Butterfly Lovers & Paganini

Chloe Chua

SINGAPORE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

RODOLFO BARRÁEZ · MARIO VENZAGO

Chen Gang (b. 1935) & He Zhanhao (b. 1933)

	Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto (1959)	
1	I. Adagio cantabile	5. 31
2	II. Allegro	2. 45
3	III. Adagio assai doloroso	2. 49
4	IV. Pesante – piu mosso – duramente	3. 40
5	V. Lagrimoso	2. 26
6	VI. Presto resoluto	5. 29
7	VII. Adagio cantabile	5. 03

Chen Gang

8	**Sunshine Over Tashkurgan (1976, orch. Yang Li Qing)**	7. 45

Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840)

	Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major, Op. 6 (1815)	
9	I. Allegro maestoso (Cadenza: Émile Sauret)	23. 36
10	II. Adagio	5. 16
11	III. Rondo. Allegro spiritoso	10. 17
	Total playing time:	74. 44

Chloe Chua, violin

Singapore Symphony Orchestra
Jin Ta, flute / **Ng Pei-Sian**, cello (Butterfly Lovers)

Conducted by **Rodolfo Barráez** (tracks 1-8) **& Mario Venzago** (tracks 9-11)

Chloe playing Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto, with conductor Rodolfo Barráez
© Jack Yam

The *Butterfly Lovers Concerto* was one of my grand uncle's favourite concertos. Years ago, I heard an excerpt played by one of his grandchildren at a family gathering, which left a deep impression on me. While learning the piece, I discovered how the Butterfly Lovers' story has endured through many retellings across the ages in many different mediums, from ink to screen to music. Not only was I deeply moved by the steadfast love of the couple, and Zhu Yingtai's courageous resistance against the customs of feudal society, I was also touched by the heart-wrenching story that unfolds through the violin concerto by Chen Gang and He Zhanhao.

Sunshine Over Tashkurgan fascinates me with its exotic harmonies, variety of melodic characters, catchy irregular rhythms with dance beats and the interesting pizzicato passage resembling the strumming of the Dombra instrument. The passionate music transports me to the beautiful town of Xinjiang, with its picturesque grasslands and majestic peaks basking in the warmth, generosity and hospitality of its people.

Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 is famous for its technical challenges and beautiful melodies written in Italian bel canto style, which I have enjoyed immensely. The many hours of practice I've invested to get a good, clean sound has been very rewarding. I truly appreciate the opportunity to record these masterpieces with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and maestros Rodolfo Barráez and Mario Venzago.

Chloe Chua

Chloe performs on a Giovanni Battista Guadagnini, Milan, 1753, on generous loan from the Rin Collection.

CHEN GANG (b. 1935) & HE ZHANHAO (b. 1933)

Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto (1959)

Most classical musical works with Chinese themes, such as Puccini's *Turandot*, have played up the aspect of exotic orientalism, perhaps unavoidably, as products originating from Europe. A notable exception is *The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto* by contemporary Chinese composers Chen Gang (陈钢) and He Zhanhao (何占豪), based on the story of the Butterfly Lovers, often called the Romeo & Juliet of ancient China. The concerto is called 梁祝小提琴协奏曲in Mandarin Chinese - or simply "梁祝" (pronounced "liáng zhù") the two surnames of the star-crossed lovers.

Who were the Butterfly Lovers? Set in the Eastern Jin dynasty in 3rd- 4th century China, the story tells of Zhu Yingtai (祝英台), the daughter of a wealthy merchant who allowed her an education, disguising herself as a boy to join classes undetected. Her best friend in boarding school is the poor scholar Liang Shanbo (梁山伯); they are attracted to each other and become sworn brothers in a sexually ambiguous romance. Zhu's father eventually recalls her home for marriage to a wealthy merchant. Liang pays Zhu a visit at her family mansion and to his greatest surprise discovers his sworn brother is really a girl. Liang asks to marry Zhu, but she is already betrothed and to break that would bring shame upon the family. Liang becomes a county magistrate but dies of a broken heart and, at his request, is buried by the road outside the village of Zhu's fiancé, so the lady would pass by it on her wedding day.

