankfurt School much venerated by the academic post-structuralist theoreticians, Theodor Adorno. In order to assess this position, it's necessary to look at the opera itself.

Rigoletto is based on a stage play by Victor Hugo called *Le Roi S'Amuse* ("The King Has a Good Time"). It was an attack on the sexual profligacy and exploitation of his female subjects by a French monarch, and was sufficiently controversial for Verdi to be forced by the censors in Italy to move the action of his opera into the Renaissance past, and to make the ruler a duke from a dukedom that no longer existed.

Verdi responded by penning one of the most vigorous, tuneful and dramatic operas ever written. Nothing can match its compelling, high-energy rhythms, its melodic profusion and its melodramatic situations. The high-point is the famous quartet in the final act where, during a nighttime thunderstorm, the Duke attempts to seduce a professional assassin's sister, watched through a window by Rigoletto and his daughter Gilda, an innocent girl who sincerely believes the Duke loves only her.

All opera houses have *Rigoletto* in their repertoires, and it has been the vehicle for innumerable world-famous soloists, from Caruso to Callas.

In brief, the plot is as follows. Rigoletto is the court jester for the Duke of Mantua. He helps mock the fathers of the girls the Duke effortlessly seduces, but has himself a daughter, Gilda, who he keeps hidden away in his house. The courtiers think she must be his mistress and so decide, as a joke, to capture her and bring her to the Duke. But she has already met him, and fallen in love with him, at church, when he told her he was a poor student. Once imprisoned in the court, Gilda continues to love the Duke, so Rigoletto decides to show her what he is really like, and pays an assassin, Sparafucile, to murder the Duke on the same evening.

If anything, then, *Rigoletto* is presented as the main object of sympathy, or at least an object of sympathy equally with his daughter. The current director's inclination, as outlined in his pre-production statement, to make Gilda the victim of an oppressive parent, could be an instance of the determination to find some fault in society at large that characterizes the critics of the post-structuralist academic school. But it would be wrong to pre-judge this production. All will be revealed in Taipei's Metropolitan Hall next Friday night.

The part of *Rigoletto* will be sung by the South Korean baritone Gerard Kim who currently works as a leading operatic soloist in Innsbruck, Austria. It's a notoriously difficult

