



MUSIC REVIEW | ATLANTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

# Nightingale and Garden With Hints of China

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The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's contribution to [Carnegie Hall's Ancient Paths, Modern Voices](#) festival, on Saturday evening, looked at Chinese-Western musical hybrids in which the Western influence was dominant, the Chinese largely incidental.

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Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

In concert: Celena Shafer in Stravinsky's "Rossignol."

The first of the two scores conducted by [Robert Spano](#), "Awakening From a Disappearing Garden," is the work of the composer Angel Lam, born in Hong Kong. Although she has studied traditional Chinese music, much of Ms. Lam's piece suggests that her studies at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore were a more decisive influence. The first movement scarcely refers to Chinese themes or timbres, and when they crop up suddenly and colorfully in the second movement, you wonder where they were hiding, and why.

The companion piece here, Stravinsky's early opera "Le Rossignol," is based on a [Hans Christian Andersen](#) story set in China. Its music is mostly pure Stravinsky. You don't

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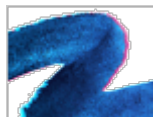
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get the elemental forcefulness of “The Rite of Spring,” but you hear the hazy string swirls of “The Firebird” and a lot of chromatic vocal filigree. Its concession to Chinese music is a few pentatonic instrumental interludes that sound pirated from Puccini’s “Turandot.”

But at least Stravinsky made the effort. At several Ancient Paths concerts you got the impression that all a Western work needed to earn a berth in this festival was the word “Chinese” somewhere in its program notes. (Mahler’s “Lied von der Erde” and Bartok’s “Miraculous Mandarin” are the best examples.)

Ms. Lam’s “Awakening From a Disappearing Garden” is many things roped together. In part it is a cello concerto for [Yo-Yo Ma](#). It is also a text — an otherworldly, dreamily poetic short story — written and narrated by Ms. Lam.

In the narrated sections Ms. Lam’s music was gentle and distant: percussionists played small, high-pitched bells, and the strings supplied a gentle murmur that gradually grew louder but did nothing to wrest the ear from the spoken text. Even Mr. Ma’s role in these sections was subdued.

When the music took the spotlight, Mr. Ma was given ample opportunity to draw on the rich, singing tone and sense of drama that remain his most crowd-pleasing qualities. But even the cello line’s most dramatic passages had little real tension within them. Ms. Lam’s first movement seemed bland and distant, with little to grab, let alone challenge, a listener. That changed in the second movement, when Ms. Lam moved closer to her Chinese roots, giving the orchestra fanciful music that drew on lively dance rhythms and couching Mr. Ma’s solo line in microtonally sliding pitches.

Mr. Spano and his players functioned in a largely supporting role, but they performed with a solid, generally warm tone. They contributed the same, with an extra dollop of vigor, to the Stravinsky, where the focus was on the superb cast.

Celena Shafer’s agile, shapely rendering of the Nightingale’s virtuosically flighty music was the evening’s most striking performance. Vinson Cole as the Fisherman, Jessica Rivera as the Cook and Kostas Smoriginas also made powerful contributions, as did the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chamber Chorus.

*The Ancient Paths, Modern Voices festival runs through Tuesday at Carnegie Hall; (212) 247-7800 or [carnegiehall.org](http://carnegiehall.org).*

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