

On the Road to China with the Laughing Buddha

Last September the then Master, Peter Fowler and Russell Jones, Director of the Association of British Orchestras (ABO), joined the City of London Sinfonia (CLS) on tour to China. Here is Liveryman Russell Jones' report.



Happy times

It all began at the Civic Luncheon of the Billingsgate Ward Club. "Don't you think we should be taking the Master and the Director of the ABO with us?" And with this suggestion (command?) by Tessa Brewer, the Lady Mayoress, Stephen Carpenter, the Chief Executive of the CLS had little choice but to invite us to join the orchestra on tour to China. Stephen was more than happy that Peter Fowler and I were eager to be the tour's cheerleaders and groupies and wave the flag for the CLS, British orchestras, the Company and the City.

The whirlwind tour was to take in three cities in five days, Beijing, Hangzhou and Shanghai. Had we thought about the pretty gruelling schedule in advance we might have had second thoughts. However, the lure of the Forbidden City, Great Wall, the Lingyin Temple, the home of the original Laughing Buddha (more of which later) and the extraordinary metropolis that is Shanghai, stiffened our resolve to be gallant troupers!

To start with the reason we were there, the music. The specially-requested/planned programme was to showcase the virtuosity of the orchestra and British music. In some ways it was something of a Last Night with a "serious" first half and a lighter second. Very cleverly the concert opened with Beethoven *Symphony No. 8* –

"8" being as lucky a number in China as "13" is unlucky to us. This was followed by sparkling performances of the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto* played by BBC Young Musician, Nicola Benedetti. The second half included the Elgar *Introduction and Allegro* and the Henry Wood *Fantasia on British Sea Songs*. Peter and I were superlative clappers in true promenading style by leading the audience in the *Hornpipe*.

The first concert was a treat as it took place within the Forbidden City in a purpose built concert hall. This concert was generously supported by the orchestra's principal sponsor Marsh & McLennan Companies and Bentley. It is interesting to reflect that in so-called communist China, Bentley's Beijing dealership has sold six \$1.2m Mulliner 728 limousines, ranked the most expensive car in the world, and has bagged the top rank among dealers worldwide. The British Ambassador, who was entertaining the Lord Mayor, David Brewer, also attended the occasion. The Lord Mayor, along with our very own Liveryman, Tessa, his wife, was spending the last night of his China tour in Beijing. The event was a great success and positive murmurings about doing this again were happily reported.

However, the concert that warmed our hearts and demonstrated the power of music was the second concert in the City of Hangzhou, a fashionable and wealthy city three hours' coach journey southwest of Shanghai. The concert took place in a 2000 seat cinema and was full. What was most encouraging was, that with the exception of Peter and myself, no one seemed to be over the age of 35. As the concert began, chaos reigned. People were still finding seats or were just choosing to sit anywhere; children were running around; mobile phone ring tones were sounding constantly and everyone was talking! But don't underestimate the power of Beethoven! Within ten minutes calm prevailed, not perhaps Wigmore Hall calm, but good enough for this