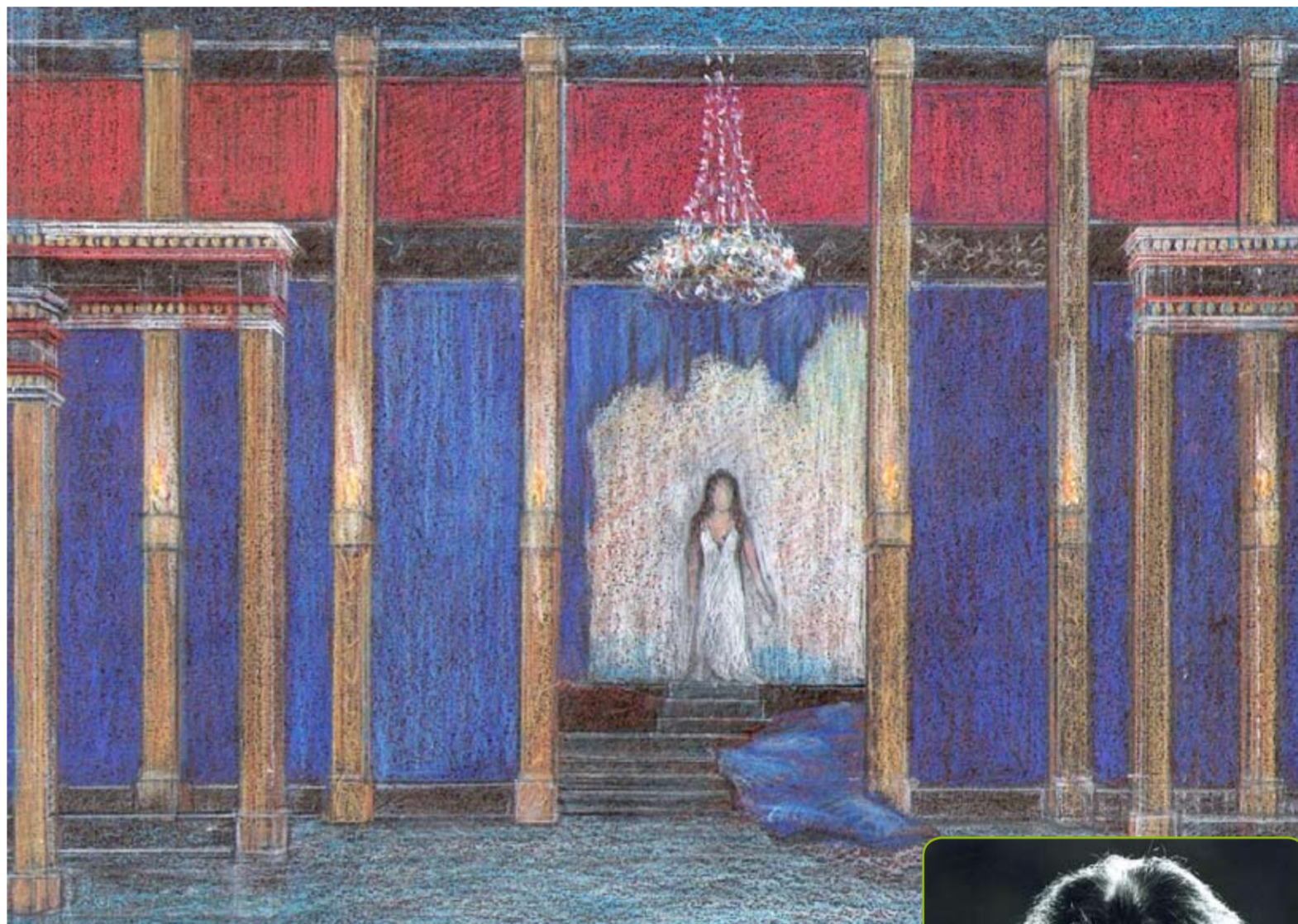


ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF TSO



PERFORMANCE NOTES

WHAT: Taipei Symphony Orchestra, *Rigoletto*

WHEN: Sept. 3 at 7pm and Sept. 5 at 2:30pm

WHERE: Metropolitan Hall (城市舞台), 25, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路三段25號)

ADMISSION: NT\$300 to NT\$1,200. For reservations call (02) 3393-9888 or go to www.artsticket.com.tw



Gerard Kim, left, and Natalia Shara, above, sing the parts of *Rigoletto* and Gilda.



Conductor Felix Chen returns to the TSO after a seven-year hiatus for *Rigoletto*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TSO

role, and surprise was expressed recently that Plácido Domingo, in his new manifestation as a baritone, will be singing it for the first time at the age of 69 — as it happens, over the same weekend as this Taipei production.

Gilda will be sung by the Russian soprano Natalia Sharay, while tenor Charles Kim will be the Duke. Both can be heard on YouTube, Sharay singing *Caro Nome* from next weekend's opera, and Kim in vigorous voice in some extracts from Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*. Hsieh Ming-mou (謝

銘謀) is Sparafucile and his daughter Maddalena is performed by Weng Jo-pei (翁若蘋).

This should be a production well worth catching. Metropolitan Hall on Taipei's Bade Road (八德路) is an attractive venue, of medium size, and with an auditorium that doesn't swallow up un-amplified voices in an over-large space. No one in the audience is very far from the stage, and the TSO has a history of putting on imaginative operatic events there, including *Hansel und Gretel* in 2007 and

Gianni Schicchi in 2008. The TSO's offices and rehearsal rooms are next door, and as a result Metropolitan Hall is in many ways the orchestra's home base.

Rigoletto will be sung in Italian with Chinese subtitles. Performances are next Friday evening at 7pm (note the early start), and next Sunday afternoon at 2:30pm.

So, both *Rigoletto* and Felix Chen return to the TSO next weekend. On both counts this is wonderful news indeed.

[MUSIC]

Living the dream

Grammy-winning jazz musician Paquito D'Rivera launches the National Concert Hall's 2010 jazz season with a performance tonight

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

Havana-born Paquito D'Rivera, who performs tonight with his quintet at the National Concert Hall, says he's achieved his goal of becoming an accomplished jazz musician. But he paid a high price.

"I had a dream to be a musician in New York City and that cost me the childhood of my son and my marriage," said D'Rivera, a Grammy-winning composer and multi-instrumentalist who plays clarinet and the alto and soprano saxophones.

