

# Royal Scottish National Orchestra in China for Hogmanay



*The Reporter's very own David Kettle accompanied the RSN0 on their New Year trip to China.*

The Royal Scottish National Orchestra and its music director Peter Oundjian have had a pretty hectic Hogmanay. It was with a mixture of excitement and apprehension that the 80-odd players left loved ones and friends for the traditional Scottish celebrations and headed instead to China, for a five-city, six-concert tour that took in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing, Tianjin and Macau.

Setting off from a rainy Glasgow on 27 December, following an 18-hour flight, first stop was the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, formerly known as Canton. After a late-night meal of crab porridge (which tastes better than it sounds) at an open-air roadside café, there was a free day to acclimatise to the warm, muggy weather (and eight-hour time difference), which most players used to climb a mountain in nearby Biayun Park – and the plucky ones even braved an impromptu bungee jump.

At the first concert the following day, in Guangzhou's modern Xinghai Concert Hall, the orchestra got its first taste of rather muted, polite Chinese applause – at least to the more serious parts of their programme, Mendelssohn's 'Scottish' Symphony and the Elgar 'Enigma' Variations. When it came to the more extrovert, obviously Scottish pieces, though, the listeners went wild – it was almost as if they were waiting for the right moment to let their hair down and join in the fun.



Young piper Iain Crawford earned astonished looks from the audience as he processed through them at the end of Peter Maxwell Davies's *An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise*, which depicts the drunken revelry of an Orkney marriage, complete with a host of traditional tunes, from evening through to the following morning, its final bagpipe solo symbolising the dawn of the new day.

A lively orchestral arrangement of the traditional *Eightsome Reels* had the audience clapping along with huge grins on their faces, and when six young pipers from the National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland took up positions for *Auld Lang Syne*, the listeners erupted in applause. Players were surprised to hear the audience singing along with the song – in Mandarin, of course. It's equally well known in China, I was assured, as a tune remembering friendship and good times.

### **Hogmanay in ultra-modern Shenzhen**

From Guangzhou, it was only a short hop by coach to flashy Shenzhen, gateway to Hong Kong and one of China's fastest-developing, ultra-modern cities. And it was there, in the bright red, ultra-modern Shenzhen Concert Hall, that the RSN0 saw in the New Year – eight hours earlier than Scotland did. After a more serious early-evening concert of Mendelssohn, Elgar and Maxwell Davies, the orchestra regrouped at 11pm in front of a capacity audience for Viennese and Scottish tunes to bid farewell to 2012 and welcome to 2013.

It's only in recent years, we were told, that the Chinese have celebrated Western New Year (in contrast with the extravagant celebrations of their own New Year). But they've clearly taken it to their hearts: the atmosphere in Shenzhen was one of warmth and excitement, with traditional Chinese hangings adorning the stage and Chinese and British flags fluttering in the enthusiastic audience. The six pipers who serenaded concert-goers as they arrived in the foyer only added to the

excitement.

A Chinese host was on hand to count down the seconds to 2013, and after an eruption of applause, hugs and handshakes at the big moment, Oundjian re-established a sense of calm with a beautiful *Blue Danube*.



### **Goodbye Shenzhen, hello Beijing**

From Shenzhen, it was with mounting excitement that the orchestra boarded a three-hour flight to Beijing, the capital – and the chance to play in the huge, lavishly decorated National Centre for the Performing Arts, a massive, egg-like structure, all gleaming glass and multicoloured light shows, right next to Tiananmen Square. It came as quite a shock to get used to Beijing's arctic temperatures – it barely rose above -10C during the daytime – but players nevertheless spent a morning exploring the awe-inspiring Forbidden City and various temples and traditional markets before coming together for the evening's music making.

There was a noticeable number of Western faces in the Beijing audience, and the reception was generally less polite and warmer than previously – that despite the concert hall's strict ushers, who would dazzle anybody who seemed about to take a photo with bright red laser pens, often from far away on the other side of the hall. That and the increased sense of security measures in place in the capital – airport-styles scanners to get onto the metro and into Tiananmen Square, for instance – were a reminder that we were in a country that still has tighter controls than we're used to in Scotland.

But still, the NCPA's remarkable acoustics lent a glorious glow to the RSNO's sound, and the players rose to the occasion with the best performances of the trip so far, earning an ovation from the capacity audience.

### **Last stop in China**

Next stop was just down the road, in port city Tianjin about a two-hour coach ride away, during which we passed the seemingly endless forests of high-rise tower blocks that surround China's capital. And Tianjin was even more chilly than Beijing had been. Time was tight, though, and players had barely an hour after arrival to make it to their afternoon rehearsal. And officials at the Tianjin Concert Hall, another beautiful building that had only been open a few months, took the strange decision to turn the heating on only in the hall itself, rather than in the foyer – with the result that listeners were desperate for the musicians to finish rehearsing so that they could get to their seats.

There was a smaller audience here, but they were no less appreciative – although the by now familiarly strict ushers were on hand to calm down quite a number of mobile phone conversations and a fair bit of photograph-taking. It was hard to match the acoustic splendours and shining performances of the Beijing performance, but the Mendelssohn, Elgar and Maxwell Davies still went down thrillingly well.

And Tianjin meant the RSNO's last concert in mainland China: the next day, the orchestra was on the road again, by coach and plane all the way south to the bright lights of Macau, the former Portuguese colony on the south coast, Las Vegas of Asia, just across the water from Hong Kong and sharing its status as a Special Administrative Region. And although many players had remarked at how much more colourful, friendly, welcoming and accessible China had been compared with their expectations, a late-night landing amid the gleaming casino lights and futuristic expressways of Macau – not to mention its volcano, Roman colosseum and Aztec temple (all fake, of course) – still came as quite a shock.

But it was a well-planned move to ease the orchestra back into Western life. The Macau audience – thoroughly multicultural – loved the RSNO's concert from start to finish, and the change of programme in the second half – Stravinsky's *Firebird* Suite

replacing Elgar's 'Enigma' Variations – went down a treat, especially in Oundjian's lively reading of the piece.

It was hard for some of the musicians to resist the lure of Macau's huge casino complexes, although reactions were mixed – some loved the glitz and glamour, but others dubbed them ruthlessly effective money-making factories. Similarly, some left empty-handed, but others, I'm told, made quite a tidy sum during their evening on the gambling floors.

Away from the casinos, though, there was a bustling, multicultural old town and numerous temples and churches which many of the musicians chose to explore on their last day in the East – before gathering for an evening TurboJet ferry to Hong Kong and a late-night flight back to Scotland.

It's been an eye-opening trip for many players – at times bewildering, at others frustrating, yet never less than fascinating and deeply rewarding. And to see the warm, enthusiastic Chinese reactions to a Scottish band playing Scottish music has been a real thrill for all.

More importantly, though, the tour has marked a real milestone for the orchestra. As chief executive Michael Elliott was keen to point out, he feels that the orchestra should be seen as not just a national ensemble, but also an international music organisation, heard on stages across the world. And the RSN0's hugely complex, extremely demanding yet highly successful China tour can only confirm the great things that the orchestra is capable of, as well as its bold ambitions for the future. With a new Glasgow city-centre home underway, deeper links being established with Scottish traditional musicians, and new music director Peter Oundjian leading the eager players into uncharted repertoire, these are thrilling times for the RSN0.