



Tribune photo by Alex Garcia

Issa Boulos accepts applause after playing the oud with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Thursday night as part of the World Music Festival.

CLASSICAL REVIEW

CSO's take on world music

By Howard Reich

Tribune arts critic

Everyone knows that the Chicago Symphony Orchestra can play Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.

The question was how the celebrated ensemble would handle Tan Dun, Chen Yi and Issa Boulos.

Not surprisingly, the CSO elegantly dispatched works by these and other non-Western composers during Thursday night's opening of the World Music Festival at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. The program, to be repeated Saturday at Symphony Center, broke several precedents.

For starters, the CSO never had performed at the World Music Festival. Its debut was a coup for the event and an opportunity for the orches-

tra to redefine itself — at least for an evening. In addition, the chance to perform with an ensemble of the CSO's stature proved a boon to several world-music artists.

The most exotic sounds of the evening, by far, came from the visiting musicians of Russia's Tuva Republic, in southern Siberia. While vocalists Albert Kuvezin produced growling, rumbling Tuvan "throat singing," as it's famously known, the CSO articulated the glistening, pictorial orchestral passages of Vladimir Toka's "Taezhnaya" Symphony.

Chicago-based musician Yang Wei long has startled audiences with his virtuosity on pipa (a lutelike Chinese instrument) but rarely in so demanding a role as in Tan Dun's Pipa Concerto. The rhetorical flourish of Wei's playing held its own against the exclamations of the orchestral accompaniment, no small feat.

If oud player and composer Boulos didn't make full use of the orchestral forces at his disposal, his Radio Maqam Ensemble nonetheless showed the incantatory qualities of Arabic maqam music. And CSO assistant concertmaster Yuan-Qing Yu offered a stirring, sweeping account of a movement from Chen Yi's characteristically evocative Chinese Folk Dance Suite for Violin and Orchestra.

Throughout, David Alan Miller sounded more appealing as guest conductor than as loquacious narrator in a concert that did not benefit from the inclusion of Borodin's "Polovtsian Dances" or Balakirev's "Islamey" (in a cheesy transcription).

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The program will be repeated at 7 p.m. Saturday at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; free; 312-294-3000.