

# MY INSTRUMENT

## Wu Man and her pipa

**Charlie Cawood** speaks to the virtuoso *pipa* player about her instrument and how she helped to bring Chinese music to the West

**G**enerally regarded as one of the world's leading *pipa* virtuosos, Wu Man has done more than perhaps any other instrumentalist in bringing the music of China to a Western audience. Raised by music-loving parents, Wu Man was encouraged to take music lessons from the age of nine. Within two years, she had already mastered the smaller, mandolin-like *liuqin*. "It has a very limited repertoire, because it's smaller and easier for little kids to play," she explains. "My teacher said he couldn't teach me anymore, because I had already learned everything, so he suggested switching to the pipa. I didn't know anything about the instrument and hated it at first. It was so boring. So difficult!"

The difficulties in question are the myriad techniques that the pipa repertoire necessitates: wide string-bends and ornaments, precise *tan tiao* alternate finger picking runs, and the fast five-finger tremolo. The pipa can evoke everything from tranquil natural scenes to violent battlefields. Dating back to the Tang Dynasty (eighth century), the pipa came to China through Central Asia – a heritage that Wu Man herself celebrates in cellist Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble.

Originally an instrument played by courtesans, the pipa evolved over centuries into its current form: a pear-shaped body played vertically, up to 26 frets raised high off the soundboard, and four strings (tuned A-D-E-A). The instrument that Wu Man exclusively performs on today is from Beijing (as opposed to Shanghai, where different materials are used). Strung with a combination of nylon and steel strings, it is occasionally tuned to an alternate tuning of G-D-E-A, depending on the piece. Wu Man's rosewood pipa was built especially for her by the master luthier Man Ruixin; she describes him as being among the best pipa makers in China.

After a year of serious practice and playing in her school's student ensemble, Wu Man developed an affinity for her new instrument. At 13, she enrolled at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. Soon, a fresh curiosity for the potential of the pipa took hold. "Through those ten to 15 years of training, I started thinking, 'what else?' Besides the pipa, I was playing everything: traditional repertoire, modern pieces, working with composition department students. I wanted to do something else, to see if the pipa could play differently."

At the outset of the 1980s, the Chinese government's increased openness towards the West allowed Wu Man to experience live symphonies for the first time, further bolstering her curiosity towards musical exchange. "The violinist Isaac Stern came to my school to give a masterclass, talking about musicianship, communication with the audience – all very new concepts to me."

Touring in the US in the mid-80s (she later relocated there permanently) allowed Wu Man to bring the pipa to a whole new audience. "In the 60s, Japanese music came to the West, and Indian music with Ravi Shankar. There was a big portion of African music, but what about Chinese music? None. Zero, at that time. Suddenly, they see I play the pipa, and it was as

if they found a new world." This led to collaborations with Kronos Quartet, as well as contemporary composers such as Terry Riley, Philip Glass and Lou Harrison.

When asked what draws Western composers to the pipa, Wu Man highlights its unique capability and personality. "It's very different to other plucked instruments. Pipa can be very elegant on the left hand, but also very dramatic and percussive, like flamenco guitar, on the right hand. It draws composers in and they discover a different colour in their vocabulary."

Likewise, in her solo performances, Wu Man challenges herself to introduce her audience to the variety of worlds her instrument can occupy. "It's how you present this instrument in front of an audience which is 99% unfamiliar with it. It's what kind of music you give them... from traditional, to folk, to improvisation, to composed music. The aim is to create a kind of journey. With this presentation, people always come up to me saying, 'I didn't know this instrument could speak so many different styles, different languages'." ♦

**+ DATE** Wu Man will perform at the Aga Khan Jubilee Concert at the Royal Albert Hall on June 20, for details see [www.royalalberthall.com](http://www.royalalberthall.com)

