



NAXOS

Xia
GUAN

Symphony No. 2 'Hope'

Gazing at the Stars

Sorrowful Dawn –
Symphonic Ballade



Nuremberg
Symphony Orchestra

En Shao

Xia Guan (b. 1957)

Symphony No. 2 'Hope' • Gazing at the Stars • Sorrowful Dawn – Symphonic Ballade

The renowned Chinese composer Xia Guan (b.1957) graduated from the China Central Conservatory of Music in 1985, having already won plaudits in composition competitions at home and abroad. He is highly regarded as a composer of both concert music and TV soundtracks, having provided the music for three successful Chinese television series (most notably *I Love My Family*). His concert music, including the *Symphonic Ballade 'Sorrowful Dawn'* (featured on this recording) and the opera *Mulan Psalm*, have been performed to great acclaim in China, New York, Vienna, Tokyo and Moscow – where it was the first Chinese opera ever to be staged at the Mariinsky Theatre. Guan has also composed several symphonies, a *Piano Concerto*, the symphonic fantasy *Farewell My Concubine*, and a Chinese national opera, *Sorrowful Dawn*, premièred in Beijing in 2001.

Guan has won notable awards from the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York and the Wiener Staatsoper. He is currently the Director of the China National Symphony Orchestra and involved in a number of Chinese national committees working with musicians and composers. He has featured among a recent list of 'One Hundred Outstanding Contemporary Artists' produced by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles.

Guan's epic *Symphony No. 2 'Hope'* was composed in 1999 (his *First Symphony* having been written in the mid-1980s). Writing about his new work, Guan reflected upon the coexistence of agony and hope, good and evil, in mankind, and the importance of struggle and persistence to push mankind forward. 'There would be no driving force in life without hope,' he observed, 'and it is hard to imagine what life would be like without it... I have written this *Symphony* for those who are sincerely in pursuit of their dreams.'

The *Symphony* consists of three movements, each with its own title. We begin with *Expectation and Quest*, the most expansive movement of the three. A lone trumpet announces the beginning of the piece, recalling decisive fanfare figurations, but woven into a musical line

that carries with it a sense of uncertainty. The rest of the brass comes to join this opening declaration, before the music subsides into a gentle, sustained string texture and solo lines for various wind players. This slow music continues for some time, interrupted by another attempt on the part of the brass to assert a new direction before subsiding again into a softer sound world. The central section of the piece, an *allegro*, is given energy and impetus through an insistent snare drum rhythm – there is a sense of moving towards new horizons with a busier orchestral texture. Eventually we are returned to the sweeping musical landscape of the opening, with moments of almost chamber-like scoring as the mood becomes more contemplative. Although the movement ends with a sense of building energy and determination, its final chord does not fully resolve what has gone before. This is still only the beginning of the journey.

The decisive narrative of this opening movement is followed by *Warmth*, an *adagio* movement with a long-breathed, lyrical melody first presented in the strings, and then passed to other members of the orchestra as the music progresses, the accompanying forces offering variety and elaboration upon the main theme. Guan has explored the 'warmest' sounds of instrumental combinations here, not only through rich string writing, but by making use of horn solos above a wind and brass accompaniment, and the low and somewhat mournful tone of the cor anglais. A solo violin is used as a foil to these individual wind and brass players, the music building to full orchestra and dropping back into chamber textures, and coming to an end in peaceful repose.

Finally the third movement, *The Light*, is a passionate, energetic *allegro*. We begin once again with fanfares, but this time there is a sense of triumph and arrival – we have come a long way since the questing solo trumpet of the work's opening. There is a great sense of space and landscape throughout the symphony, and here the swelling and falling shape of the movement, in which long melodic phrases seem to sweep over a

swirling, energetic accompaniment, seems almost to conjure the power of the sea. The brass plays a prominent rôle throughout, and we reach the end of the *Symphony* in a blaze of glory, arriving in the home key at last. As Guan himself explains, 'It is because of hope that the world becomes warm and humans become resilient.' This was his vision of hope and the future, on the eve of the new millennium.

Earth Requiem, the first Chinese-language Requiem, was completed in the same year as Guan's *Second Symphony*. In May 2008, Guan, along with the writers Lin Liu and Guanoming Song, travelled to Wenchuan county in central China shortly after the great Sichuan earthquake (which had its epicentre in Wenchuan). Here they witnessed first-hand the tremendous suffering of those living in the affected area – over 80,000 people were killed, and countless buildings destroyed. Confronted by the devastating effects of the earthquake, from the loss of friends and family to homes and businesses, the composer was moved to contemplate the ultimate significance of life and the crucial need to show kindness to others in times of crisis and tragedy. He, Lin Liu and Guanoming Song collaborated on a Requiem in memory of the lives lost, written between 2008 and 2009. The resulting synthesis of a contemporary text with traditional Chinese musical elements and a Western genre was the composer's first attempt to create an internationalised Chinese musical style. This seemed a fitting tribute to those who had died in this tragic event.

