

S'pore baritone delves deep into his passion

By Cheah Ui-Hoon
uihoon@sph.com.sg

OPERA-LOVERS in Singapore last heard baritone Martin Ng sing the lead in Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* earlier this year, but his love and speciality is Italian opera, in which he has immersed himself for the past 11 years.

The former commercial litigation lawyer quit his job 11 years ago, at the age of 27, to enrol in opera vocal training at the State Conservatory of Verona in Italy – barely making the cut because he was considered a mature student.

"Thankfully, I had topped the entrance exam, which was why they considered admitting me, because the cut-off age is 26. Even then, I was only accepted because there were still spaces available," shares the 38-year-old.

It was a major move away from his legal career into an operatic one, and one that came possibly as a surprise to those around him.

Though he had always been interested in singing, and learnt the piano when he was young, he wasn't active in the music scene until after National Service (NS). "I didn't join choirs or choral groups in secondary school, and not even when I was at National University of Singapore ... I didn't really want to sing with other people," he quips.

The first live opera he saw was the Singapore Lyric Opera's (SLO) *La Boheme*, when he was an NSman. "And it made an indelible impression on me," says Ng. He started taking lessons from his mother's vocal coach which was when singing opera became an obsession, he confesses.

He also took leave to attend a few masterclasses overseas. "It was quite clear possibly to my father that I really wasn't into my legal career," he reminisces.

Ng went to the Verona conservatory because he specifically wanted to

be trained by Taiwan-born soprano Chu Tai Li. "She was the one who advised me to learn opera in Italy, because I was considering going to New York. But she convinced me that there's no other place I can learn Italian opera than at the birthplace of the genre itself," he explains.

Throwing himself wholeheartedly into his new-found passion, Ng also took Italian language lessons for five years so that he would better understand the nuances of the language, besides the fact that it would be useful since he was going to study for six years at the conservatory.

"Because of my age, I was offered a two-year Masters course, but I wanted to study for as much and as long as possible."

Since he graduated five years ago, Ng has been singing professionally – besides teaching English when he's in Milan, to help pay the bills. He's sung a few lead roles with the SLO here. This year, he's performed twice in Taiwan and this would be his third performance in Singapore, after roles in *Turandot* and *The Flying Dutchman*.

Joining him is Singapore-trained, Germany-based soprano Li Jie and pianist Boris Kraljevic from Montenegro, who used to teach at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

The night's programme by the trio will feature excerpts from Verdi, Donizetti, Puccini, Ponchielli, Rachmaninov and Giordano.

Ng's personal passion is early 20th century *verismo* opera which is about realistic portrayal of the darker emotions, and not just *bel canto*, or beautiful singing.

Baritones might not be the poster boys of the opera world, a spot staked by tenors early on, but Ng might change that yet, with his award-winning voice and the fine figure he cuts on stage.

■ **Martin Ng: The Italian Baritone**, Dec 17, 7.30pm at Sota Concert Hall. Tickets from www.peatix.com

Ng's personal passion is early 20th century *verismo* opera which is about realistic portrayal of the darker emotions, and not just *bel canto*, or beautiful singing.



A baritone grown in stature

REVIEW/CONCERT

THE ITALIAN BARITONE

Martin Ng

School of the Arts Concert Hall

Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

In a state where vocal recitals are uncommon, a baritone concert is a curate's egg.

Singaporean baritone Martin Ng has been gradually making a name for himself. Based in the Italian city of Verona, his performance in October as the eponymous Flying Dutchman in the Singapore premiere of the Wagner opera gave notice to his considerable abilities.

This recital, presented by the Singapore-based opera blog The Mad Scene, centred on Italian operatic roles where baritones are often limited to the part of villainous, avuncular and anti-hero characters. Here,

he proved his mettle, not just vocally but also dramatically, as one might in an opera house.

The programme began with two contrasting arias from Donizetti's bel canto operas. In *Cruda, Funesta Smania* from *Lucia Di Lammermoor*, he projected with a force and heroism more often associated with tenor arias.

