

ABOUT THE MUSIC

JAHJA LING'S FINALE - MAY 26, 27 & 28

WHY THIS (FINAL) PROGRAM? AN APPRECIATION

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Last year at this time, instead of writing my usual column about the pieces chosen by our conductor, I turned my attention and increasingly limited energies into writing about the man himself. It was for the final program of his last fully scheduled season as the music director of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. Today's program is, indeed, Jahja Ling's valedictory as our music director after 13 years of building an orchestra that has developed into a wonderful collective musical instrument. Not many people reading this will have had the opportunity to have listened to the San Diego Symphony for as many years and through as many ups, downs and crises as I have, beginning with my listening to its Ford Bowl rehearsals across Park Boulevard from my windowed office at the old Naval Hospital in the summer of 1959. If they did have the experience of hearing that orchestra in those years, they, too, would have strong, exceptional feelings of appreciation for the man who built that fledgling organization into the really superb ensemble we are privileged to enjoy in the present.

Jahja Ling built the San Diego Symphony into what is today: one of the finest orchestras in this country, even better than some of the European orchestras we hear during their American tours or on our European visits. Blessed by the kind of economic stability necessary to do that job, Maestro Ling hired close to two-thirds of the superbly trained virtuosos from the finest conservatories who currently make up our Orchestra personnel. Our principals are all equally superb players, and the string sections sing these days as never before.

One of the hallmarks of the tireless work done by Jahja Ling over the years became evident, paradoxically during this past season, when a procession of guest *maestri*, younger and older, more or less experienced, mostly seeking to become the next music director, came to audition on what was Ling's podium. Regardless of the quirks of each of the applicants (and all conductors have their own, often highly individual quirks), the professionalism of our orchestra became increasingly apparent as the musicians gave the guests whatever they wanted, and all of the guests pronounced their deep satisfaction with their experiences here. Some will be back next season for more mutual exposure with the orchestra and the audience as well. Replacing Jahja Ling is not an easy process, nor is it a quick one.

Jahja stuck to his guns during his tenure here, although some people, in or out of the orchestra family, criticized some of the repertoire

choices he made. Strong feelings about the music he loved became apparent as he and I talked and discussed what he planned on having us hear. As he pointed out with great feeling, his musical background emanated from his deep love and, even more, idolization of the series of great central European composers whose work he treasured. Despite this, he allowed himself to be very open to French, Russian and Italian composers as well – and perhaps even more important, to a large number of American composers. His feelings especially about Leonard Bernstein are really of adoration, based in great part on his experience with Bernstein as a mentor.

Jahja's closeness to a large number of the greatest musicians on the international scene allowed us to hear some extraordinary performances by many of them. Lang Lang is a special example. Ling's closeness to that remarkable pianist led to his accompanying the orchestra at Carnegie Hall just a few years ago for their sold-out debut just before launching their China Friendship Tour. That tour did amazing things for the orchestra, who never before had dreamed of such exposure. Jahja dreamed of it for several years, though, and since then has continued dreaming of taking them to Europe to show them off in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and the Vienna Musikverein Saal. But he need not feel too many regrets about that; he gave them what no one had ever given them before!

Lang Lang came back here this special season to play under his dear friend, Jahja Ling, following another close musician-friend, Gil Shaham. The violinist opened the season with Ling, who, later in the season, characteristically brought forth a brilliant, new, young, up-and-coming violinist, Benjamin Beilman, especially to play one of Ling's favorite concertos, the beautiful Saint-Saëns Third. For this final weekend of concerts of this valedictory season, Jahja Ling has another close friend with him, Yefim Bronfman, described by *The New Yorker* music critic Alex Ross as "the thinking-man's pianistic powerhouse," who will play one of his and Jahja Ling's powerhouse mutual favorites, the Brahms Second Piano Concerto.

One of two major concerts of this season conducted by Jahja Ling featured the immense Symphony No. 8 by Bruckner, about whom Ling said to me that he pictured the composer swaying over his great organ in Austria and being elevated into even deeper religious feeling and expression than he had felt before, and which always infused his music. This is centrally important to Jahja Ling, a sincerely, deeply religious person who spends much time and energy touring the world, arranging the musical events that are significant parts of the meetings of his co-religionists in their worldwide evangelistic society. Other than his family to whom he is deeply devoted, and his music, his deep faith is perhaps equally central in his life – possibly even more so.

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I know that Jahja wanted to program our principal cellist, Yao Zhao, as a featured soloist over the past several years, but one thing or another seemed to interfere. Ling was finally able to have our brilliant cellist opening up that March program featuring the Bruckner Symphony with the delightful C Major concerto by Haydn, a composer that Ling and I wish could have been heard a little more frequently during our seasons. But with on average only 14 programs in the annual Masterworks series during his tenure, everything wished could not always be accommodated.

Jahja Ling's deep feelings about Gustav Mahler's incredible symphonies have often been expressed by the conductor over his years here. He has conducted Mahler to considerable audience and critical acclaim here and elsewhere and is pleased that he has presented seven out of the composer's eight symphonies during his tenure here, some more than once. The Third, which opened this final month of Jacobs Masterworks classical concert programs, is a special favorite that he had wanted to repeat over the past several seasons.

Returning to this final concert program of this season, Ling has chosen to conclude it – and the season, and his tenure as music director – with the mighty Sibelius Second Symphony. The great Finnish composer is a true representative of the great central European tradition revered by our conductor. Sibelius was a violinist

and trained in Leipzig, but his own feelings about his homeland permeated his works. Ling has conducted the Second once before here, and has also led performances of a couple of the Finnish composer's other symphonies. The Second, though, is special to the maestro, with a wide variety of musical impulses bringing to mind the often cold and windy Finnish weather as well as the contrasting, gorgeous evergreen forests in the midst of which Sibelius lived.

No other man in our series of music directors since 1959, when the San Diego Symphony Orchestra began its consecutive winter series of concerts, has ever been honored in the manner we in San Diego are honoring Jahja Ling. He is the first – and so far the only one of our music directors – to be given the title of Conductor Laureate. How appropriate that is – maintaining a good degree of contact with the orchestra he has trained, coached and otherwise mentored to its current excellent capacity.

The Lings will be maintaining their home here in San Diego. Their two young girls, who have won over all of our hearts, are in school and involved in a huge number of activities, musical and otherwise. Of course, Jessie Chang, their devoted mother and Jahja's beloved wife (and excellent pianist in her own right), will continue teaching and playing here. Jahja will joyfully continue with his worldwide evangelical services and will also be in Cleveland frequently, where he will be teaching at the city's famous Institute of Music. He will also continue appearing as guest conductor with the superb Cleveland Orchestra, with which he has had, and continues to have, a close relationship.

He and I talked about the possibility of other guest conducting engagements. He agreed that those may be likely, but the guest conducting he really looks forward to will be at some of the great music schools of America, where he can teach and train aspiring musicians and inculcate them with his thoughts about – and his absolute devotion to – music.

By and large, and in conclusion, I believe that Jahja Ling and we – the city and the orchestra – did well with each other. This is not only attested to by what we hear these days when we listen to our Orchestra, but also by his being a man who exudes a great deal of love from within himself, not only about music, but on a personal level as well. He made many friends here who will miss seeing him as regularly as before, but who will rejoice, as I will, when he returns either to conduct – and I look forward to that – or simply to continue to be an honored and beloved member of our community who left us the splendid orchestra we hear today as his continuing legacy. ■