



“Every great orchestra has a great performing home. The Vienna Philharmonic has the Musikverein; we have the Esplanade.”

Lan Shui



# THE Maestro

The Singapore Symphony  
Orchestra's Lan Shui

He's the man with the baton, the maestro. For the past 15 years, Lan Shui has been the Music Director of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, leading it to a worldwide reputation, championing the works of local composers and providing an anchor for what is one of the most itinerant ensembles in Asia.

Odd then that the 55-year-old never really wanted to be a conductor at all.

"It was always my last choice," says Shui. "It's not in my nature. To be a conductor you have to ask people to do things, and you always have to deal with personnel issues. With the violin you can just play for yourself."

It was simply a confluence of circumstances that led Shui to the rostrum and it involves an astute uncle, some broken fingers, a suicide and Madame Mao.

**1879**

Shanghai  
Symphony  
Orchestra  
(founded as  
Shanghai  
Public Band)

**1895**

Hong Kong  
Philharmonic  
Orchestra  
(founded as  
Sino-British  
Orchestra)

**1911**

Tokyo  
Philharmonic  
Orchestra

**1942**

Jakarta  
Symphony  
(founded  
as Batavia  
Philharmonic  
Orchestra)

**1945**

National  
Taiwan  
Symphony  
Orchestra

**1946**

Tokyo  
Symphony  
Orchestra  
(founded  
as Toho  
Symphony  
Orchestra)

**1948**

Seoul  
Philharmonic  
Orchestra

**1956**

Japan  
Philharmonic  
Orchestra

The year was 1962 and Shui, then aged five, used to travel from Hangzhou, where he was born and lived with his family, to visit his uncle, a Professor of Composition at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, during vacations and on weekends. It was the musical side of the family; Shui's aunt, his father's elder sister, was a pianist.

"My uncle used to play [Austrian expressionist composer Arnold] Schoenberg, which was considered very modern in China at that time. And I started singing it, just imitating it. It was atonal music, very difficult for someone to imitate, but I could sing along to it. And my uncle told my aunt, 'This guy needs to go into music.'"

His parents signed him up for violin classes, which Shui recalls he didn't much enjoy, but he persevered at his parents' insistence. It is something that Shui now recommends to parents thinking of caving in too early to a child's demand to stop lessons.

"Many parents, I think, stop too early. When a kid says, 'No, I don't want to play, I don't like this', you can still guide them a little bit more. It's the same with my own boy. I don't expect him to go into music like me, but I see he has some musical talent and will enjoy playing an instrument in the long run."

Shui does not remember enjoying the violin until tragedy intervened. By this time, China was in the mad throes of the Cultural Revolution. Shui recalls with sadness that his violin teacher committed suicide and his classes therefore stopped. It was only then he realised that he missed the violin. "After that it was very natural, I wanted to play every day," he says.

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Shui was able to continue his violin studies via a strange benefactor – Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao's wife and one of the Cultural Revolution's chief architects.

China's communist regime had by this time denounced all Western music as a corrupting bourgeois influence; all music, except that which served the political purposes of the regime, was suppressed.

"During the Cultural Revolution all the schools were closed, except for one, run by Madame Mao," recalls Shui. "Because she loved music she started a talent school for child protégés in the army, which was the only safe place in those days; no one dared touch the army."

Thirteen-year-old Shui competed in national auditions and was chosen by Madame Mao's cultural delegates to join her arts programme.

Shui was 18 when the Cultural Revolution ended, by which time something else had happened which effectively put an end to his prospects of becoming a violin virtuoso – he had badly broken his fingers playing football.

"It was a tough period," recalls Shui. "After my injury, I realised that it





**1956**

China  
National  
Symphony  
Orchestra

**1958**

Symphony  
Orchestra of  
Sri Lanka

**1973**

Philippine  
Philharmonic  
Orchestra

**1977**

Beijing  
Symphony  
Orchestra

**1979**

Singapore  
Symphony  
Orchestra

**1983**

Macao  
Orchestra

**1997**

Malaysian  
Philharmonic  
Orchestra

**2004**

Thailand  
Philharmonic  
Orchestra

**2006**

Angkor  
National  
Youth  
Orchestra  
(Cambodia)

**2006**

Symphony  
Orchestra of  
India

was over, I could not play the violin any more.”

But while one door closed another opened. Shui was accepted into the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where he studied composition for two years. He was later accepted into the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing where he studied conducting under Xu Xin and Huang Fei Li, the founding father of the Beijing Symphony Orchestra.

Xu encouraged Shui to pursue conducting as a career, but his pupil wasn't keen. It was only through a ruse that Xu got Shui to conduct an orchestra for the first time.

“He asked me, ‘Shui, can you come and conduct this rehearsal because I'm sick.’ So I just had to do it. It was Beethoven's First Symphony.”

Shui went into a head spin. “I don't quite know what happened [during that rehearsal]; I didn't hear anything. But I guess my teacher felt I could make it as a conductor as he could see I had a little bit of talent. Actually, my teacher wasn't sick at all; he was in the shadows watching me. He only did it to get me before an orchestra.”

By the late '70s, Deng Xiaoping, now China's paramount leader, had opened the country allowing tens of thousands of Chinese students to study abroad. Shui, now a graduate, won a scholarship to study music at Boston University in 1986. He recalls it as quite an eye-opener.

“It was such a contrast. China was open, yes, but we still wore the blue Mao suits. The first movie I saw in America was *Blue Velvet*. So that's the example – from the Cultural Revolution to David Lynch!” he says with a chuckle.

