Live ping-pong takes center stage at New York Philharmonic concert

2018-02-22

By ZHANG RUINAN/ZHOU WEI |   
 China Daily |  
 Updated: 2018-02-22 08:10

It was the first time a ping-pong table had taken center stage at the David Geffen Hall in New York, as two US national table tennis champions played each other live as part of the New York Philharmonic's Chinese New Year annual concert at the Lincoln Center on Feb 20.  
Ariel Hsing and Michael Landers, the youngest-ever US women's singles champion and US men's singles champion respectively, were featured as the ping-pong-playing soloists in Andy Akiho's energetic concerto, Ricochet, Concerto for Ping Pong, Violin, Percussion and Orchestra, under the baton of Chinese conductor Yu Long.  
The performance used the sounds from an intense table tennis match alongside a full symphony orchestra, which saw the ping-pong players elevated at the back of the stage, like opera singers performing above an orchestra pit.  
"We've never done anything with ping-pong before," says Bill Thomas, the executive director of the New York Philharmonic.  
The piece was performed because the orchestra wanted to do "something new as a way to think about the future" at the time of Chinese New Year celebrations, he says.  
The appearance of the work in a program of music from China－home to some of the world's greatest table tennis players and the global hub for Chinese New Year celebrations－also evoked China's ping-pong diplomacy of the 1970s, with the violin part serving as an intermediary between the percussive soloists and the orchestra.  
"The piece originally had its world premiere in Shanghai and the soloist who performed it serves as the connection to the Philharmonic－our violinist Elizabeth Zeltser," says Thomas. "We kind of knew this would be interesting and then we had the idea of performing it in New York as part of our Chinese New Year Celebration. We're very excited about it."  
"Tonight's concert, of course, has Chinese characteristics, because this is what we planned to do," said Shirley Young, governor of the Committee of 100 and chair of the US-China Cultural Institute, which supports the Chinese New Year concert, ahead of the concert on Tuesday. "The content of the concert is to give American audiences a little taste of Chinese culture."  
The concerto is related to Chinese culture and history, and the soloists were two champion ping-pong players, together with other soloists with the Philharmonic, said Young.  
"So, this concert is obviously not a normal concert, it's definitely a great New York Philharmonic concert but with Chinese characteristics."  
The performance also featured the Spring Festival Overture, a cheerful Chinese orchestral work composed by Li Huanzhi in the 1950s, Beethoven's grand Choral Fantasy by 13-year-old pianist Serena Wang and the Farmers' Chorus from Yunnan province, in their first appearance outside China.  
"They are real farmers, and 50 of them have come all the way from Yunnan to perform for us," says Young.  
Audiences were wowed by the performance. Amy Melman from upstate New York says she couldn't have imagined how the ping-pong was going to be played in time with the orchestra, remarking how well the players performed.  
"The particular thing I liked most of all was how the ping-pong playing matched the rhythms of the orchestra. It was amazing," Melman says.  
On the afternoon before the concert, traditional Chinese dragon and lion dances performed by the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company wowed New Yorkers outside the Lincoln Center. Students from the National Dance Institute's performance of Chinese folk dances and a dog dressed up in traditional Chinese clothes also drew large crowds.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201802/22/WS5a8e0a77a3106e7dcc13d47f.html