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FEATURED

Review: Pipa performance reflects agility, ability

By Peter Jacobi | H-T Reviewer | April 2, 2017

An instrument that has a history of more than 2,000 years played in solo, played in combination with a classical string quartet and played as one among more than a dozen other members of an ensemble specializing in the avant-garde.

The instrument, originated in China, is called pipa, part of the lute family that looks daunting to pluck and strum on. A full-house audience gathered Friday evening in the Buskirk-Chumley Theater to watch a virtuoso give sound to that daunting object of attention. Her name is Wu Man, a remarkable China-born and trained champion of the pipa, which can produce sweet and soft melodies along with forceful, even abrasive, sounds. Wu has lived the past quarter-century in the United States, spreading the word about her beloved pipa and commissioning new music for it.

Here in Bloomington — thanks to support from the Lotus Education and Arts Foundation, the Indiana University Arts and Humanities Council and the IU Jacobs School of Music — Wu attached her artistry to the Vera Quartet, this school year's graduate quartet in residence, and to David Dzubay's influential New Music Ensemble. That made for a stellar lineup of musicians.

The opening portion of Friday's concert, however, belonged to Man alone. She performed three solo works that supremely tested her abilities. But from the first measures of "Dance of the Yi People," based on tunes from a minority society that inhabits territory in southwestern China, one sensed that nothing technical could faze her. And as best as a listener new to the pipa such as I could discern, nothing did, none of the strumming or plucking demands, no matter how complicated they seemed.

Wu continued with "Kui," an equally challenging composition based on a Kazakh tune, and completed the solo portion of the concert with "Shi Mian Mai Fu" ("Ambush Laid on Ten Sides"), a traditional Chinese piece expressing a story of martial content out of China's distant past, that of a battle fought in 202 B.C. between soldiers of the Han kingdoms and of a warlord. The music turned bellicose and then triumphant to reflect a victory for what became the Han Dynasty. Man's agility and ability to suggest actions and moods proved outstanding. She played with a fury that brought amazement.

Our visiting artist next sat amid the four members of the Vera Quartet — violinists Pedro Rodriguez Rodriguez and Patricia Quintero Garcia, violist Ines Picado Molares and cellist Justin Goldsmith — to perform a Concerto for String Quartet and Pipa by the prominent contemporary composer Tan Dun, who won both an Oscar and a Grammy for his "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" film score.

The concerto gives the pipa a comfortable home amid the four other string occupants. According to the composer, the music is meant to describe the presence of humans and spirits of the future, as believed by Chinese peasants 4,000 years ago. Well, if Dun says so, so be it, I guess. But this listener merely recognized that Dun's score blended the pipa deftly into the web of sound, thereby making the quartet a quintet. Wu became part of the ensemble in the fine performance of an appealing composition.

The concert ended with "Tian Ling" ("Nature and Spirit") by Pulitzer Prize-winning Chinese-American composer Zhou Long, commissioned and premiered by the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble in 1992. David Dzubay conducted Friday's performance. He's expert at that and made the collaboration of pipa and 14 other instruments something not unusual at all, just interesting. Man made herself fit in as part of the team; the team appeared to do likewise, and together, they took another striking journey, with Maestro Dzubay as willing and very able agent of the effort.