

Wu Man's Pipa Spotligthed with Taipei Chinese Orchestra

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Wu Man, *pipa* player extraordinaire and founding member of the Silk Road Ensemble, was named [Instrumentalist of the Year](#) by Musical America in 2013. Five years on, her Carnegie Hall mainstage appearance with the internationally acclaimed Taipei Chinese Orchestra was both a chance to hear why, and, with the orchestra presenting four representative works in their U.S. premieres, the perfect introduction to the repertoire.

Forgive the digression, but for those unfamiliar with the sound and makeup of a “Chinese Orchestra,” here’s a crash course. First, there are a number of key similarities with their Western cousins, chiefly the use of cellos and double basses to create the lower string sounds, but also the inclusion of harp and a common

deployment in the percussion of timpani, cymbals, and tam tam. Then there are the similar but different instruments, like the bamboo flutes (the *zhongdi* and the *dadi*), and an array of Chinese percussion, some of it familiar perhaps from “exotic” 20th-century scores like *Turandot*.

Lastly, there are the uniquely Chinese instruments. An array of plucked lute-like instruments that include the *pipa*, the *liuqin*, the *zhongruan*, and the *daruan* (defined by their different sizes and different numbers of strings) sit alongside hammered and plucked dulcimers and zithers like the *yangqin* and the *guzheng*, which add to the characteristically glittering mid-range sound of the orchestra. At the apex of the sound sit the *erhus*, a phalanx of gentle two-string fiddles (held on the lap and bowed low down) that essentially take the place of violins and violas.

In the wind section, next to the flutes, are the *shengs* (soprano, alto, and bass), which look a little like tiny hand organs and when blown create a harmonica-like sound.

But it’s the lack of brass instruments that really sets the Chinese orchestra apart. That role is taken by the *suona* (again, coming in soprano, alto, baritone, and bass versions), a celebratory, double-reeded horn originally designed for playing outdoors. Their distinctively loud and high-pitched sound—not entirely unlike bagpipes—can, and frequently does, cut across the more subtle textures created by the instruments in the orchestra’s musical middle ground. True to their somewhat cocky nature, it was a procession of blaring *suonas* that paraded down the aisle to launch the concert.

Much of the contemporary repertoire for Chinese orchestra has a colorful, almost Hollywood feel to it, strong on melody, and with a sweeping bravura that comes from music that’s frequently rooted in pictorial imagery. Dance is a powerful component as well, as in Chen Shu-Si’s *The Parade of Gods*, which begins with a wailing call to arms on the *suona* but soon erupts into a riot of musical hues and textures, delivered here with infectious energy.

Wu Man joined for two works, Qu Wenjun’s *Soul of the Loess Plateau* (1994), essentially a four-movement suite for *pipa* and orchestra, and Cheng Kuang-Chih’s *Yao-Ji*, a double concerto for *erhu* and *pipa*. The Loess Plateau is the composer’s homeland, a region sitting above a loop of the Yellow River in central China. With two movements entitled “Parting is Difficult” and

“Homesickness,” the work has a pensive moodiness about it typified by the *pipa*’s initial entry, spinning an aching melody over a bed of shimmering tremolos in the orchestra.

Wu is a fascinating musician to watch, the perfect blend of relaxed communion and artistic tension. A consummate virtuoso, her right hand is scarcely ever still as it plucks busily at the strings towards the base of the instrument, while her agile fingers fly over the fret board, pausing at times to create that pronounced vibrato that is a typical ingredient of the *pipa* sound. At other times, she possesses a rare quality that reaches out to an audience and draws it into her otherwise private imaginative sound world.

In the livelier sections – notably the third movement “Joy of the Loess” – she let the *pipa* slip onto a slight angle, the impression being closer to that of playing a modern guitar. The work may be rooted in easily-grasped folk tunes, but there was little simplistic in her dazzling flights of fantasy. There was plenty of vigor in the double concerto as well, the outer movements of which depict aspects of the mythical story of Yao-Ji, an ancient Chinese deity who brings beauty and intelligence to women who consume the particular herb into which she was legendarily transformed after her death.

Here, Wu was joined by the passionate and focused Wang Ming-Yu on *erhu*, the two enjoying an obvious rapport as they passed a succession of themes back and forth between them. A soft-toned instrument, the *erhu* blends well with the *pipa* in duet, but is more inclined to become submerged in the orchestral texture since it lacks its fellow’s percussive edge and cut-through. The gorgeous double cadenza, however, that leads from the semi-improvisatory slow movement into the concerto’s final *presto* was quite magical.

The second half of the program comprised a single work: Sun Guanjun’s arrangement for Chinese orchestra of Bao Yuankai’s *Sketches of Taiwan*, an eight-movement concerto for orchestra, originally written for Taiwan’s traditional Western outfit in 1999. It’s an exquisitely crafted, highly colorful suite in which no single movement ever outstays its welcome. Again, cinematic in scope, this is music that is grounded in popular melody and never loses sight of its aim to entertain.

With movements depicting a sunrise on Jade Mountain (the highest peak in North-East Asia), historical battles, children’s’ games and aboriginal Taiwanese festivals, there was plenty for the orchestra to get its teeth into and it didn’t disappoint. But perhaps it was the low-key movements that impressed the most including a tender cello solo expressing the pain of exile in the “Homesick for Hengchun” movement and wistful exchanges between *sheng* and flute in “Atayal Love Song,” a delicate movement depicting the graceful courtship rituals of the Taiwanese Atayal tribe.

The high-octane first encore – Bao Yuankai’s *Gao Shan Ching* – drew a cry of delight from the Chinese contingent in the audience and had several of them clapping along. Even better was a unique reading of Bernstein’s *Candide* Overture, and one that had a darn sight more zip to it than some I’ve heard this centenary year.