Speaking on the phone last week with the *Taipei Times* from his home near New York, D'Rivera recalled how he defected to the US while on tour in Spain in 1980, leaving his family in Cuba.

At the time, he was a member of Irakere, a group that combined jazz, classical, rock and traditional Cuban music.

He made his escape at the airport in Madrid, where he ditched his Cuban handlers and ran up an escalator that was moving in the opposite direction.

"Woody Allen said that comedy is tragedy plus time. So that's very funny now, but in those days it was very scary," said D'Rivera, who is 62.

"Nobody was chasing me because nobody knew what I was going to do. But when you're living in a communist country — you have mainland China over there so you know what I'm talking about — you think you always have somebody watching you," he said.

D'Rivera saw his career reach greater heights after settling in New York, where he found himself free to pursue his various interests: be-bop, classical and Latin music.

He spent time playing with renowned jazz figures including Dizzy Gillespie, who helped connect him with other New York musicians, and also developed a deep interest in Brazilian music.

D'Rivera brings in pan-American influences into his jazz music, and also draws from classical training that began during his childhood.

He has won nine Grammy awards in both classical and jazz

categories, for works such as a chamber composition, *Merengue*, recorded by cellist Yo-Yo Ma (馬友友), and the be-bop and tango fusion album *Funk Tango* (2007).

In 2005, D'Rivera received a Jazz Master Award from the National Endowment for the Arts, the highest official recognition for jazz musicians in the US.

D'Rivera says his interest in classical music partly explains his affinity for the clarinet, an instrument falling into obscurity in the jazz world today. But die-hard jazz enthusiasts still recognize his skills: D'Rivera was voted best clarinetist in *Downbeat Magazine's* annual reader's poll last year.

Tonight's concert sees D'Rivera returning to the National Concert Hall for a show that was almost sold out as of press time. During his last visit, D'Rivera was here as an accompanist for Yo-Yo Ma, with whom he collaborated on the renowned cellist's album of Brazilian music, *Obrigado Brazil*.

As for his former homeland, D'Rivera speaks bluntly about Cuba's political situation. "We have been suffering that dictatorship for 50 years. It's too much," he said.

He has even expressed support for Cuban dissident groups through his music. One of his recently completed compositions was a chamber piece dedicated to Ladies in White, a group of wives and mothers of Cuban political prisoners.

In 2005, he wrote a public letter to Carlos Santana criticizing him for wearing a T-shirt bearing Che Guevara's image at the Oscar Awards ceremony.

"I remember people going to jail for listening to Carlos Santana," he said of his reasons for writing the letter. "And now that Carlos Santana is wearing a [Che Guevara T-shirt]? Give me a break."

"I cannot understand how some people, especially in our profession, still try to defend the undefendable. Some people still have nice things to say about Castro. For me ... I cannot understand that."

D'Rivera says he was only able to see his wife and son after 10

years, when they were finally allowed to visit the US. By then his son had grown up and his marriage was over.

"What I mean to say with this is that everything in life has a price. If I had to do it again, I would do it again," he said.

Tickets for next week's show with Cuban pianist Chucho Valdes are already sold out, but seats are still available for American saxophonist Joshua Redman's concert on Sept. 3 and Brazilian singer Elaine Elias' concert on Sept. 10.

Paquito D'Rivera was voted best clarinetist in *Downbeat Magazine's* annual reader's poll last year.

PHOTO BY LANE PEDERSON, COURTESY OF PAQUITO D'RIVERA



PERFORMANCE NOTES

WHAT: Paquito D'Rivera Quintet

WHERE: National Concert Hall (國家音樂廳), 21-1 Zhongshan S Rd, Taipei City (台北市中山南路21-1號)

WHEN: Tonight at 7:30pm

ON THE NET: www.paquitodrivera.com

ADMISSION: NT\$1,200 and NT\$1,600 (all other seats sold out), available at the venue, NTCH ticketing outlets or online at www.artsticket.com.tw

National Concert Hall Summer Jazz Party 2010

PERFORMANCE LINEUP

» Chucho Valdes and the Afro-Cuban Messengers, Sunday, 2:30pm (sold out)

» Joshua Redman Trio, Sept. 3, 7:30pm

» Eliane Elias Concert, Sept. 10, 7:30pm

ON THE NET: event.ntch.edu.tw/2010/jazz/