

Violinist Fan Xing vividly recalls her first performance with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra: a concert early

last month at the Cultural Centre Concert Hall featuring Mahler's Symphony No 9. She was thrilled to share the stage with her "idol", the Philharmonic's artistic director and chief conductor Edo de Waart.

"I felt a huge sense of accomplishment playing with a professional orchestra because no student orchestra has the time and resources to play such a long, complex piece," says the Sichuan Music Conservatory graduate.

Fan, 22, is among five young mainland musicians who are spending a year honing their skills with the Hong Kong Philharmonic through fellowships from the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation. The others are violinists Wang Yue and Long Xi and cellist Li Cheng from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and violinist Xu Heng from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. All string players, the five are being mentored by concertmaster John Harding and other string principals.

Launched in the 2006/07 season, the training programme also gives the Philharmonic a good way to recruit talent from outside Hong Kong, which has been notoriously difficult in recent years partly because its salaries are relatively unattractive compared with those in orchestras in the west.

Timothy Calnin, chief executive of the Hong Kong Philharmonic, says young Chinese string players have shown tremendous technical skills at auditions for vacant positions. What they lack, he says, is real orchestral training.

"They could play Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto amazingly and brilliantly, but never would make it through the round of playing orchestral repertoire during the audition," says Calnin.

"We thought it's a missed opportunity for these fantastically talented musicians and extremely well-trained musicians coming out of these major academies, but the orchestral training was missing."

It is unusual for orchestras to take on the responsibility of training the best young graduates so they can bridge this gap, he says.

"I'm not saying it's a weakness in their training; it's common all over the world."

Since arriving four months ago, the five young musicians have been given many opportunities to practise what they have learned. They are now back on home turf performing with the Hong Kong Philharmonic on its 2009 China

Fan Xing (below left), Li Cheng and Long Xi see their stint with the Hong Kong Philharmonic as an invaluable experience. Photo: Sam Tsang



Young interns embody the Philharmonic's investment in the mainland's musical future, writes **Vivian Chen**

All these strings

Tour. They just played a concert in Guangzhou on Friday and will be appearing at the Beijing National Centre for the Performing Arts this week before rounding off the trip at the Shanghai Grand Theatre Lyric Theatre on January 18.

Beijing-born Li, 22, is looking forward to performing in the capital. "I will invite my friends and professors to the concert," the cellist

says. "I hope they can see a different me and I believe I [have] changed during the four months in Hong Kong, not only because I learned to perform with an orchestra, but I also made many new friends like the principal violinist, they are my mentors and friends."

These young string players belong to a new generation of musicians whose lives and careers have developed free of historical and political clichés. None, for instance, was forced to learn an instrument or made to play only music approved by the state – something their teachers might have endured during the Cultural Revolution. But musical training on the mainland often remains routine and unimaginative.

Li, for instance, used to practise three hours a day; to pull off complicated passages he would go over one single line some 50 times.

"I remember that six years after I started playing the cello, my mum asked if I wanted to continue playing music. She knew I wanted to give up, and that was what I thought I'd tell her. But the minute she popped the

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Wang Yue, violinist

question, I told her, a bit reluctantly, that I'd love to continue," says Li. He doesn't regret his decision.

Wang, who started violin lessons at age three and has performed with youth orchestras in Beijing since she was 13, says playing with the Hong Kong Philharmonic is different from her previous experiences.

"Musicians here are very serious about their music. They are very efficient and organised. That makes me want to be part of the group, to contribute as much as I can."

Li says he enjoys playing with the orchestra. "It's far more exciting playing with another hundred musicians ... It's so powerful."

Calnin says lack of experience across a wide range of repertoire is a common weakness among these interns. "The style of string play dominating in China is a late 19th-century Russian style – highly polished technique-wise but rather limited in stylistic scope," he says.

"[Concertmaster] John Harding doesn't only teach them the orchestral repertoires, he forms a chamber playing quartets and quintets with them and he chooses repertoire which they have no direct experiences with, such as the 18th-century chamber music repertoire which introduces them to a very different approach of string play. "It's a chance to stretch their ability and introduce them to a more refined way of playing."

Will taking on the role of training mainland talents open more doors for the Philharmonic to perform up north? After all, the audience for classical music across the border is growing, with more orchestras being formed and concert halls built. Calnin says that isn't their intention: "I see it as us investing in China's music future."