When the appointed day arrives, Zhu is escorted to her fiancé's house to complete the wedding ceremony. A storm breaks out, and the procession has no choice but to stop by Liang's grave. The lady steps out of the litter to mourn her lover, richly dressed in her red bridal dress and jewels. Seeing that the tomb opens at her coming, the lady throws herself in without hesitation. The sky soon clears, and the sun shines again, but to the amazement of those present, the bride is no more. Instead, a pair of butterflies are seen fluttering around the grave before they disappear into the distance.

Composed in 1959 while Chen and He were students at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the concerto utilises traditional melodies and themes of the traditional Yue opera of the Wu-speaking areas of Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces, juxtaposing pentatonic melodies with Western harmonic support.

In addition to emulating the stylistic quirks of Chinese opera, quintessentially Chinese musical mannerisms such as grace notes and portamento effects called huá-yīn (滑音, literally "slipping" or "sliding sound") abound in the score. Played in an authentic manner, they evoke the unmistakable atmosphere and spirit of Chinese music, not unlike how judiciously applied ornamentation in Baroque music allows notes to transcend and flavour the score.

An *Adagio cantabile*, the first of seven sections, opens with a flute solo that exemplifies the role of its Chinese counterpart (the dizi) faithfully, in a *cadenza ad lib* evoking a fluttering butterfly. The violin enters, representing Zhu in a happy time full of youthful hope. She meets Liang (represented by the cello) on the road to school in Hangzhou, and sparks are kindled.

Three fruitfully busy years in school follow in the vivacious *Allegro*. The *Allegro assai doloroso* shows the pair about to graduate and saddened by their parting. *Pesante – piu mosso – duramente* follows, where Zhu arrives home and is informed of her arranged marriage, with the music of the violin clearly showing her inner turmoil.

Chloe playing Paganini, with conductor Mario Venzago
© Chris P. Lim

The arrival of Liang and his discovery of Zhu's true identity are the background of the *Lagrimoso*, where solo cello and violin play an intensely emotional duet, the heart of the work.

Presto resoluto has the violin and cello raging against fate (the orchestra) before the pair resign themselves to what cannot be prevented – Liang (the cello) grows sick and dies. This section ends with Zhu's eventual suicide, evocatively depicted in the violin solo which ends abruptly on a high note.

The final movement is another *Adagio cantabile*, an epilogue recalling the first movement, but further developing the original theme to a bittersweet climax. The ending is truly remarkable: amidst the serene hush of fate looking sympathetically upon the departed couple, the forlorn violin intones one last, wistful farewell. The flute, which began the concerto with its mellow solo, returns briefly now to escort the pair of butterflies

into immortal memory. They fade mystically away on a quiet high D chord on strings.

The work premiered in Shanghai as part of the 10th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the People's Republic of China, and what better way than with a popular folk tale, where backward feudal views about marriage caused the destruction of two bright futures? Thus, we come full circle with this work – viewing a Chinese theme, through the medium of a Western orchestra, from a distinctly Chinese perspective.

The soloist at the 1959 premiere was the esteemed Chinese violin pedagogue, Yu Lina (b. 1940). She was 18 at the time, not much older than Chloe when she recorded this album.

He Zhanhao is widely credited for writing the concerto's main theme, while his compatriot Chen Gang fleshed out most of the work's development. They belonged to the first generation of youth in a new China exposed to both Chinese traditional music as well as music and musicians from the "western" symphonic tradition. At present, He continues to be a composer, conductor and a professor at the Shanghai Conservatory.

Today, the *Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto* remains as the most famous and widely beloved musical retelling of the tale. The score has been transcribed and adapted into many other versions, including for Chinese orchestra/instruments. Its unforgettable melody is synonymous with the legend.

CHEN GANG (b. 1935)

Sunshine Over Tashkurgan (1976, orch. Yang Li Qing)

From 1966 to 1976, the People's Republic of China was in the grip of the Cultural Revolution, and Western music—everything from Bach to the Beatles—was forbidden, and the only permitted performing material was the eight "Model Plays" and revolutionary songs. One bored musician was Pan Yinlin, principal violinist of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, who was running out of repertoire for his solo recitals. In 1974, Pan encouraged the composer Chen Gang to write new repertoire for him.

