

Program Notes

Selections from ChinaSong

(b. 1963)

Arranged by YI-WEN JIANG

Some years ago I developed the idea of arranging a few sets of Chinese folk songs along with popular music by various Chinese composers. I grew up with many of these pieces, and played some as solo works for violin and piano during the difficult days of the Cultural Revolution.

These works are short and diverse, some based upon traditional folk songs, and others composed recently. Although their musical style is not structured or sophisticated, the pieces seem to be accessible and enjoyable for a general audience. The themes speak to the individual listener because they are expressive, direct and easily absorbed and understood. I asked myself: "Why not arrange them for string quartet, which is the form I love the most? That way I can play beautiful Chinese music again and also bring it to a wider audience with my group, the Shanghai Quartet."

I sifted through many songs and began arranging them for string quartet or small ensemble. Some of the folk songs are usually performed by a singer, violin, or piano; or by Chinese traditional instruments such as the Pipa, Erhu or Suona (a double-reed wind instrument, almost like an oboe), and Bamboo flute. But, I didn't want simply to imitate traditional Chinese instruments when we play those pieces. I tried to make the harmony and the structure closer to traditional western styles. The idea is that Chinese music can be played on western instruments and thus can be enjoyed internationally.

The use of folk materials of China's minority nationalities was extremely popular among Chinese composers during 1960-1980. The **Yao Dance** was originally written by Mao Yuan and Tie-Shan Liu, based on a folk song of Yao, a mountain village in GuiZhou, in the south-west region of China. The work has three large sections, and within each section there are two themes. In the opening, the viola and cello, playing a soft pizzicato, hint at the arrival of nightfall. Some Yao dancers dressed in floating, colorful garments, gather in the moonlight. The 2nd violin plays a simple but expressive melody as a beautiful young girl starts to dance. The rest of the dancers join her soon after. The theme suddenly takes on an ardent and rough character, suggesting a group of young men that cannot refrain from dashing into the group of dancing young girls. The strong contrast in the music depicts the striking personalities of the Yao people. The middle section is in 3/4 time, and its melody moves back and forth between a singing quality and a rhythmic dancing figure, as if two young lovers are expressing their adoration for each other. In the recapitulation the viola starts the first theme before being joined by the other strings. The 2nd theme is more vivid and passionate, with each voice alternating its entrance until the whole quartet comes together in a loud and fast coda, suggesting the climax of the evening celebration.

Shepherd's Song is a popular folk song stemming from the Chinese autonomous region of Inner Mongolia. It was often played on a traditional two stringed Mongolian instrument called a "Horse-Head Qin," because there is a hand carved horse's head on the top of the Qin instead of a scroll. There are several versions of this piece, including one by the famous Chinese composer Han-Kun Sha, who arranged "Shepherd's Song" for violin solo with piano accompaniment. As the shepherd puts his cattle out to graze, the surroundings inspire him to express his love of nature and his feelings of nostalgia for his homeland. He sings, "White clouds are floating in the blue sky. Under the clouds there is a flock of snow white sheep." The lyrical melody brims with deep emotion. The free rhythm and Dvorakian harmony in the lower strings' arpeggio figures create a quiet, misty atmosphere, suggesting patches of soft clouds floating over the meadows. The music reaches a passionate climax before subsiding again into an atmosphere of tranquility and peace. We in the Shanghai Quartet were very honored that Mr. Han-Kun Sha was in the audience for our performance of this piece in Shanghai in November, 2001. He was deeply moved and happy to hear his piece in a brand new form.

Harvest Celebration is an original piece by violinist and composer Jing-Ping Zhang. He composed this piece for violin with piano accompaniment while he was a professor at the Nanjing Arts Institute. The work is one of my favorites, and I have always kept it in my solo repertoire as a wonderful encore piece. For centuries the majority of the Chinese population has lived off the land, so the harvest celebration, coming after a year of hard plowing and weeding, has always been one of the great events in people's lives. Based on four short phrases, the violin tries to imitate the sound of the Suona — a double reed wind instrument with a very loud and high pitch, similar to an oboe — while drums, cymbals and gongs (suggested by the lower strings) are beaten boisterously. The rapid switches of meter and rhythm suggest the competitive improvisations typical of traditional Chinese celebrations. The music evokes images of the peasants singing and dancing with boundless joy.

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ChinaSong is available on Delos Records.

Song of the Ch'in
(b. 1953)

Zhou Long

Song of the Ch'in for string quartet was composed in 1982, published in the Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music in 1984 and won first prize in the Chinese National Composition Competition in 1985. The ch'in (pronounced gin), a traditional Chinese seven-stringed, plucked zither, has been associated with sages and scholars. The sophisticated technique of ch'in playing, exemplified in the earliest ch'in manuscript from the Tang dynasty (618-906), involves various ways of plucking the strings and the use of ornaments to produce changes in sonority, intensity, dynamics, range and timbre. This composition for string quartet, the first prize-winner in the 1985 Fourth Chinese National Composition Competition, intends to capture these special musical gestures frequently found in ch'in music.

According to the artistic conception of the piece, it is based on a poem titled "Old Fisherman" by Liu Tsung-yuan (773-819) who was a government official and outstanding thinker and writer during the middle of the Tang dynasty. He was removed from his post for advocating reform, but he never became despondent. He traveled to many mountains and valley in southwestern China and created many excellent works. In the "Old Fisherman", he wrote: "The old fisherman moors at night by western cliffs; At dawn, draws water from the clear Hsiang, lights a fire with southern bamboo. Mists melt in the morning sun, and the man is gone; Only the song reverberates in the green of the hills and waters. Look back, the horizon seems to fall into the stream; And clouds float aimlessly over the cliffs."

