

# Report: Hong Kong Protests

By Ken Smith

Seeing media coverage from Hong Kong, where people first took to the streets on June 9 against an extradition bill proposed by the local government, you might think that protests are taking place 23 hours a day, breaking only for commercials. The day-to-day reality is less dramatic, with nearly all disruptions occurring on weekends, and any violence breaking out only late in the evening. This has had a direct impact on the city's classical music community, whose major events overlap almost precisely with prime protest time. Added to a volatile news cycle—the government formally withdrew the bill on September 4, only a day or so after Chinese troops were gathering across the border—the situation has thwarted schedules, both long- and short-term. Protesters' complaints have extended to include further instances of China's encroachment of Hong Kong's regional autonomy (the formerly British territory became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China in 1997) and showed no signs of abating as of early September.

Although the Hong Kong Philharmonic had not opened its season as of press time, Philharmonic Chief Executive Benedikt Fohr says the protests' "impact on ticket sales was within expectations." Other local orchestras, though, have felt the effects more directly. The Hong Kong Sinfonietta was forced to cancel an August 31 performance when its venue at Hong Kong City Hall closed its doors at 1 p.m. after a nearby protest had been announced. "We'd love to reschedule this program, since we were already 85 percent sold and

still getting box-office calls that morning," says Sinfonietta CEO Margaret Yang.

The only thing more troubling than cancellations may be having the concert go on, as the City Chamber Orchestra of Hong Kong found on June 26, when its City Hall performance with pianist Philippe Entremont coincided with a rally outside. "I was in the upstairs restaurant nervously watching the crowd grow," recalls Leanne Nicholls, CCO's founding director. Her biggest concern was getting the 85-year-old Entremont back to his



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The young musicians of NYO Jazz—the jazz ensemble of Carnegie Hall's National Youth Orchestra of the USA—concluded their Asia tour in Hong Kong on August 11, one day before protestors forced the airport to shut down. Above: NYO Jazz musicians at Repulse Bay in Hong Kong.

hotel unharmed. "Fortunately, he wasn't afraid," she adds. "He said, 'We have protests in Paris every week.'"

Classical music has yet to match the offstage drama at a Cantonese opera performance in early July at the Sheung Wan Civic Centre—a short distance from China's seat of power in Hong Kong—after police started firing tear gas at protestors on the streets outside. "We were monitoring the situation closely," says Elaine Yeung, director of culture at Hong

Kong's Leisure and Cultural Services Department, which controls the city's sports facilities as well as its cultural venues. "We even tried to get the performers to play faster. But once the gas started coming inside, we had to end the performance." Older audience members were handed hospital masks as they left the theater.

As a threat to Hong Kong's cultural profile, the protests have yet to equal SARS, the 2003 flu epidemic that by definition discouraged people from enclosed spaces. Rather, Yeung compares the situation—and the LCSD's current system of monitoring media and maintaining close contact with venues and their renters—to "responding to a Level 8 typhoon every weekend."

While day-to-day concerns are still much less than one might expect from newscasts, a greater fear is that such periodic tensions might become the "new normal." Local venues have already seen several recent cancellations, mostly ensembles from mainland China. Hong Kong's own ensembles, though, have reported little drop in ticket sales. Nor had they received many cancellations, though Nicholls remarks that one guest artist from the U.S. requested changes in hotel and transportation to avoid high-risk areas. The young musicians of NYO Jazz—the jazz ensemble of Carnegie Hall's National Youth Orchestra of the USA—concluded their Asia tour in Hong Kong on August 11, one day before protestors forced the airport to shut down.

The main casualty in programming so far has been the Hong Kong Philharmonic's September 19 and 20 program celebrating China's National Day, this year celebrating the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic. That program originally was to have showcased old and new revolutionary songs by the resident chorus of the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing. The Philharmonic announced the NCPA Chorus's cancellation on August 14. **S**

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