Earth Requiem was composed for a solo quartet of soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and baritone, with chorus, orchestra and organ; but it also makes use of the ancient Qiang flute (a vertical bamboo flute consisting of two pipes wound together with silk), as well as elements of Southwestern Chinese folk music in its musical construction. Originally in four movements, we hear on

this recording an orchestral version of the first movement, *Gazing at the Stars: Meditation*. Guan describes the scene he depicts: 'The deep sky of night covers the suffering people, who gaze upwards. They feel the shortness of their lives and the insignificance of humanity in comparison to the brilliant stars and the broad Milky Way. And this inspires, too, their fear of nature...' The music is expansive and solemn, almost sacred in its profundity, the opening string melody representing the people gazing skyward. As the tension builds and the melody is passed to the cor anglais, French horns and solo violin, the timpani eventually join the texture, shaking the stargazers. As the music reaches its climax, Guan adds chimes and vibra-harp, 'like spreading starlight'.

The *Symphonic Ballade* was composed in 2000, and draws on the music of Guan's opera *Sorrowful Dawn*. The opera tells the story of China's War of Liberation following the end of the Second World War. The *Ballade* presents themes of love, bravery, devotion and death as the revolutionaries battle for their homeland. There is a passionate sweep to the work's outer sections, framing a more dynamic and violent battle-scene: timpani and the rest of the percussion section dominate here, driving the music forward whilst the brass and winds stab through the texture. The brass section is much in evidence throughout the *Ballade*, with an almost Wagnerian sense of heroism and grandeur in their recurring fanfare figurations. There is gentler music too, led by the concertino piano and later, a solo violin and oboe. Guan has written of the high tension, the hope and struggle of this piece – and later, a depiction of the peaceful life that can result thanks to the 'strength and hope of a glorious victory in the great age of revolution.'

Adapted from the composer's notes by Katy Hamilton

Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra



Photo: Guy Kleinblatt

Since its foundation in 1946 the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra has been active in all kinds of musical fields: opera, operetta, oratorio, film and, in particular, the orchestral concert. Acting as the concert orchestra of the European metropolitan area of Nuremberg, it brings classical music to an audience of almost 200,000 people every year, performing around one hundred concerts each season. The year 1993 represented a highlight in the orchestra's history, when the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra won one of the coveted GRAMMY® Awards in Los Angeles for its sensational recording of the main title music for the TV series *Beauty and the Beast*, continuing a tradition of the 1950s, when the orchestra recorded the film scores for *Ben Hur* and *Quo Vadis*. The orchestra has performed for many years on the international stage, including Vienna, Prague, Milan, Japan and China, and has collaborated with distinguished musicians. The young British musician Alexander Shelley has served as Chief Conductor since 2009.

En Shao



Photo: IMG Artists

Born in Tianjin in China, En Shao started to play the piano and violin at the ages of four and five respectively and by the age of eighteen was working as a composer, pianist and percussionist with a local orchestra. After graduating from the Beijing Central Conservatory he became second Principal Conductor of the Chinese Broadcasting Symphony Orchestra, a post he held for five years, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Central Philharmonic Orchestra of China and the National Youth Orchestra of China. He is currently Chief Conductor of the RTV Slovenia Symphony Orchestra, Principal Guest Conductor of the China National Symphony Orchestra and a Royal Northern College of Music Honorary Fellow. As winner of the Sixth Hungarian Television International Conductor's Competition in 1989, he conducted several performances with leading Hungarian orchestras. In January 1990 he became Associate Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. Between 1992 and 1995 he was Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor of the Ulster Orchestra, with whom he made his Proms debut. He has also held the positions of Principal Guest Conductor of the Euskadi Orchestra in Spain and Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Macau Orchestra.

The music of renowned Chinese composer Xia Guan has been received with acclaim in Moscow, Vienna, Tokyo and New York. The solemn first movement of *Earth Requiem*, a commemoration of the devastating 2008 Sichuan earthquake, is heard here in an orchestral version that depicts ‘the suffering people who gaze upwards’. The epic *Symphony No. 2 ‘Hope’* is a reflection upon the co-existence of good and evil in mankind, agony and hope, in music of considerable breadth and increasing warmth. Heroic drama animates the vividly scored *Symphonic Ballade*, which draws on the music of Guan’s opera *Sorrowful Dawn*, the story of China’s War of Liberation following the end of World War Two.



XIA GUAN

(b. 1957)

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| Symphony No. 2 ‘Hope’ (1999) | 43:54 |
| 1 Expectation and Quest: Largo – Allegro – Largo | 20:39 |
| 2 Warmth: Adagio | 11:31 |
| 3 The Light: Allegro | 11:44 |
| 4 Earth Requiem: I. Gazing at the Stars: Meditation
(orchestral version) (1999/2008-09) | 9:36 |
| 5 Sorrowful Dawn – Symphonic Ballade (2000) | 18:11 |

WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS

Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra

En Shao

Recorded at the Musiksaal, Kongresshalle, Nuremberg, Germany, on 1st and 2nd August, 2014

Executive producer: Lucius A. Hemmer • Engineer and editor: Jakob Haendel

Publisher: Composer’s editions • Booklet notes: Xia Guan • Cover image by Freebreath (Fotolia.com)