



Romanian soprano Angela Gheorghiu

# Starry, starry nights

► Beijing 2008 will be about far more than athletics and medals. The city is also hosting a series of concerts by many of the world's leading opera singers. **Chen Jie** reports

On June 23, 2001 (World Olympic Day), Pavarotti, Domingo and Carreras, the Three Tenors performed at the Forbidden City, using their heavenly high Cs to express their support for Beijing's bid to host the 2008 Games. Now, as the big event draws near, the city once again prepares to host a true A-list cast of world opera performers.

As one of the highlights of the Meet in Beijing 2008 Olympic Arts Festival, the Divas in Beijing concert series will feature Renee Fleming, Angela Gheorghiu and Sumi Jo. Other concerts starring new-generation tenors Marcello Giordani, Salvatore Licitra, Roman Vargas, Jonas Kaufmann and baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky will also be given at the National Center for the Performing Arts and the Great Hall of the People.

The divas and tenors gala concerts will be a feast for both local opera fans and international visitors to Beijing.

"We've presented lots of shows and exhibitions in the last two months to celebrate the Olympic Games," says Zhang Yu, general manager of China Arts and Entertainment Group, the company organizing the Meet in Beijing 2008 Olympic Arts Festival.

"As the event gets closer, the Arts Festival is reaching its peak and more spectacular performances will run.

"It is a challenge to bring these world's best sopranos and tenors together. Fortunately, they have shown great interest in performing in Beijing during the special time. I believe the divas and tenors concerts will highlight the cultural calendar of the Beijing Olympic Games," Zhang says.

Promoter Rick Garson says the concerts will perfectly complement the sports. "In the daytime, people can cheer for the world's best athletes and in the evening, they can enjoy performances from the best singers in the world."

Garson certainly has the pedigree – he has been staging the biggest TV entertainment events in the US for years.

Superstar Romanian soprano Angela Gheorghiu will kick off the Divas in Beijing series at the Great Hall of the People on August 7, the night before the Games opening ceremony.

Accompanied by the China National Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of young French conductor Emmanuel Villaume, the glamorous soprano will sing arias from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Verdi's *La Forza Del Destino* and popular arts songs.

"As a Romanian artist I have always consid-

ered myself as a world citizen thanks to the gift I received and which I want to share with the whole world," says Gheorghiu, who performed at the 2008 New Year concert with the China Philharmonic Orchestra in Beijing. "I feel honored to return to China on the occasion of the Olympic Games."

Gheorghiu will be followed by the rising South Korean coloratura soprano Sumi Jo, who will sing at the National Center for the Performing Arts on August 11, her first visit to Beijing. Her program includes Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*, Rossini's *Barber of Seville* and a variety of Korean songs.

Praised for the remarkable agility, precision and warmth of her voice, Jo has established herself as one of her generation's most sought-after sopranos.

The South Korean diva is looking forward to performing in Beijing. "I love the idea of combining the talents from the world's different regions and I am proud to be singing at such a historic event in Asia, my home region," says Jo, who will return to Beijing to sing with the China Philharmonic Orchestra at the Beijing Music Festival in October.

American soprano Renee Fleming will perform two gala concerts, sharing the stage with Sumi Jo, the German tenor Jonas Kaufmann and the Russian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky at the Great Hall of the People on August 14 and then signing with Kaufmann at the National Center for the Performing Arts on August 16.

Between the divas' concerts, the three next-generation tenors – Ramon Vargas, Marcello Giordani and Salvatore Licitra – will perform at the Great Hall of the People on August 13.

Mexican lyric tenor Vargas, 48, won first prize in the Enrico Caruso Competition in Milan in 1986. In true operatic tradition, he shot to stardom by replacing a big-name star – in his case he made his Metropolitan Opera debut in Lucia di Lammermoor in 1993, replacing Luciano Pavarotti. The critics and media described his debut as a "phenomenal success".

Hailed as an extraordinarily versatile artist, and in demand by the world's major opera houses and symphony orchestras, the Sicilian-born tenor Marcello Giordani has a true spinto voice with his flawless breath control and a bright, ringing top.

Forty-year-old Swiss-Italian tenor Salvatore Licitra has been dubbed the "New Pavarotti" since his debut in 1998.

This trio of tenors will perform solos, duets and trios, while Licitra has even prepared a special Chinese song for his Beijing concert.



