



# Harp

## An 8,000 Mile Commute: My Week with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra

by Andrea Stern

This past February and March I had the pleasure of visiting my friend Donna Orbovich in Hong Kong. Donna is Associate Principal Flute with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra (HKPO). We decided that as long as I was coming to visit, I might as well combine business with pleasure, and she arranged for me to play second harp for several performances.

The HKPO became a professional orchestra in 1974 and makes its home in the Hong Kong Cultural Centre in Kowloon. The orchestra has members from eleven different countries, including Japan, Korea, the Philippines, India, Australia, Great Britain, United States and Canada, but the bulk of the players are from Hong Kong and mainland China. As the only professional orchestra in Hong Kong, the musicians maintain a busy schedule with a 44 week season. The majority of concerts are subscription events which feature guest artists such as Joshua Bell, Lynn Harrell and Andre Watts. They also perform educational concerts, opera, ballet, and even Cantonese pops. They tour, and recently performed in Singapore. Next fall, they will travel to Beijing and Macau.

Another interesting aspect of the HKPO is the variety of styles and teaching influences present amongst the players, as a result of them being trained in so many different countries and traditions. For instance, Donna mentioned that the double reed players are all English and thus have a distinctively brighter sound than that of the American school. The winds and brass sections are greatly affected by this difference of style.

The program that I played included Bartok's *Rumanian Folk Dances* and *Concerto No. 2* for violin and orchestra, as well as *Death and Transfiguration* and *Der Rosenkavalier Suite* by Strauss. The guest conductor, Shui Lan, is the conductor of the Singapore Symphony, and the orchestra responded to him with great enthusiasm. The Music Director, David Atherton, will be leaving this season after

11 years, and will be replaced next season by Samuel Wong. Mr. Wong is a native of Hong Kong, and it is hoped that his presence will pique interest in the orchestra and boost sales.

As with most orchestras, the HKPO musicians had their rehearsal routines, depending on their nationality. When orchestra members took breaks, I saw some people going out for coffee, while others had tea, and a few of the Brits on occasion would make a stop at a local pub for a quick pint. Lunch destinations ranged from MacDonaldis to Planet Hollywood to Maxim's Fast Food Chinese to Deli France, although one could always stop at one of the innumerable hole-in-the-wall Cantonese restaurants found on most every commercial side street.

The musicians travel to work by ferry, subway, bus, taxi, and motorcycle. Hong Kong has an excellent mass transit system, with all signs in both Cantonese and English. The ferries are a very important form of transportation, given that the territory of Hong Kong is comprised of a chunk of the mainland and 235 islands, most of which are uninhabited. Some of the musicians live in central Hong Kong, which is an intensely urban area, consisting of miles of high rise offices and apartment buildings crammed together. Others, like Donna, live in Discovery Bay, a small community (30,000 people) on the mostly rural Lantau Island, about a 30-minute ferry ride from the smog and congestion of central Hong Kong.

Discovery Bay is a peaceful place with a tree-lined central square, beach front, and a wealth of open space compared to the narrow streets of urban Hong Kong. There is a Trappist Monastery about 2 miles away, accessible by a winding foot path. In the middle of the island there is a Buddhist Monastery which features the world's largest seated Buddha: a bronzed statue over 100 feet tall perched on a hill high above the China Sea. However, encroaching development threatens this beautiful island: The new Hong Kong

airport was recently built on the far side of Lantau, and Disney is negotiating to build its first theme park in Asia one bay over from Discovery Bay.

Chris Sidenius, the HKPO's principal harpist since 1989, happens to be a Wisconsin native. Chris now lives in Sha Tin, which mostly remains a traditional Chinese village, and is only a one hour train ride from the People's Republic. He is fluent in Cantonese, and it does not seem to bother him that it's very hard to find good cheese in Hong Kong. Prior to playing with the HKPO, he was second harpist with the Milwaukee Symphony. He studied both harp and piano at Interlochen. He has several private students.

Despite having been a British colony until 1997, the population of Hong Kong is 98% Chinese, with the rest being mostly British, Filipino, Indian, Portuguese and American. Thus, the audience for the predominantly Western repertoire of the orchestra is largely Chinese. The HKPO has experienced some audience decline since the political changes in 1997, which have resulted in a steady exit of Westerners from Hong Kong. Efforts are being made to appeal to the Chinese audiences. For example, Cantonese popular music is standard for the orchestra's Pops series.

Playing in the HKPO did not really feel that much different than playing in an orchestra anywhere in the world, at least as long as I remained in the hall. However, once I stepped outside of the Cultural Centre and looked across the harbor to the incredible glow of the Hong Kong skyline, I knew that this was an experience that I would not soon forget.

*Andrea Stern is a free-lance harpist in the Twin Cities area. She has a private studio in her home and specializes in adult students of all levels. She composes and arranges for harp and has published Mosaic through Lyra Music Company. Her CDs feature a wide range of styles. ‡*