Red Lantern. Quintet for Pipa and String Quartet

Zhao Lin

I was very honored to be invited by pipa virtuoso Wu Man and the Shanghai Quartet to compose a new work for pipa and string quartet. This piece is a tribute to my father, the composer Zhao Jiping, and to the great tradition of music from China.

Red Lantern is derived from my father's original music, scored for the great Zhang Yimou film, "Raise the Red Lantern." Inspired by Chinese traditional Beijing Opera, this work explores its unique musical style and language with the many colors of our traditional music. The quintet is a suite of stories that take place in a traditional Chinese private courtyard (四合院) through the centuries. It tells an emotional story of Chinese family relationships in older times and the impact of the family's isolation from society.

There are 5 movements:

1. Prelude - Moonlight
2. Wandering
3. Love
4. Death
5. Epilogue

Zhao Lin
October 2015 in Beijing

String Quartet in F minor No. 11, Op. 95 ("Serioso")

Ludwig Van Beethoven

Beethoven's String Quartet in f minor, Op. 95 is classified as a work of his "middle" period. Unlike the towering, integrated set of three Rasumovsky quartets of the same middle period, Op. 95 stands alone, singular, even isolated. It is the last of the middle quartets, sitting on the brink, as it were, of Beethoven's "late" period where the final quartets dwell in a rarefied world of their own. Still, like all broad classifications, this is an oversimplification. Particularly in the second movement and third movements, the quartet contains many passages with the sublime qualities of the late quartets featuring transitions between the profound, difficult and elliptical on one hand and the simple, direct and exquisitely lyrical on the other. From another perspective, between the extraordinary expansion of the medium in the middle and late quartets that straddle it, Op. 95 represents a singular contraction of the form into a dense, concentrated work where everything is stripped to a drastic, but essential minimum. In addition to its predominant minor key and its frequently urgent if not violent mood, it is this relentless reduction of means that must have led Beethoven to give the quartet his own multi-faceted title, Quartet Serioso.

The compression of form and expression is most apparent in the first movement. The sonata includes three rapidly exposed and highly contrasted themes in an exposition without repeat, followed by a brief development and a varied but truncated recapitulation. The conclusion leverages our expectations of Beethoven's previous music by preparing for what appears to be a dramatic launch into a new section of great length only to rapidly fade into a fairly shocking close. The awesome potential energy remains untapped projecting a heavy weight on the movements to follow. Lasting typically between four and five minutes, this is the shortest first movement of all the Beethoven's quartets, only about one third the length of its counterpart in the first Rasumovsky quartet.

The second movement is the tender heart of the quartet, the closest thing to repose that the Serioso has to offer. Beginning as a lyrical slow movement, it promises compassionate relief from the huge kinetic (and potential) energy of the first movement. Here is the true window into Beethoven's late quartets with their liquid ecstasies amidst imponderable complexities. For along with the lyricism, Beethoven introduces a fugue with a wrinkled, chromatic subject that grows into a sustained expression of great intensity with the subject turning upside down on itself, overlapping in stretto and compressing into an emphatic climax built from its first two-note interval alone. The direct and heartfelt returns again in a final glory of song,

but is unable to conclude: suddenly perturbed by a new, unresolved chord, the movement halts, then bounds headlong into the third movement scherzo restoring all the unbridled tension of the first movement.

The final two movements sustain a nearly unbroken arc of intensity from beginning to end. The scherzo offers brief respite in its contrasting trio and the finale begins with a slow, mournful introduction. But the bulk of the scherzo, itself marked *serioso*, and the majority of the finale, marked *agitato*, join with the first movement to make this the most unrelentingly intense of all the Beethoven quartets. Compact, dense, uncompromising and relentless, these are the essential qualities that join under the banner of *Serioso*. Yet Beethoven was keenly aware of his manipulative powers and knew that just as he transfixed his listener in the rapture of despair, he could shatter the mood by turning on a dime. And so he concludes his great *Serioso* quartet: at the very end of this tense, nearly continuous quartet, the final bars instantaneously shift into a bright romp, fresh and giddy as spring, oblivious to everything but unrelenting joy. The huge, unresolved weight of the entire quartet evaporates in the last thirty seconds in what might be the greatest musical punch line of all time.

— program notes by Kai Christiansen, earsense.org

Ghost Opera (chamber version)

Tan Dun

Ghost Opera is a five-movement work for string quartet and pipa. The composer describes this work as a reflection on human spirituality, which is too often buried in the bombardment of urban culture and the rapid advances of technology. It is a cross-temporal, cross-cultural, and cross-media dialogue that touches on the past, present, future, and the eternal; employs elements from Chinese, Tibetan, English, and American cultures; and combines performance traditions of the European classical concert, Chinese shadow puppet theater, visual art installations, folk music, dramatic theater, and shamanistic ritual.

In composing **Ghost Opera**, Tan was inspired by childhood memories of the shamanistic "ghost operas" of Chinese peasant culture. In this tradition, which is over 4,000 years old, humans and spirits of the future, the past, and nature communicate with each other. Tan's **Ghost Opera** embraces this tradition, calling on the spirits of Bach (in the form of a quotation from the Prelude in C-sharp minor from Book II of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*), Shakespeare (a brief excerpt from *The Tempest*), ancient folk traditions, and earth/nature (represented by the Chinese folk song "Little Cabbage"). The Bach excerpt acts, the composer says, as "a seed from which grows a new counterpoint of different ages, different sound worlds, and different cultures." In the final movement, the gradual transformation of the counterpoint brings the spirits of Bach and Shakespeare, the civilized world, and the rational mind, "this insubstantial pageant," into the eternal earth.