

# MUSIC REVIEW: Silk Screen meets Blue Pipa in Pittsburgh

by Shuo Zhang



Ever since the "Music on the Edge" project presented a concert featuring collaboration between Pitt composition professor Eric Moe and pipa soloist Wu Man in 2005, Pittsburgh has been blessed by the music of pipa—an ancient Chinese lute. Three years later at the opening concert of Silk Screen Film Festival 2009, another pipa virtuoso, Min Xiao-Fen, brought her Blue Pipa to the curious audiences in the packed concert hall of Pittsburgh CAPA High School.

An internationally acclaimed pipa soloist and composer, Xiao-Fen moved to the United States in 1992 from China, where she is regarded as an established, accomplished musician. She has worked with numerous prominent composers, including Carl Stone, Chen Yi, Zhou Long, Philip Glass, and Tan Dun, among others, performing pipa music that ranges from traditional Chinese to Western classical to jazz. A featured jazz artist at Lincoln Center for the Arts, New York City, Xiao-Fen founded the Blue Pipa Trio in 2003. Current members include guitarist Steve Salerno and bassist Dean Johnson.

Their Pittsburgh performance was the most inspiring one yet. Listening to pipa music, the audience was reminded of one of the principles of the Chinese philosophy Tai-Chi: the motion of "yin" and "yang", or rest and motion.

The culmination of the "lyrical" style of

the solo pipa was reached in the first half of the concert, when the sound from battlefields of ancient China swept the concert hall with the "martial" style piece "Shi Mian Mai Fu" (Ambush from All Sides). This piece was labeled by New York Times music critic Allan Kozinn as "energetic, rolled strumming similar to the technique guitarists call rasgueado; rapid solo figuration; and clear-textured counterpoint." Xiao-Fen's virtuoso mastery of complicated right-hand skills demonstrated the power of a relatively small instrument in a large concert hall. Just as Franz Liszt showed the power of piano in relation to his symphony orchestras back in the 19th century, Min Xiao-Fen displayed the power of the solo pipa in 2008.

Commissioned by New York-based Chinese composer Huang Ruo, the piece Written on the Wind revealed an experimental approach combining vocals and pipa, both played by Min, with the two unfolding in a linear fashion rather than in a vertical structuring. Interestingly, the lyrics for the vocal part in this piece were not written in any existing language; rather, they were nonsense syllables, supposed to be "personal words, feelings, stories...that are meant to belong to the performer". Min's presentation was full of contrast and affection, and she cast a special flavor both musically and phonetically on the

piece, highlighting her background in Mandarin Chinese rhetoric.

The second half featured the entire Blue Pipa Trio performing their most classic pieces: "Chinese Take-out," "Red Haired boy Dancing with Golden Snake," and "Fortune Cookie." The concert reached its apex when the trio played the last piece, "Fascinating New Year", another work featuring Min's vocals. In fact, there was more than vocals; there was singing and dancing and mumbling. Her voice, the body motions, and the instruments all came together in the most exciting blend, and the audience felt it in their fervor.

Overall, the collaboration between Chinese instrumentalists and jazz musicians has proven fruitful in the U.S. in recent years. Typically in this collaboration, a Chinese instrument leads with a Chinese flavored melody, then other Western instruments follow and together, the instruments explore a musical path's potential. I have heard American audiences describe this fusion as "inspiring" and "most refreshing", and the

Blue Pipa is no exception. Throughout each piece, the potential of all three instruments is fully explored and the exposition of their individual parts by Salerno and Johnson are full of inspiration.

Overall, the Chinese quality and the jazz spirit infused the music with a fresh liveliness, although one could argue that there be more variety for Blue Pipa Trio in terms of timbre. Indeed, the tone quality of three plucked stringed instruments ran the risk of sounding homogenous. However, Xiao-Fen's vocal performance and Johnson's double bass part using the bow undoubtedly added diverse layers of the music's tone color.

In an after-concert discussion, Min told the audience some of her thoughts about instrumentation: "I need a harmonic instrument that can provide the chords for my music. But piano is definitely not the one that I'm looking for. It has to go well with the flavor and timbre of pipa."

Mr. Shuo Zhang is a Ph.D student of Music at University of Pittsburgh.

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授課教師:苗歌,抒情女高音,以優異成績本科聲樂專業畢業,在就讀中央音樂學院研究生班和任職中央樂團期間,深得中央音樂學院聲樂歌劇系主任郭淑珍教授,中央樂團男高音歌唱家著名聲樂教育家吳其輝老師的悉心指導。演唱過大量中外優秀曲目,多次在全國大型文藝彙演中擔任獨唱和領唱,並在文化部舉辦的聲樂比賽中榮獲全國美聲組一等獎第一名,全國推新人大賽美聲唱法全國十佳稱號。苗歌執著追求聲樂藝術,她的音色優美純淨,有很好的穿透力及藝術表現力,願意將多年積累的聲樂表演技巧和聲樂教學經驗與大家分享。

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