

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

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## CONCERT REVIEW: East Meets East, City Meets Country

By Josef Woodward

Acknowledged master of the ancient Chinese lute known as the pipa, Wu Man went west nearly three decades ago, and exposed the "west" the unique and subtle majesty of her ancient instrument. Through her work with the Kronos Quartet, the Yo-Yo Ma-directed Silk Road Ensemble, and multiple other contexts of east-west juxtapositions and commissioned pieces (often by noted Chinese emigres to the States), she has successfully spread the gospel of the pipa's musical eloquence far beyond China.

All the while, though, her invested connection with eastern roots have never been left behind, as she showed a Campbell Hall audience last week. But the plot thickens.

Last week's wondrous world music event by the pipa-playing leader and her so-called Huayin Shadow Puppet Band (actually a revised name for the generations-deep Zhang family of musicians and puppeteers, from the Huayin county area of the Shaanxi province) actually digs into Chinese village folkloric tradition. That world was somewhat alien to the roots of Ms. Wu, who was raised in the urban setting of her native Hangzhou and studied at the urbane Central Music Conservatory in Beijing.

The pipa player invited the Zhang family band to perform at Carnegie Hall during a special China Festival in 2005 and has at last achieved her goal of arranging the band's first U.S. tour. Santa Barbara was lucky to be part of the touring itinerary, courtesy of UCSB Arts & Lectures' sponsorship.

As Ms. Wu pointed out late in the concert, her several solo pipa pieces on the program come from a different place — literally, culturally and musically — from the rugged energies of the Zhang band, illustrating the point that Chinese music is a vast and variegated world, a point not often understood in the west. Two solo pipa pieces opened the program — the yearning, lyrical "Flute and Drum Music at Sunset" and the more aggressive "martial" attack and tonally restless nature of her famous piece "Ambush from Ten Sides." She swiftly won us over with the subtle grace and fluid mastery of her 2,000-year-old instrument of choice.

From the first blast of its musical message and lead vocalist Zhang Ximin's unabashed extroversion, the band (with Ms. Wu inducted into the ranks) unleashed a big, hearty, celebratory and rough-around-the-edges sound, a musical force both immediately infectious and exotic. The ensemble pieces "Round Sun and Crescent Moon in the Heavens" and "A Bright Pearl in the Sea" were followed by two examples of the venerable art of shadow puppetry, practiced in the band's region and other Eastern cultures (i.e. Indonesia and India.)

From the shadow puppet aspect of the evening, "Three Heroes Do Battle with Lü Bu" depicted a battle between the horse-bound warriors, in shadow against an ornately decorated screen, while a second, gentler and romantic puppet play unfolded against the tender sound of Ms. Wu's improvised solo pipa

invention. She later softly dazzled the house with delicately detailed solo pieces "Dance of Yi" and "Three and Six," the latter retracing her from her hometown of Hangzhou.

A brusquely joyful noise from the widely-grinning band, ending the evening with the raucous burst of "The General's Orders Stir the Mountains and Rivers" (war-related music rarely sounded more ecstatic), was capped off by another short but intense encore. We've known of the reliable intrigue and musical depth and explorational qualities of Wu Man's musical journey. After last week's concert, many of us are inclined to add Chinese village music to the short list of world music niches worth further exploration and dissemination over in the west.

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