American soprano Renee Fleming



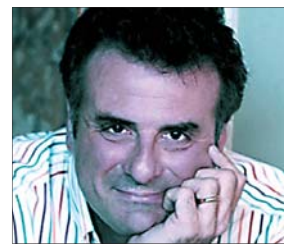
South Korean soprano Sumi Jo



German tenor Jonas Kaufmann



Swiss-Italian tenor Salvatore Licitra



Italian tenor Marcello Giordani



Mexican tenor Ramon Vargas

## Passing the baton in Beijing

By CHEN JIE

Under the celebrated baton of Erich Kunzel, the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra will perform twice in Beijing as part of the 2008 Summer Olympics festivities. The Cincinnati Pops will be the only American orchestra featured during the opening weekend.

The special program will include music that has been written for previous Olympic Games, including the rousing song *Medley for Peace in the World*.

Broadway vocalists Steven Morgan and Michael Scott Lowe will lend their talents to the tour. A children's choir from Beijing will also join the orchestra onstage.

"It is incredibly humbling to be asked to perform as part of the prestigious Olympic Opening Weekend ceremonies. It is a great honor for the city of Cincinnati, and indeed for the United States of America," says Kunzel. "It is like a dream come true to celebrate athletic talent and musical talent across cultures."

In 2005, Kunzel and the

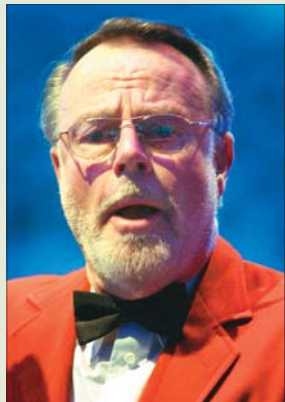
Cincinnati Pops Orchestra made history by becoming the first US Pops orchestra to perform in the Great Hall of the People. The upcoming Beijing shows are part of his fourth tour in China.

The Cincinnati Pops is one of the world's busiest ensembles,

maintaining a year-round performing and recording schedule. Kunzel has recorded 83 Cincinnati Pops releases on the Telarc label, 55 of which have made Billboard's chart of best-selling recordings.

Kunzel joined the orchestra in 1965. More than four decades later, the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra, under its first and only conductor, is still performing for packed houses in Cincinnati's Music Hall.

The first performance will be given at the new National Center for the Performing Arts on August 9. The second performance will be an outdoor concert on the Olympic Green at the Olympic Grounds the next evening, hosted by the Organizing Committee of Beijing Olympic Games. Admission is free.



Erich Kunzel, conductor of the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra.



Gala of Africa, a showcase of the continent's rich heritage, will be staged at the Great Hall of the People tonight.

File photo

## Cameroonian ballet meets Argentine tango

By CHEN NAN

The Olympic flame and the sticky summer weather aren't the only things heating up Beijing this season. Three musical shows coming soon to the Great Hall of the People promise to add yet more sizzle to the summer.

The first is *Gala Africa*, which will be staged tonight. More than 10 African musical troupes will highlight the continent's rich and rhythmic artistic heritage.

Li Yayuan, the choreographer of the China Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble, is the show's designer. An expert on African art, Li's unique choreography draws inspiration from the religious rituals of Cameroon, Senegal and Tanzania, as well as the traditional dancing and singing styles of Mauritius, Rwanda and Kenya. The lavish set draws upon African

sculptural and painting styles.

Modern dances – *Black is Beautiful* and *On the Other Side of the Cloud* – will be performed by the National Dance Company of Cameroon. Ballet National du Senegal will perform traditional music and dance from West Africa. Other performers include a group called The Drum Café, which was started in 1996 and has since established itself as the authority on traditional African percussion music.

Another heat wave about to hit the city is *Night of Latin America*, which will come to the Great Hall of the People on August 1 and 2.

Six dance companies from Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, Peru and Cuba will perform the passionate moves of popular Latin American dances, including tango and samba.

Argentine tango, which evokes power and grace, has been thrilling dancers and audiences for more than 100 years. The Argentine Tango Passion Dance Company will showcase the finest past and present traditions of tango culture. Dancers will also update traditional steps with the addition of modern electronic music.

Another highlight will be the performance of traditional Andean music, a colorful fusion of South American flutes, Andean string instruments and diverse percussion styles. Last but not least, Cuban music has its principal roots in Spain and West Africa, but over time has absorbed musical influences from many different countries. Cuban music has likewise been immensely influential in other countries, contributing not only to the development of jazz and salsa, but also to Argentine tango, Ghanaian high-life, West African Afrobeat, and Spanish Nuevo flamenco.

At the end of the summer, audiences can look forward to *Night of Asia*, presented at Beizhan Theater on Sept 6.

The show will feature more than 100 pop stars from across Asia – including Sa Dingding from China, Rain from South Korea, Shinji Tanimura from Japan, and Dydia from Thailand. The concert venue will be decorated with artwork from Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand. Multimedia performances will also enhance this stunning three-dimensional portrait of modern Asia.

