

Chamber orchestra sets 5 concerts in Suzhou, China



The Baltimore Chamber Orchestra rehearses in 2004. The ensemble will be traveling to Suzhou on Saturday. (Baltimore Sun file photo by Elizabeth Malby / November 29, 2004)

By Tim Smith
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Most of Baltimore's classical music ensembles will take a break during the holidays, but one of them is going full-throttle - half a world away. The Baltimore Chamber Orchestra, about 40 members strong, heads to China on Saturday for a five-concert gig in Suzhou, a city of 5.9 million in the Yangtze River Delta.

The trip is all the more remarkable, given the BCO's recent troubles. "Eleven months ago, things were dicey," says music director Markand Thakar. Back then, adds executive director Lockwood Hoehl, "We were waiting to see if the board was going to close up shop." The BCO suspended operations for the second half of the 2008-2009 season in an effort to shore up the finances, a move that appears to have paid off.

Today, the BCO is holding its own. Although the total number of orchestral concerts has been reduced to three, from the five that were the rule in better days, it was an accomplishment for the BCO to launch its 2009-2010 season successfully in the fall. Given how tight budgets remain for most performing arts groups (lack of funding kept the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra from realizing a European tour with music director Marin Alsop earlier this season), the BCO's foreign venture gives the organization an

extra, unexpected lift. The source of the ballast can be traced to a personal connection in China.

"A former conducting student at Peabody [Institute] is in charge of hiring at the new performing arts center in Suzhou," says Thakar, who is co-director of Peabody's graduate conducting program. The Suzhou Science and Cultural Arts Center is covering all travel, hotel and meals for the musicians, as well as paying the orchestra a performance fee, Thakar says. (Perhaps the players will get to sample some of the Suzhou area's culinary specialties, such as squirrel-shaped Mandarin fish, cracking eel paste, soft-shelled turtle with cream sauce, watermelon chicken, and cabbage heart in chicken fat.)

The center boasts a cineplex - "2012" and a Chinese comedy called "A Simple Noodle Story" are among the current showings, with "Avatar" listed as "coming soon" - and a 1,200-seat multipurpose theater, where the BCO will perform Dec. 28 through Jan. 1.

The program will feature Viennese music, with lots of infectious waltzes and polkas by Johann Strauss and others. It's the kind of festive fare that has become traditional in the West at New Year's, exemplified most notably by the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's Day concert that is televised to a global audience. Baltimore Symphony Orchestra concertmaster Jonathan Carney will be the BCO's guest concertmaster for this tour and also will be the soloist in charming pieces by Fritz Kreisler. Although the BCO hasn't programmed this sort of light Viennese repertoire in Baltimore, Thakar expects the ensemble "to do a bang-up job" with it. "This music has so much grace and transparency," the conductor says. "I just love this stuff."

In other BCO news, the orchestra will hold a conducting workshop Jan. 9 to 12 at Goucher College, thanks in part to a grant from the NEA. Among dozens of applicants, 10 aspiring conductors from around the country were selected to work on honing their craft with Thakar and the orchestra. The final session will be open to the public.

For more information on these and other events in the BCO's season, call 410-685-4050 or go to thebco.org.

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