

## Opera divos, acrobats take stage alongside Olympics

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BEIJING (Reuters Life!) - Opera divos, flying acrobats, and singing mascots. The Olympics is not all about sport with a lively program of cultural events running alongside the Beijing Games.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee, might be relieved to find his vision of a festival combining sport and art has been revived.

De Coubertin wanted the Games to include competitions in architecture, sculpture, painting, music and literature and until 1948 art competitions were held alongside the Games.

The Beijing Olympic Cultural Festival, running from June 23 to September 16 over the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, gives the 2.5 million visitors to Beijing, as well as the city's 17 million residents, entertainment that is not sport.

At the Great Hall of the People in central Tiananmen Square, opera singers Marcello Giordani, Salvatore Licitra and Ramon Vargas -- dubbed "The Three New Tenors" -- performed to an enthusiastic audience who demanded several encores.

"Having a cultural event alongside the sport brings a totally different set of eyeballs to Beijing and the Olympics and it's great to have this harmony of sport and music," said Rick Garson, chairman of ZZYX Entertainment who produced the tenors' concert.

"Chinese people love opera, dating back to the tradition of Chinese opera, and they are very open and interested in the whole Western opera scene."

Musicians, singers and dancers from China and overseas are putting on nearly 300 performances, ranging from the cultural to the cute, in Olympic host cities during the festival.

The Olympic Fuwa Park is staging a play called "Fuwa", which also means "The Friendlies" and is the collective name of the five mascots of the Beijing Games which have each taken a color of the Olympic rings and represent the five traditional elements.

China's Minister of Culture Cai Wu said the festival was a chance to exhibit modern Chinese culture and art to overseas visitors as part of Beijing's campaign of openness.

"Our friends will get a chance to better understand, enjoy and embrace the splendid achievements and fascinating charms of China, its culture and arts, while we can experience theirs," he said in a statement.

"These activities will definitely improve interactions between the western and eastern cultures and spread the Olympic spirit in China."

(Reporting by Belinda Goldsmith, Editing by Miral Fahmy)

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