

SYMPHONY DIRECTOR EAGER TO SHOW WHAT HE'S CREATED

After 10 years at the helm, Jahja Ling says bringing the orchestra to China is 'perfect'

JAMES CHUTE • U-T

For 10 years, Jahja Ling has been building the San Diego Symphony.

But he's not making any claims, not for what might happen in Carnegie Hall on Oct. 29 as the orchestra performs in the national spotlight for the first time, and not for what might happen in China, when the orchestra plays in Yantai, Shanghai and Beijing in early November.

"We should never call ourselves a world-class orchestra," Ling said. "It's not up to us to proclaim that. Only other people will say what kind of orchestra we have."

"I'd only say: We've worked for 10 years, and this is the result. And we want to share with you this thing we nurtured, our community supported and

everyone worked together to make something we are all proud of."

Ling has every reason to be proud, and not just of this orchestra.

He's the first and only conductor of Chinese descent to be music director of a major U.S. orchestra, which makes the trip to China that much more significant.

"I've conducted a lot in China," Ling said. "But now, to bring this orchestra, something I've been working on for 10 years, this is perfect."

Ling also takes pride in the fact that he lives what he believes. He has a deep faith, and several times a year he volunteers his time as music director for Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries International. Tong, whom Ling considers his "best friend," is of-



Jahja Ling, the music director of the San Diego Symphony, has been with the orchestra for a decade. K.C. ALFRED • U-T

ten referred to as "the Billy Graham of Asia," and his rallies all over the world have reached an estimated 33 million people.

"These are the things that are important to me," Ling said. "To give my talent is a special privilege. I don't get paid to do these

things (with Tong), but it gives me so much joy.

"And the same way in music. It's my profession and I get paid, but the

most important thing is to give joy to people through the music."

Called to music

Although both of his parents were Chinese, Ling was born in Jakarta, Indonesia. He started studying piano at age 4 and is grateful to his parents for their encouragement. Especially in Indonesia, music was not considered an appropriate career for an only son.

"When I was young, if kids want to study music, you are a sissy," Ling said, "especially if you are a boy. It used to be you'd only play music if you were a girl."

"So when I was playing music, I'd sometimes get laughed at. But my mother and father, they never waver. They feel like because I have talent, they nurture me."

In Ling's view, God gave him the talent, so commit-

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LING • As the economy booms in China, so does classical music

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ting himself to developing his talent is also committing himself to God.

"We should have faith," Ling said. "In music, even though you might not be successful like if you are a businessman, or a doctor, or a lawyer, that's what you are given the talent for."

A year after Ling won the Jakarta Piano Competition at age 17, a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship allowed him to come to the U.S. (where he is now a citizen) and study piano at the Juilliard School.

He seriously pursued conducting as a graduate student at Yale, caught the attention of Leonard Bernstein and worked with Bernstein at Tanglewood and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. An assistant conductor position with the San Francisco Symphony followed, as did what has been the most influential musical relationship of his life: a 1988 appointment as resident conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, where he still guest-conducts annually.

He never conducted the Cleveland Orchestra in China, although he accompanied it on its tours there. He started travel-



Jahja Ling conducts the San Diego Symphony during a rehearsal. K.C. ALFRED • U-T

ing to China in 1995 and has frequently returned to train and conduct its fledgling orchestras.

"In '95, they didn't have anything," Ling said. "I try to lift them up. So every time I come back, they always show appreciation. 'Even though the economy was not good, you come

and try to train us and share your tradition.' They remember."

Universal language

Before China's Cultural Revolution, classical music flourished in communist China, in part fueled by Russian musicians and Russian-trained

musicians. But it was outlawed for a decade and its practitioners disgraced. Although the ban ended in the mid-'70s, it's taken a while for the music to recover.

"It's been very difficult for classical music in China," Ling said. "When you lose a generation, you

don't have the training."

But with China's economy booming, so is classical music. The country doesn't yet have ensembles equal to those in the West, but it is rapidly building the infrastructure.

"They understand that music is something more

than just entertainment; It's more like a universal language," said Ling. "It's something that connects people."

"Every city in China, every little city, is building a concert hall. It's amazing, because once they have money, the first thing is they build a concert hall."

Because of those halls — and because of the money — the top U.S. and European orchestras are routinely playing in China. But Ling sees San Diego's visit as not just another orchestra going to China.

"Getting recognition is not the most important thing," Ling said. "This is a friendship tour. We are hoping to build relations, like in Yantai, San Diego's sister city."

Ling, who is fluent in Mandarin, expects that he and some of the other Chinese musicians in the orchestra will have the opportunity to work with Chinese music students.

"Our (Chinese) musicians, they go there, they can talk to little kids, they can do something in their own language," Ling said. "We can be an inspiration."

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