Equally well emoted were the lyrical pages of *Come Paride Vezzoso* (*L'Elisir D'Amore*), which showed sensitivity and balance and proved that he was not just a pair of sturdy lungs.

His performances have indeed grown in stature over the years. The board-like stiffness that accompanied his earlier appearances has given way to a more supple and flexible persona befitting a variety of roles.

In Ponchielli's *Ah! Pescatore* from *La Gioconda*, his agile and articulate way around its tricky rhythms was a marvel to behold.

Even better were the offerings in the second half of the concert – Verdi's *Pieta Rispetto E Amore* (*Macbeth*) and Cortigiani Vil Razza Dannata (*Rigoletto*), and Giodano's *Nemico Della Patria* (*Andrea Chenier*).

Ng's towering and booming entries and anguished expressions found a foil in the flowing melody, which his mellow and multi-hued voice served well. This indicates that he is ready for major roles in more repertoire operas.

Adding variety to the programme was non-Italian repertoire performed by Chinese soprano Li Jie, a graduate of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts who is now living in Germany.

Her command of Schumann's lied *In Der Fremde*, Lehar's *Meine Lippen* (from *Giuditta*) and the obligatory Puccini aria (*Signore Ascolta* from *Turandot*) was excellent and every bit Ng's equal.

The accompaniment was provid-

ed by Montenegrin pianist Boris Kraljevic, whose orchestral conception of the music ensured that a fuller ensemble was not missed.

His solo segment was as varied as the songs he played for, with myriad shades of bell sonorities in the two Rachmaninov pieces, the *Musical Moment* (Op. 16 No. 5) and *Etude-Tableau* (Op. 33 No. 8).

Together, the trio served up sumptuous readings of the recital's most substantial pieces, operatic duets from three Verdi operas.

The relationships between father and daughter (*Rigoletto*), father and prospective daughter-in-law (*La Traviata*), and evil duke and would-be lover (*Il Trovatore*) were shelled out with a show of passion and conviction.

The chemistry among all three performers was clearly palpable and prolonged applause after a stirring *Udiste...* *Mira, Di Acerbe Lagrime* (*Il Trovatore*) was followed by a rousing encore.

Putting Singapore's stamp on opera

Asian leads and a creative team from Singapore has been assembled to put on German composer Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* in October

Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh

Singapore's very own take on German composer Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, the first of his operas to be staged here in full, is taking shape.

The international and Asian leads for the show – which premieres in October – have been selected and a creative team from Singapore has been assembled.

Besides co-directors Chong Tze Chien and Glen Goei, who will bring puppetry and creative flair to the 1843 opera about a captain doomed to sail the seas endlessly, the team also includes Grammy nominee Darrell Ang as musical director, Wong Chee Wai as set designer and Lim Woan Wen as lighting designer.

The opera is presented by the Richard Wagner Association (Singapore) and co-produced by Opera Viva, in association with theatre company, The Finger Players, of which Chong is company director.

It will run from Oct 23 to 30 at the Victoria Theatre, with the international leads singing in four of the five performances. The remaining show on Oct 27 will be performed by the Asian leads.

They are Singapore soprano Nancy Yuen as heroine Senta, Singapore baritone Martin Ng as the Dutchman, Taiwanese bass Julian Lo as Senta's father Daland and Singapore baritone Kee Loi Seng as Erik, a villager who has fallen for Senta.

Richard Wagner Association (Singapore) president Juliana Lim, 65, says: "The honest truth is that we embarked on this project in early 2015 not expecting to find any Singapore singer willing to take on a Wagner opera."

The association forged a partnership with its counterpart society in Karlsruhe and the International Association of Wagner Societies to tap on contestants in the International Singing Competition for Wagner Voices, a triennial competition held in Germany, for the opera.

Lim says the association also held open auditions here and was pleasantly surprised to find singers coming forward.

