

'Come to Beijing on Boxing Day,' said the email. 'Why not?' thought **Philip Mackenzie** of the Amadeus Orchestra, who subsequently embarked on a ten-city, 11-concert tour in 14 days. It was, he says, the most idiotic thing he had ever attempted

No sane man would try and take a 70-piece orchestra around China, taking in ten cities and giving 11 concerts over a period of 14 days. I did. It was, quite simply the most ludicrous and idiotic thing I have ever attempted, and there was some stiff competition for this dubious honour. Between us we travelled 1.4 million miles and experienced (sometimes on the same day) temperatures ranging from 22° to -30° centigrade.

It all started when a man called Adrian (a complete stranger to me) emailed me from Beijing and asked if we would like to come over on Boxing Day. This was in August. Not much time to prepare but just about do-able.

The tour was, in part, to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Mozart and it is perhaps for this reason that they asked the Amadeus Orchestra to come. The Amadeus Orchestra is an ensemble of young professionals and music students who are looking for extra orchestral training outside of the normal college concerts – perhaps ideally suited to the punishing workload that the Chinese expected us to undertake.

We received a rapturous reception wherever we went. Banners the size of my house proclaimed in English and Chinese 'Welcome to the London Mozart Symphony Orchestra' or 'Welcome to the Mouzart Philharmon [sic] Symphony Orchestra' and once, slightly embarrassingly, 'Welcome to the London Mozart Players'. Let's hope they're not reading this article.

Halls of up to 4,000 seats were routinely full, although in one more rural town the audience had clearly been rounded up by armed police and made to sit nicely. Audiences were broadly divided into two types: the sophisticated Shanghai types who listened to the music and turned their mobiles off and the more rural, less well educated types who actually answered their phones and held conversations and then complained because the orchestra did such unspeakable things as smiling and taking handbags on stage. In one memorable incident, they complained that the four soloists in Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* were of different heights.

The programme consisted of some Mozart, lots of Strauss waltzes and polkas, some Chinese orchestral music (think *King and I*) and the *Enigma Variations* – a selection that reflected both the Chinese taste and our own. The Elgar consistently went down well and I suspect may have been first performances in several towns.

In Hangzhou we were the first orchestra to perform in a brand new concert hall. The place was stunning. All quality materials, good acoustics, superb back stage facilities, enthusiastic audience, and, outside on a new plaza, giant screens broadcasting a DVD of the Amadeus Orchestra in full swing at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford.

The highlight for everyone was, I think, the two days we spent in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia. We arrived at about 1am and were greeted by a line of beautiful girls in national costume who handed out silk scarves and swigs of some lethal local spirit. They whisked us off to a five-star hotel where we were greeted by more of the same plus a band of local musicians and singers. I have never heard anything like it. I used to think that western classical music was the best



Mozart in China

Pictures by Alastair Merrill www.alastairmerrill.com



sort of music but then I heard Mongolian singing. Stunning. Electrifying. Heart melting.

Invigorating. Totally absorbing. I wanted more!

The next day we were treated to a lunch of terrifying proportions. We arrived at the appointed time and all 70 of us, plus about 30 members of the local Communist Party, were all given identical brightly coloured waistcoats and led into the dining hall.

After speeches (mine was written for me by 'the party') and toasts, a whole roast sheep was carried in. To my horror I was beckoned towards the sheep and asked to cut a deep cross in the top of its head and straight through the brain. This done, we proceeded with 12 courses of mouth-watering food, a surprisingly good red wine and more of the local fire water. Throughout the meal we were treated to singing, dancing and acrobatics from all the different Mongolian tribes.

There were also moments of hardship and moments of comedy and I'm not sure which one this was: on the morning we were due to leave Shanghai, we were all aboard our two coaches (New Year's Day, several hangovers, etc) when we noticed that we weren't moving. Indeed we hadn't been moving for two hours but no one had really noticed because we were so tired.

On glancing out of the coach window I noticed a collection of about four men in agitated discussion with 'our' Adrian. They had also positioned a petite girl in front of the coaches so that we couldn't 'escape'. It turned out that they were the local promoters who had 'bought' the concert and the programme we had performed the night before was four minutes shorter than the contract stated and that they were seeking to 'save face' by causing annoyance, and perhaps knocking a few yuan off the price.

Philip Mackenzie conducts the Amadeus Orchestra in Stravinsky and Mozart at Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre on 22 April. Box office 01865 305305. www.amadeusorchestra.co.uk