Chen Gang was born in 1935 in Shanghai as the son of Chen Gexin, a noted composer of popular music including the songs *Shanghai Nights* (夜上海) and *The Blossom of Youth* (花样年华), both famously sung by Zhou Xuan. Chen senior's *Rose, Rose, I Love You* (玫瑰玫瑰我愛你) was covered by Frankie Laine in 1951 and to date the only major popular music hit in the USA by a Chinese composer. Chen Gang himself studied music first under his father and then at the Shanghai Conservatory, where he eventually became professor, a post he holds to this day.

While working within the nationalistic requirements of his time, Chen Gang found inspiration in folk music from the western frontier region of Xinjiang. The work *Sunshine Over Tashkurgan* (阳光照耀着塔什库尔干)depicts the town of Tashkurgan (officially spelled Taxkorgan), near the border with Tajikistan. An ancient stop on the Silk Road, Tashkurgan's name in Tajik means "Stone Tower", and is a possible candidate for the Stone Tower mentioned by the Greek astronomer Ptolemy of Alexandria in his 2nd-century treatise *Geographica* as the midpoint of the journey between China and Europe.

In addition to using Persian-style *maqams* (modes), Chen worked two Tajik melodies into his composition: *Beautiful Taxkorgan* and *Spring in the Pamirs* to help evoke the Central Asian steppes and grasslands. With a majority population of Muslim Chinese Tajiks, who speak a language closely related to Persian, Tashkurgan and its Perso-Arabo-Turkic culture would have been seen as

exotic by the average Han Chinese, much like the Orientalist crazes among 19th century Europeans.

With the 1976 death of Mao Zedong, much of the repression came to an end and the floodgates opened. *Sunshine Over Tashkurgan* was premiered at the Shanghai Culture Square that same year and immediately became a hit.

NICCOLÒ PAGANINI (1782–1840)

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major, Op. 6 (1815)

If there were to be a real-life example of TwoSet Violin's semi-mythical Ling Ling, it would be Niccolò Paganini, the OG superstar virtuoso and the first to make a following out of his stage persona instead of his repertoire. Paganini's father had recognised his son's natural talent early, and made him practise all day long, even withholding meals if he thought the results were not good enough.

With such strict guidance and all that practice, Paganini rapidly exhausted all the virtuoso works in the violin repertoire. Finding them insufficiently virtuosic, he decided to start writing his own, incorporating new techniques and tricks he had come up with. Part of Paganini's success was his own carefully curated image, and the mystery he shrouded himself with. He never let anyone hear him practise, always performed in all black with dishevelled hair and a gaunt appearance. He neither confirmed nor denied claims that he sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his skills, earning him his nickname, the Devil's Violinist.

For all that he was, he lived up to his own hype, with seemingly nothing he could not do. Where others played harmonics, he played double-stopped harmonics; where others wrote octave double-stops, he wrote tenths. He invented a technique of plucking notes with the left hand and became known for the ricochet technique – where the bow would bounce quickly across the strings: all of which can be found in this first concerto that he wrote.

Taking a leaf out of Rossini's book, Paganini's concerto is written in a *bel canto* style and features all the theatricality of an opera. Its **outer movements** are grand, comical and lively, allowing the violin to display both its singing quality and virtuosic fireworks. The cadenza performed in this recording is the famous version by French violinist and composer Émile Sauret (1852-1920).

The **middle movement** is an expressive aria, accompanied by pizzicato strings imitating the sound of the guitar, another instrument that Paganini played. The **finale** brings back all the tricks in Paganini's book, as though a parade of all the different characters.

In this recording, Paganini's original instrumentation is used. This calls for 1 flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 1 bassoon, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 1 trombone, and strings. In the years following the original publication of the work, Paganini intermittently expanded his orchestration, writing additional parts for performance. These included a 2nd flute, contrabassoon, double the number of horns, new trombone 1 and trombone 2 parts, with the pre-existing trombone role becoming a (bass) trombone 3 part. Percussion parts were also added for timpani and banda turca (bass drum, crash cymbals, and suspended cymbal). His one and only surviving manuscript score does not contain these parts.

Notes by **Natalie Ng** (Paganini) **and Edward C. Yong** (Butterfly/Sunrise), with additional notes by **Leon Chia**.

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This album was recorded live at the Victoria Concert Hall, Singapore on 9-11 November 2023 (Butterfly, Sunshine) and the Esplanade Concert Hall, Singapore (Paganini) on 2 September 2023.

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