

# FEATURES

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PAGE 13

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Left, manuscript page of Puccini sketch for the final part of his incomplete opera *Turandot*. Right, Lo Kii-ming, Professor of Musicology at the National Taiwan Normal University, standing by a statue of Puccini at Torre del Lago, Italy, in 2007.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUERGEN MAEHDER

## Musical masters bewitch their audience

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON AND DAVID CHEN  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER AND STAFF REPORTER

It was almost impossible to fault the marvelous operatic double bill from the Taipei Symphony Orchestra (TSO) on Friday evening. *Gianni Schicchi* in particular shone out as the masterpiece it is, but even the slighter *Il Segreto di Susanna* was delightful throughout. In particular, Wu Bai Yu-Hsi (巫白玉璽) excelled himself in both the leading male roles. Vocally he has always been unimpeachable, but this time his acting attained new heights as well. As the crafty Gianni he was ideal, and when he broke into a dance of elation with the relatives he was about to trick you felt he was genuinely happy even so, just as he had been genuinely moved by his daughter's famous appeal. His hasty and emphatic dictating of all the final bequests to himself was unforgettable. This was a richly complex interpretation from every angle.



Pianist and jazz legend McCoy Tyner treated Taipei audiences to an intense, spirited performance, drawing from a repertoire that spans nearly 50 years.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL THEATER AND CONCERT HALL

Yang Lei (楊磊), singing out with real vigor and conviction as the young lover Rinuccio, also deserves the highest praise. His voice had never sounded better, and this seemed a high point of his singing career. Chen Pei-Chi (陳珮琪) as Zita and Liao Chong-boon (廖聰文) as Simone had fewer opportunities to display their powers in this compact work, but both were very strong nonetheless, and ideally cast. Julian Lo (羅俊穎) as Betto added his strong bass voice in stalwart support throughout. And if Lo Ming-fang (羅明芳) as Lauretta slightly lacked power in *O Mio Babbino Caro*, she missed nothing of the famous aria's expressiveness and tenderness.

Marti Fischer-Dieskau deserves the highest praise for his commitment and discretion as conductor. The TSO has never sounded better, and every detail of the subtle and innovative score could be heard clearly in the fine acoustics of Taipei's Metropolitan Hall. Everything was ideal, from the tempi — never eccentric — to the gorgeously rich fortes and crystal-clear pianissimos.

All in all, this production by Tseng Dau-hsiung (曾道雄) was a stunning occasion. The set by Chang Yi-cheng (張一成) for *Gianni Schicchi* proved as effective as her one for *Il Segreto*, with the dawn over Florence seen through a high window a fitting background for the lovers' final mini-duet. The costumes of Kao Yu-po (高育伯), both historically authentic and sumptuously made, were indicative of a major talent.

This glorious double-bill was an occasion to treasure. The more operas TSO can stage in the future the better.

At the National Concert Hall last Friday, Taipei got a taste of living jazz history as pianist McCoy Tyner and his ensemble played a 90-minute set that came across as both a show of technical mastery and onstage musical journey.

The audience erupted with cheers and applause when Tyner appeared on stage and took a gracious bow. The room was silent as he walked gingerly to the Steinway grand piano. The 69-year-old Tyner looked gaunt and thin in contrast to his press photos. But any appearance of frailness faded immediately as Tyner and his ensemble launched into *Walk Spirit*, *Talk Spirit*. Right away the audience could see Tyner's left hand bouncing as high as his head, as he pounded out his signature rhythmic flourishes on the piano.

Christian Scott, a 25-year-old rising star trumpeter from New Orleans, laid out the tune's melodic theme with smooth, understated riffs. Stationed at the side of the stage, he ambled over to the microphone in the center for solos, with a gait full of bravado and a hint of youthful insecurity.

After the first number, Tyner picked up a microphone to greet the audience. In a quiet baritone voice, he said it was an honor to have played with John Coltrane, and led the band through the legendary saxophonist's composition *A Moment's Notice*. Scott again featured as the lead voice, and by then his cool exterior had melted: he beamed and shook his head slightly, as if in humble awe at Tyner's lush, inspired soloing.

The show only grew in intensity, with energetic, masterful performances from bassist Gerald Cannon and drummer Eric Gravatt. The veteran musicians created exquisitely textured rhythms, to which Tyner added dramatic splashes of dissonant chords and lines of notes that ranged from sparse to overflowing. The result was a cerebral, elegant sound. Tyner and the group developed abstracted melodies and challenging harmonies, but housed them in tight, crisp structures — even the silences that sometimes marked solos were perfectly timed.

The remaining songs were unfamiliar to this reviewer, but the music was unmistakably familiar: it was driven and had the excitement that marked Tyner's tenure with the John Coltrane Quartet. The tunes ran a gamut of emotions: one piece grew into a sonic frenzy, which was then tempered by a ballad; there was also a straightforward, be-bop blues number. But throughout, there was always a sense of musical exploration, as well as joy on stage, evident as the musicians frequently broke into smiles.

