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An opera diva totally devoted to her art

Pratap Parameswaran

IT HELPS when an artist has natural talent. And it's a sheer delight if she has beauty as well. Chinese soprano Ying Huang definitely has both. After first captivating audiences around the world with her international debut in *Madame Butterfly*, the Shanghai-born Ying Huang has since embarked upon a career in the international scene.

And her stage recently included *Emerald Bay* at Pangkor Laut Island.

Considered as one of the most promising young concert and operatic artists in the profession, 29-year old Ying Huang was part of the repertoire at YTL Corp Bhd's Concert of Celebration '98 in conjunction with the group's 43rd anniversary.

It also featured tenor Warren Mok and flautist Andrea Griminelli, and was accompanied by The Orchestra Internazionale D'Italia - which included twenty-two members of the Kuala Lumpur Symphony Orchestra - conducted by Paul Mann.

The concert, which was graced by the presence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah, was also held in conjunction with the official opening of the exclusive Marina Bay Estates at Pangkor Laut island developed by YTL Hotels and Properties headed by Mr Mark Yeoh.

The opera diva managed to find time amid a busy schedule of rehearsals to talk to *Business Times* during her stay at Pangkor Laut.

How does she explain her dramatic rise to international stardom in such a short period of time? Has it gone to her head?

"In Asia there is this traditional concept of destiny and that is really what had happened to me. If it belongs to you, it belongs to you ... I believe in destiny and a lot of things happen because of destiny," said Ying Huang.

"And I also believe I had the faith and talent. And the opportunity," said the opera diva.

Opportunity arrived when she was chosen out of 200 other hopefuls to portray the ill-fated geisha Cio-Cio-San in Frederic Mitterrand's film version of *Madame Butterfly* in 1996.

*Butterfly* is a 15-year old Japanese virgin whose arranged marriage to an American naval officer temporarily stationed in Nagasaki, is seen as a sham by everyone but her.

Although abandoned, Cio-Cio-San never loses hope that he will return one day as she raises the son he never knew.

Music director James Conlon was on the verge of giving up hope of finding the right voice until he heard Ying Huang on a video-tape made of her at a Paris competition.

"A ravishing coloratura voice, a young, pure, unruined voice ..." was how Conlon described her voice, although Ying Huang had never sung an entire opera before.

Ying Huang also sings Western music like a Westerner.

She had opted to specialise in Western music and studied Handel, Mozart, Rossini at the age of 18 when attending the highly acclaimed Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

With a new generation of young professional and talented opera singers and musicians from all over the world, especially in Europe, providing a highly competitive environment profession, the only option for Asians to break into the fold is "to be better than them and work harder", she said.

Her recipe for success? "I have to remind myself to be strict, determined, disciplined and professional.

Appreciative of what she currently has, Ying Huang is set on her ambitions. "I am going to devote my life to the arts and music and be a fine artist... that is the most important...I do not want to be a shooting star."

Since moving to the West from China four years ago, Ying Huang has performed in some of the major opera centres around the world, including with the Cologne Philharmonic, and the London, Boston, Houston and Chicago Symphony Orchestras.

Has Madame Butterfly changed her life after catapulting her onto international stardom? "There is tremendous pressure and many people are jealous of you...it can be stressful...but there are also a lot of opportunities," she admits.

Opportunities to develop her musical abilities, foreign languages and the culture of different lands.

Meditation helps as well as an inherent ability to remain strong when times are tough, a characteristic, she adds, which is also found in Madame Butterfly's Cio-Cio-San.

"I was Cio Cio San. I identified myself with her...part of my character is very, very similar to her. After the movie all the crew on the film came up to me and told me that too," she said.

Asian women, according to Ying Huang, have the same cultural background, in terms of their roots, mentality, way of expression and bearing.

"We have it inside us, said 'China's steel butterfly for the 90s' as one reviewer termed Ying Huang.

However, even a person as strong as she is have their moments of vulnerabilities.

"Although I am much more experienced and matured, I realise it is much more difficult now to be alone in a foreign country without my family...to leave home and be travelling all the time," she said.

"It is a lonely life on the road most of the time and not many people understand. People only tend to see the crowds around you and the flowers... you have to face the loneliness by yourself," she said.

Having seen much of the world of famous artists in the last few years alone, Ying Huang is perhaps well-suited to know that they may not necessarily be perfect beings as well.

"I would like to be a great artist and also a nice human being. I do benefit concerts for charity but it is not enough ...," she said.

Ying Huang is also keen on being part of a mission promoting an East-West musical exchange which she epitomises - a Chinese artist performing European music as part of her repertoire and bringing it to Asian audiences.

Perhaps that would be a fitting encore for a remarkable journey in the life of a diva whose early childhood was spent watching opera movies in a language which she did not understand but was felt to be her "inspiration" and later to be her destiny.

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