She says: "We then decided to dedicate one of the five scheduled performances to them."

"Looking to the future, should this opera ever be restaged, it's the

Singapore-based cast that will take it forward."

She adds that Yuen – "the doyenne of the Singapore opera world" – was invited to sing the part of Senta.

It is a role that the veteran singer of over 30 years describes as daunting. She says: "I've always been drawn to Wagner's music as a listener, but have yet to perform any of his operas and am immensely grateful to have this golden opportunity to sing his beautiful work."

The other Asian leads were picked from the open auditions. Ng, who graduated from the State Conservatory of Verona in Italy, considers the role of the cursed Dutchman a huge break.

"It's the most difficult role I have taken on so far and certainly the most important," he says. "Having sung Verdi and Puccini's operas for years, singing Wagner's masterpiece presents huge stylistic and vocal challenges."

Meanwhile, the international cast features some up-and-coming Wagnerian singers. Australian soprano Kathleen Parker, who won the Wolfgang Wagner Prize and the Audience Prize at the 2015 International Singing Competition for Wagner Voices, will be Senta.

She is intrigued by the blending of elements of shadow puppetry and Chinese opera in this production, which "has the potential to be very evocative and completely innovative".

She will star opposite Ukrainian baritone Oleksandr Pushniak, the first prize and Audience Prize winner of the 2012 competition, who takes on the role of the Dutchman.

Lim of the Richard Wagner Association (Singapore) says the team is looking to break new ground and put Singapore's stamp on the opera.

"They're creating something very deep, beautiful and innovative," she says. "I can already hear the audience gasp as soon as the overture starts."

asyiqins@sph.com.sg

BOOK IT / THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

WHERE: Victoria Theatre, 9 Empress Place

WHEN: Oct 23 to 30, 6.30pm (Oct 23), 7.30pm (Oct 25, 27 and 28), 3pm (Oct 30)

ADMISSION: \$46 to \$146 from Sistic (call 6348-5555 or go to sistic.com.sg)



Nancy Yuen and Martin Ng (both left) play the leading roles in *The Flying Dutchman*. PHOTO: TAN NGIAP HENG

www.operanow.co.uk
April 2016 | £4.95

Opera Now

AT THE HEART OF THE OPERA WORLD

IS IT ART?

Sex at the opera

A PLACE IN THE SUN

Here comes a summer of festivals

ORIENT EXPRESSED

Crossing opera's Far Eastern frontiers

WIN!

ZÜRICH OPERA'S
FIDELIO
ON BLU-RAY FROM
ARTHAUS MUSIK

PLUS

RICCARDO MASSI'S
TENOR TINGLE-FACTOR

CHINA'S NEW
SPACE-AGE THEATRE

HONG KONG'S
CULTURAL PEAK

STUART SKELTON

Tales of a hero

R.
RHINEGOLD
PUBLISHING

20+ INTERNATIONAL REVIEWS ★ HI-FI FOCUS ★ WORLDWIDE EVENTS



RISING IN THE EAST

The Far East is opening up to new opportunities for emerging artists, and there is a wealth of talent hoping to reach top of the profession as opera singers. Our Bangkok-based correspondent Robert Turnbull meets four young Asian singers who are already well along the way



Jo-pei Weng: 'Opera has a magical power over me'

It was an alarming occasion when Taiwanese mezzo **Jo-pei Weng** first found herself in the fast lane of professional opera. In June 2014, she was invited to the Mariinsky Theatre by Valery Gergiev to reprise the role of Olga in *Eugene Onegin*, which she had first sung for the maestro at Beijing's National Centre for the Performing Arts. Weng arrived for the White Nights Festival in St Petersburg and was immediately thrown into the maelstrom of the world's busiest conductor.

One hour before curtain up she found herself still in her hotel. 'With no idea of the production or who was sharing the stage with me that night, I panicked!' she says. 'Once at the theatre, I realised that the stage manager only spoke Russian, so I had to stand in the wings throughout the show to know when I was supposed to go on stage.' Amazingly, Weng wants it all to happen again... sort of. 'The thrill of singing with complete strangers, to have to trust each other and react to sudden changes was so exciting.'