## Puccini's unfinished business

The composer suffered from academic neglect after his death as a result of his popular appeal, but conferences like the one held at the NTNU last week are trying to remedy the situation

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

That an academic conference on the operas of Puccini should take place in Taipei might at first sight seem unlikely. Last week saw one nonetheless, at the National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU, 師範大學). The underlying reason was the presence in the Department of Music there of Professor of Musicology Lo Kii-Ming (羅基敏), and the current presence in Taiwan of her husband, the renowned opera and Puccini expert Juergen Maehder. In essence they organized the conference between them, they told me, even down to the design of the poster.

Based in his Puccini Research Center in Berlin, Maehder is celebrated for having discovered the first and longer version of Franco Alfano's completion of Puccini's unfinished final opera *Turandot*, the subject of the conference's final session.

"Puccini studies are still in their infancy," said Andrew Davis of the University of Houston. "Academics and critics alike are beginning to learn that just because a composer's popular doesn't mean he's insignificant. The first ever symposium on Puccini was held as recently as 1983! Gershwin is experiencing a similar revival."

When I arrived at the conference in last Thursday's blistering heat, a mere ten students were sitting in the darkened Concert Hall while a DVD of Pavarotti in *La Boheme* was playing. One of them appeared to be asleep. But as the lights went up and the major participants began to arrive, things livened up, and some 35 people listened to a learned paper from Professor Lesley Wright of the University of Hawaii at Manoa on the early reception of *La Boheme* in Paris in the 1890s.

"The French critics didn't want to like Puccini's opera," Wright told me. "It was set in Paris, but it was by an Italian! It was felt not to encapsulate the French 'soul.' But they capitulated. In a sense, audiences loved it, so they had to!"

"I find my students are not as hostile to classical music as you might think," she said when I questioned her on the level of interest in such things. "And if they do like it, they tend to like opera best. DVDs with their subtitles have done a lot to help. We live in a visual culture, after all, and

opera is a partly visual art form. As for performances, in Hawaii we see around four a year, and one of them is almost always by Puccini. They know he'll sell tickets — that's probably the heart of the matter."

Pedal points, tonic and dominant, unstable harmonies, cyclical form and the fragmentation of musical discourse — the language was frequently intimidating to the non-specialist. Richard Erkens, one of Maehder's graduate students in Germany, gave a learned discourse on the repeated use of musical "memories" in a nowadays little-known opera on Christopher Columbus. He pointed out how such recurrences of thematic material, correctly known as "reminiscences" and used extensively by Puccini, had to be distinguished from Wagner's more systematic leitmotifs.

But Maehder was always going to be the star of the proceedings. I'd met him before, at the National Symphony Orchestra's *Ring* cycle in Taipei in 2006. This Puccini symposium, officially an International Musicological Conference on Giacomo Puccini and the Italian Opera of His Time, was partly being held to mark the 150th anniversary this year of the composer's birth. Its specific dates, however, were not influenced by last week's performance of Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* by the Taipei Symphony Orchestra (TSO) under Maehder's old friend Martin Fischer-Dieskau, he said.

Juergen Maehder discovered the longer first version of Alfano's completion of *Turandot* in 1979. It was in the archives of Puccini's publisher Ricordi in Milan, but it had been wrongly catalogued. When he sat down to examine it, Maehder assumed it was the well-known completion that has been performed all over the world ever since Puccini died leaving his final opera unfinished in 1924. But he quickly saw that it contained some additional material. After further work, he established that this was Alfano's original conclusion to the opera, but that it had been cut before the premiere on the insistence of the conductor, Arturo Toscanini, who thought it was too long. Thus it was that Alfano's original, fuller, completion finally came to light, and it has since been extensively performed, first in Berlin in

1982, then by the New York City Opera the following year, and then in Rome and Bonn in 1985.

Maehder's knowledge of Puccini's sketches for the end of *Turandot* is exhaustive. The composer died after a heart attack during surgery for throat cancer in Brussels. But he hadn't expected to die, Maehder explained. *Turandot*, even though unfinished, was already being rehearsed, and one of Puccini's last recorded remarks was to ask how the rehearsals were going. His sketches for the ending, therefore, were not intended for someone else, but for himself.

On one famous page, he wrote "from here on Tristan", meaning that the big love duet with which the opera was going to conclude would be somewhat in the style of Wagner's famous love duet in his *Tristan and Isolde*. It was probably Puccini's private joke, addressed to himself, but it makes a fascinating comment on musical heredity nonetheless.

Maehder has even studied the paperclip markings left on Puccini's manuscript notes. Paperclips in those days weren't coated in plastic, so they rusted easily. Puccini lived close to the lake in Torre del Lago, and the climate there is notably humid. So the clips rusted quickly, and left a reverse impression on top of the page underneath. These marks have enabled Maehder to work out the exact sequence of the musical sketches — an example of academic close attention to detail if ever there was one.