Shui attended the prestigious Los Angeles Music Festival in

Massachusetts, where he came into contact with legendary composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein.

“In China, at that time it was still quite limited if you wanted to study classical music. Basic study was all about detail; very good basics, counterpoint, orchestration, etc. But with a great musician like Bernstein you forget about note to note; it's about art. Music is art. You're still on Earth, but your mind is somewhere else.”

After graduating from Boston in 1990, Shui was selected to conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Summer Festival, an honour given to just one music graduate each year.

“Being a conductor was always my last choice. It's not in my nature.”

Lan Shui

“That was a big jump,” recalls Shui. “You work directly with great musicians. From then I kind of knew my path [to being a conductor] was clear.”

It was at Tanglewood that Shui came to the attention of David Zinman, widely regarded as one of the world's finest conductors, and the man who would become his mentor. In 1992, Zinman invited Shui to the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra as Conducting Affiliate for two seasons, during which time Shui became an American citizen.

A stint as Associate Conductor to Neeme Järvi, the Estonian-born conductor of the Detroit Symphony, followed. In the same period, Shui



assisted German conductor Kurt Masur at the New York Philharmonic, and worked with French composer Pierre Boulez at the Cleveland Orchestra in Paris under the Young Conductors' Project.

A return to China to conduct the National Radio Symphony followed in 1996. He had not returned to his homeland for more than a decade because of Tiananmen Square.

"For a long time I didn't go back," says Shui. "After Tiananmen... to me, I feel really sad about what happened to this day."

He recalls that first concert as a "very special" experience, which was marked by the performance of his good friend, the virtuoso cellist Yoyo Ma, whom Shui had met through Zinman.

In 1997, Shui was approached to take up the post of Music Director at the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO). Now, 15 years on, he laughs when he considers how long he's been at the job.

"I never thought I'd be here for so long. But I love it. It's such a wonderful orchestra and Singapore is a great place."

While the SSO is certainly Shui's career definer, he is also the Chief Conductor of the Copenhagen Philharmonic, a post he has held since 2007. But Singapore takes precedence.

"When I took over Copenhagen, they understood that my first priority is Singapore. All my planning I do here first. And what time I have over I give to them."

Shui spends 14 weeks in Singapore; eight weeks in Denmark divided throughout the year. "I'm always on a plane," he says. "My body is a mess right now; I don't sleep. Maybe four hours at most a night!"

## SYMPHONY OR PHILHARMONIC – WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?



**Not much, really. A full-size orchestra (about 100 players) can be called either a "symphony orchestra" or a "philharmonic orchestra". Basically, an orchestra is a symphony orchestra if it's capable of playing symphonies – such as Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* (containing the famous "Ode to Joy" movement) – which philharmonic orchestras certainly are. So when does a symphony become a philharmonic? Well, if there's already another symphony in town, for instance. In reality, whoever gets there first gets dibs on the title "symphony", and latecomers often use "philharmonic" for the purposes of differentiation. However, this isn't always the case. For example, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra was founded in 1842, while the Vienna Symphony Orchestra came along in 1900.**

He says the main challenge with the SSO over the years has been the itinerant nature of Singapore.

"Compared with other Asian orchestras, what I'm most proud of is the morale of our players. This is

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the most important thing for any orchestra. An orchestra is a unit. It’s always hard to make good morale for any orchestra because musicians first of all are individuals; they’re not just some worker you can order what to do. They need to be

inspired by you. At the same time they need to fulfil their desires. So it’s a very interesting, very sensitive job.

“This orchestra has teamwork.

They feel each other; they respect one another at all levels... musicians, the management, the Board, everything is teamwork. That’s the big difference with 15 years ago.”

“The Berlin Philharmonic has this kind of morale. Many orchestras can play perfect pitch. But with a great orchestra, one plus one equals three. Berlin has this “three”. There are many great orchestras, but they lack soul.”

Nothing Shui says comes across as self-important or conceited in any way. In person he is humble, warm, friendly, a gentleman. On stage, he has a generous spirit, and is happy for the 96 members of his orchestra

and visiting performers to share in the applause with him.

Shui credits the establishment of the Esplanade, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, as bringing the SSO to greater heights.

“It lifted the orchestra,” he says. “It helped us form our orchestral sound. Every great orchestra has a great performing home. The Vienna Philharmonic has the Musikverein; we have the Esplanade.”

Shui is also passionate about performing music by Asian and Singaporean composers such as the late Leong Yoon Pin – “the godfather of classical music in Singapore”, as Shui calls him – and contemporary musician Kelly Tan.

Does Shui still want to compose himself?

“I wish. I want to compose; I want to play violin. Lack of time is the factor,” he says.

Outside of work, Shui spends his time reading or playing with his son. He says he doesn’t listen to much music.

“I used to listen to a lot of music; all the time,” he says. “But I felt much better when I had my space. Breaks are essential. So that when you come to the first rehearsal of the week you feel fresh, and the music will feel fresh. If you’re tired, the music is tired.”

And what is there left for the maestro to achieve?

“It never ends; there is so much to learn,” he says. “My teacher, David Zinman, is 77 years old and still conducting. You’re constantly learning new pieces, but constantly learning old ones, too. With your life experience, your age... Brahms, for example, is very different now from when I performed him 10 years ago. It never ends.” **TR**

## 2007

Hangzhou Philharmonic Orchestra (China)

## 2009

The Orchestra of the Music Makers (Singapore)

## 2009

Guiyang Symphony Orchestra (China)

## 2010

China National Centre for the Performing Arts Orchestra