Before that occasion, Weng had spent little time in Europe. 'I was offered work in Germany and North America, but I decided to stay at home in Taiwan for family reasons. Now I think it's time for me to be more ambitious. After White Nights, operatic life at home is quiet.' However, as the leading Taiwanese mezzo-soprano of her generation, she is not short of work. 'Taipei has no opera house as such, but the country boasts three or four symphony orchestras which perform staged opera regularly. This year, I'll sing in *Così fan tutte*, *La traviata* and *Carmen*. I try very hard to challenge myself with different characters and a wider repertoire.'

As in many Asian cultures, it was the ►

Church that introduced Weng to singing. Her brother is a choirmaster and her parents both leaders of Church choirs, so she was brought up listening to sacred music and oratorios. Attending Taipei National University, the country's top vocal institution, she did postgraduate studies at the Peabody Institute in the US. It was there that she discovered the voice of Russian mezzo Olga Borodina and became inspired by Russian music, especially Tchaikovsky.

Her background and experience in singing hasn't made performing any easier. Weng says she becomes quite nervous when giving recitals and choral concerts, frightened even to be noticed. (People do notice her though: 'As Angelica's icy aunt, Jo-pei Weng used her sizable, burnished mezzo to compelling effect,' wrote the *Baltimore Sun* of her performance in Puccini's *Suor Angelica*).

Opera, on the other hand, is different. 'I always forget time when I sing these very involving roles. For example, I tend to wear badly fitting shoes. I forget about them completely once I'm on stage, but when I'm off stage they hurt like hell. Opera has this magical power over me. It transforms me to become another person.'

At the age of 27, native Singaporean **Martin Ng** took the bold step of quitting a career in law to train as an opera singer. As a baritone living in a city that can produce barely one opera a year, the odds were certainly stacked against him. 'But it was the right thing to do', says Ng. 'I wasn't at all satisfied with legal work and I had a lot of support in this decision.'

Ng headed for Italy in 2005, where he graduated from the Conservatorio dell'Abaco di Verona and went on the study with Joy Chen, Sergio de Bari and Stefano Anselmi.

Work slowly rolled in. In 2013 he made his debut in Florence's Maggio Musicale festival as Sleep and Corydon in Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*. Two years later, he was given the title role in Viktor Ullmann's *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* at Milan's Teatro Rosetum; then came Silvio in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* with the Teatro Sociale di Trento.

Today, opportunities have opened up in Asia, and Ng is involved in some exciting new regional initiatives. Singapore Lyric Opera still sticks to a one fully staged



▲ Martin Ng: 'Leaving the law for a career in opera was the right thing to do'

and somewhat routine production per season, but Ng will sing the title role of *Die fliegende Holländer* in a co-production between the small local company Opera Viva and the newly-minted Wagner Society of Singapore.

In Kuala Lumpur, he takes on Marcello in Puccini's *La bohème* for KL City Opera, a reinvented private troupe formerly known as 'Eat, Sing and Travel'. The advent of this company was more than welcome among Malaysia's small pool of talented musicians, who have had little to do of late. The country's only professional company in recent years folded well before the death of its founder Leow Siak Fah in 2015.

Ng has also found himself in Taiwan which, unknown to many, has a really

vibrant music scene, with many symphony orchestras staging their own productions. 'I recently sang Don Alfonso in *Così fan tutte*, and was very impressed by the standard of local singers there. My impression is that many of these singers have been trained in America and Europe and have returned home to contribute to the local opera scene.'

Speaking of his future plans, Ng says: 'I'm actually quite pleased with the present direction my career is taking. I'm beginning to sing roles that I've always wanted to perform, and in different parts of the world. I just go wherever an engagement takes me, but I realise I am singing more often in Asia. If things go well, I'll be Asia as much as five times this year for various engagements. This is unprecedented for me!' ▶

lease to the new player, which is run by recreation and hospitality company Island Lifestyle Group.

