

# The French do it better

## review concert

### POSTCARDS FROM SPAIN

Singapore Symphony Orchestra

Shui Lan, Conductor

Esplanade Concert Hall

Last Friday

chang tou liang

The title of the concert read Postcards From Spain but all the music played was French. Puzzled?

That was because from time immemorial, French composers were thought to have written the best Spanish music.

This perception still continues because the likes of Debussy, Ravel and Chabrier are arguably far more popular and exportable than Albeniz, Granados and de Falla.

The orchestra's Iberian musical tour began on a wobbly note in Ravel's Pavane For The Dead Infanta. The opening French horn solo almost cracked on its second note while the oboe solo failed to keep time.

It was left for the strings to salvage pride with its warm and lovely sheen, one so steeped in quiet nobility that suggested that the princess, rather than the pavane, was dead.

The froth of Chabrier's rhapsody Espana followed, a delightful if rather unauthentic evocation of Spanish revelry.



**Pianist Noriko Ogawa moved from naivete to sensuality with ease. PHOTO: WWW.HKSINFONIETTA.ORG**

The real test of prowess came in Debussy's triptych Iberia, receiving its third SSO performance in four months.

The rhythmic bluster in the festive outer movements was infectious but the most sensitive playing distinguished the middle section Scents Of The Night, where Rachel Walker's oboe sang like some forlorn lover.

Maestro Shui Lan delights in revealing every detail, which comes through most vividly in Esplanade's generous acoustics.

The Fantaisie for piano and orchestra was the work of a young and wet-behind-the-ears Debussy, and the closest he came to writing a virtuoso piano concerto. The piano solo part is over-busy but unlike the two Ravel piano concertos, without much to show for.

**The Straits Times,  
3 August 2009**

So it took a supreme Debussy interpreter like the elegant Japanese pianist Noriko Ogawa to make sense of its Massenet-like lyricism and quasi-Saint-Saens razzle-dazzle without descending to bathos.

Her combination of fastidiousness in never missing a note, alternating naivete, sensuality with boldness was awe-inspiring, almost persuading one that this was a true masterpiece.

Finally, the evening closed with the insistent beat of Ravel's Bolero. Abetted by a rock-steady drummer in Jonathan Fox, this painstakingly gradual crescendo worked its way to a massive terminal apoplexy.

Spanish or French, musical tedium such as this has never sounded so good.