

Thunderous ovations and three encores greet VSO

First of four cities on Chinese tour

Tony Atherton, Special to The Sun

MACAU --The thunderous ovations and three encores that greeted the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's performance here Tuesday night has been three decades in the making.

It has been 30 years since a Canadian professional orchestra last performed in China, but judging from the response from patrons in this, the first of four Chinese cities on the VSO's history-making visit, the next tour needn't be so long delayed.

When The Toronto Symphony Orchestra toured China in 1978, soon after the Cultural Revolution, Macau was not under Chinese administration. A Portuguese trading post since the 16th century, its government was still Portugal's responsibility, as it would remain until 1999.

Then, under the terms of an agreement between Lisbon and Beijing, Macau reverted to Chinese control, but as a Special Administrative District, like Hong Kong, with protections for existing rights, freedoms and lifestyles. Among the pre-handover traditions that have continued is the Macau International Music festival.

While the 22nd Macau International Music Festival features such chamber music stalwarts as The Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quartet, and Trio Apollon, the appearance of the Vancouver Symphony is one of three major performances anchoring the event. The festival began October 5 with Britain's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra playing Mahler's Symphony No. 1 in D Major, and will close at the end of the month with Opera de Nice's production of *Il Trittico* (The Triptych) in celebration of the 150th anniversary of Giacomo Puccini's birth.

On Tuesday night, the VSO was playing second fiddle to no one with masterful performances of Shostakovich's Symphony No.5 in D Minor, and Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D major, the latter made luminescent by 28-year-old soloist Hilary Hahn.

When, in the late 1870s, violinists labeled Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's concerto "unplayable" and critics dismissed it as "brutish", none could have imagined a sylph-like creature in a shimmering cocoa evening gown commanding the stage with such power and -- given her youth -- preternatural aplomb.

Her performance inspired raves from the audience at the Macau Cultural Centre, matched only by their response to her solo encore, the prelude of Bach's Partita for solo violin, No.3 in E major.

The Shostakovich was even better received, and the audience seemed reluctant to let Maestro Bramwell Tovey retire from the stage.

Acknowledging the crowd, Tovey made reference to the election underway in Canada, but vowed that this night would not be about politics, but friendship, "like that between Vancouver and Macau,"

The orchestra then played one of its three encores, Elgar's Nimrod, a testament to the composer's friendship with music publisher August Jaeger.

The audience's appreciation wasn't limited to the performances from the classical cannon. A modern piece by Canadian composer Jeffrey Ryan, which Tovey was determined to include on the program of the VSO's first international tour in 17 years, was very favourably received.

Patrons responded to inherent theatricality of Ryan's Linearity of Light, in which the interplay between various parts of the string section sometimes resembles choreography as much as composition. The enthusiastic response was similar to what the piece had evoked in two earlier concerts in Korea.

"People have been lining up to get my autograph," Ryan, the VSO's composer laureate, said before the Macau concert, "That never happens in Canada."

The VSO performs in the Chinese mainland city of Guangzhou today, and makes the first of two appearances in Beijing on Friday. The tour wraps up in Shanghai on Sunday and Monday.