The original SKI360 Degree first opened in 2006 and was Singapore's only cable-ski park. In such parks, wakeboarders or water-skiers are pulled by an electrically driven overhead cable system.

The other option is to go on the open waters and be pulled by a boat and there are a handful of such operators in Singapore.

The new player has made some

20kmh before progressing to the maximum speed of about 30kmh once they learn to stand.

Only one rider can head into the waters at any one time compared with the full-sized system, which can take up to six. An instructor will be present to guide the watersport novices and there will be a briefing even before they step on the boards.

Mr Hatta reveals that \$4.5 million was pumped into the establishment.

Patrons need to be six and above to hit the waters and beginners start by learning to stand on the

December 2014, it took some time to gain all the necessary approvals to meet guidelines from various authorities.

Before it opened, the company had been regularly updating its close to 3,000 followers on its Facebook page since October last year.

Ardent wakeboarder Joanne Yan, 29, is stoked about the much-awaited opening. "I have been looking forward to the park's opening as it's been closed for a while now and there isn't any other cable-ski place," she says. The civil servant

PARK

WHERE: 1206A East Coast Parkway

OPEN: 10am to 10pm (weekdays); 9am to 10pm (weekends and public holidays)

ADMISSION: From \$40 an hour on weekdays and \$60 an hour on weekends

INFO: www.singaporewakepark.com

Asian cast impress in their only performance

REVIEW / CONCERT

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

Richard Wagner Association (Singapore), Orchestra of the Singapore International Festival of Music/Darrell Ang (conductor) Victoria Theatre/Last Thursday

Marc Rochester

Opera productions usually have a

standby cast ready to step in if one of the principal singers drops out. Normally, this second cast comprises younger and less experienced singers, many of whom harbour secret hopes that something will come along, which will give them their moment in the limelight. Dreams are made of such stuff.

For Singapore's pioneering production of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, things were done rather differently.

The two casts are segregated not

by age, experience or ability, but by ethnicity – something which Wagner would surely have approved. Thursday night saw the first and only scheduled appearance of the Asian cast.

Any thoughts that the Asian singers might have been overawed by Wagner's daunting operatic demands were completely swept aside by the third act and the stand-off between the eponymous Dutchman (Martin Ng), his new fiancée Senta (Nancy Yuen) and her

rejected suitor Erik (Kee Loi Seng).

This had devastating musical and emotional impact. Controlled with great mastery by conductor Darrell Ang, all three voices throbbed with the kind of power, intensity and self-assurance you would expect from only the strongest of professional casts.

Ng had begun a bit shakily, but he quickly grew into the part and by the time he prepared to board the ship and sail away to meet his doom, he was very much the domi-

nating presence on stage.

Kee was probably the most consistent voice among the principals. From the start, he impressed with his vocal authority and complete assimilation of the Wagner idiom.

Only Yuen was never entirely convincing. She certainly had the power to match anything thrown at her from the hefty orchestra in the pit but, at times, she went vocally overboard and her voice took on a hard, brittle edge. The maturity and confidence she exuded in this, one of the great soprano operatic roles, sat rather uneasily with the little-girl demeanour the production imposed on her.

The other principal in the Asian cast was Julian Lo, who was much

more convincing as a scheming father at the start than as a grieving one at the end – but he was always vocally firm and dependable.

Both Jonathan Tay (as the Steersman) and Candice de Rozario (as Mary) were in the cast for the previous performances and it showed in the easy fluency of their singing and acting.

Some rather wooden acting elsewhere on stage may well have been down to the production which was, in all other respects, outstanding. Avoiding cliché and contentious innovation, its simple touches, and especially the wonderful Wayang Kulit backdrop brilliantly executed by The Finger Players, made this a very impressive evening entertainment.

Meet Makaia