Also discussed was the alternative ending to *Turandot* composed by Luciano Berio and first performed in 2002. Maehder proved somewhat skeptical about this, unsure if it was indeed all by Berio himself who, like Puccini, was also seriously ill with cancer at the time. But what is certain is that Berio also used the Puccini sketches extensively, even incorporating ideas and motifs neglected by Alfano.

All this talk of illness and uncompleted work obsessed me as I left. Do what you can while you can, I thought, whether it's in the sunlight of Torre del Lago or elsewhere. Time gives us the gift of life, then passes on. Academic conferences are not always as academic as they seem.

nobody draws attention like **Lindsay Lohan** and gal pal **Samantha Ronson**.

The duo sat in the front row for the Saturday morning presentation of Ronson's sister Charlotte's spring collection at New York Fashion Week, where they were immediately swarmed by photographers who brushed past other famous folks like **Sean Lennon** to get shots of the actress and DJ.

Lohan sported a denim dress and blue pumps, and wore her blonde hair pulled back in a bun; Ronson had on a black T-shirt and a gray skinny jeans and vest — she usually incorporates a hat into her rocker look, but this time she opted to show off her pixie haircut.

They stood up for a standing ovation when Charlotte Ronson appeared on the runway after the show, and made a quick exit as media chased them backstage (where they hid in a VIP lounge).

Actress **Emma Roberts**, the niece of Julia Roberts, joked that she was stuck in a "Lindsay traf-

fic jam" as she tried to leave the crowded event. In-demand music producer **Mark Ronson** — brother of Charlotte and Samantha — deejayed the music at the show.

In other celebrity news, **Justin Timberlake**, **Miley Cyrus** and **Charlize Theron** were among the celebrities who appeared at the fifth annual Fashion Rocks concert celebrating the relationship between music and fashion.

They walked the red carpet Friday night at Radio City Music Hall amid a media circus angling for glamour shots of other stars including **Fergie**, **Rihanna**, **Chris**

**Brown** and the "Gossip Girl" gang.

Brown, the R&B heartthrob, soaked up all the attention with a smile as he showed off his dapper ensemble of a black vest and shirt, gray pants, shiny shoes and diamond stud earrings.

"To be a musician and a great entertainer, you have to be a trendsetter. To be a trendsetter, you have to know fashion — and I have fun with it," explained the singer, who later changed into khakis and a black shirt and scarf for a performance of his hit song *Forever*.

Getting away from the celebrities and looking at the people who listen to music, it has been found that heavy metal fans and lovers of classical music have more in

common than they like to think, according to research published Friday by a British university.

Although fans of bands like **Metallica** are traditionally portrayed as work-shy, long-haired students and lovers of **Mozart** are seen as sober and hard-working, researchers found that both music types attract creative people who are at ease with themselves but can be introverted.

But classical music fans have high self-esteem while heavy rock fans lack self-belief, the team at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh found.

Indie music listeners lack self-esteem and lovers of pop music are uncreative, while country and western fans are hard-working and rap fans have an outgoing personality.

The three-year study on the links between personality and music taste was led by psychology professor **Adrian North**.

"We have always suspected a link between music taste and personality. This is the first time that

we've been able to look at it in real detail. No-one has ever done this on this scale before," he said.

"People do actually define themselves through music and relate to other people through it but we haven't known in detail how music is connected to identity."

North added: "The general public has held a stereotype of heavy metal fans being suicidally depressed and of being a danger to themselves and society in general. But they are quite delicate things."

The research could have many uses in marketing, the professor said.

"If you know a person's music preference you can tell what kind of person they are, who to sell to. There are obvious implications for the music industry who are worried about declining CD sales."

More than 36,000 people around the world took part in the research, making it the biggest survey of its kind ever conducted.

— AGENCIES

## PLANETPOP

Planet Pop opens this week with the sad reminder that youth fades away. The woman who as a beautiful teen inspired Brazil's best-known song, *The Girl from Ipanema*, was in a Sao Paulo hospital Friday suffering from a gastric problem, the news Web site Terra reported.

Helo Pinheiro, now in her mid-60s, said she had checked into the Sirio-Libanese Hospital in the city because of chest pains she feared were symptoms of "a cardiac problem," but tests showed it was "only gastric."

The woman, whom songwriters **Tom Jobim** and **Vinicius de Moraes** described as "tall and tan and young and lovely" when she walked by their cafe in Rio de Janeiro's upmarket Ipanema district aged 15, was accompanied by her husband.

Doctors said the tests showed she was also suffering hypertension, which she blamed on stress from juggling family, a TV presenting job and studies.

But back in the world of the currently bright and beautiful,



Actress **Lindsay Lohan**, left, and **Samantha Ronson** attend the **Charlotte Ronson 2009 Spring Collection** in Bryant Park during **Fashion Week** in New York on Saturday.

PHOTO: AP