

Pipa master

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Internationally renowned virtuoso on the pipa (Chinese lute) Wu Man has performed with Yo-Yo Ma, the New York Philharmonic and Boston Symphony.

When Wu Man used to practice her pipa as a child in China, she would open the windows, and the lute-like instrument could be heard for “miles away.”

“It only has four strings,” she said in a phone interview from her home in San Diego. “But sometimes, it sounds like a thousand strings.”

But it was the pipa's quieter, more spiritual voice that inspired her to pick it up at 9.

“It can be very loud and dramatic and percussive and exciting,” she said. “But also the opposite: very elegant and slow and meditative. That's the part that really attracted me.”

The world's leading pipa player will reveal the many voices of her pear-shaped instrument this weekend when she gives the American premiere of Zhao Jiping's Concerto for Pipa and Orchestra with the Santa Rosa Symphony.

The East-meets-West concerts, led by Guest Conductor Enrique Arturo Diemecke at Sonoma State University's Green Music Center, will open with Mozart's Symphony No. 15 and close with Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, “Pastorale.”

Named Musical America's 2013 Instrumentalist of the Year, Wu Man also has become an ambassador of Chinese music, a muse for contemporary composers and a frequent collaborator with ensembles from the Kronos Quartet to Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble.

During recent trips to her native China, she also has spearheaded multimedia projects aimed at preserving ancient pipa melodies and traditions.

“I wanted to find my musical roots,” she said. “I talked to folk musicians, and I realized everything traditional is endangered, because the next generation is no longer interested.”

In early 2012, Wu Man released an album, “Borderlands,” which traces the history of the pipa in China as part of a Smithsonian Folkways' ethnographic series.

That led her to the outskirts of the country, where she also made a folk music DVD called “Discovering a Musical Heartland: Wu Man's Return to China.”

“I made this film, hoping the Chinese would realize that this is the identity of the Chinese culture, so please save it,” she said. “You can't always have McDonald's. Sometimes you want to have a dumpling.”

Brought to China almost 2,000 years ago from Persia, the pipa has evolved over the years into a truly Chinese instrument.

“The bending notes are very important,” she said. “That's because of our speaking language. When we speak Mandarin, there are five tones that go up and down, up and down.”

The pipa is played upright in the lap. The back, curved outward like a large spoon, is made of strong rosewood. The front is soft pine, which transmits the vibrations outward. The frets are bamboo.

“The right hand plucks the strings,” she said. “And with the left hand, there's vibrato, bending notes and sliding. You have to work all 10 fingers.”

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the pipa developed into more of a solo instrument, with more frets added. But in a large concert hall, the plucked instrument can not always be heard.

“With a big orchestra, I do have to use amplification, but very little,” she said. “The high-tech sound systems now are much better.”

Wu Man premiered Zhao Jiping's Pipa Concerto in October with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. It is the first pipa concerto commissioned by a Western orchestra.

The composer is well known for his film scores, such as 1991's “Raise the Red Lantern” and 1993's “Farewell My Concubine,” and his knowledge of traditional music.

“I worked with him 10 years ago in Tanglewood, with the Silk Road Project,” Wu Man said. “He understands very well the Western strings, and the pipa as well. So it feels very natural, the combination of the two.”

Zhao Jiping wrote the pipa concerto especially for Wu Man in the style of the teahouse tunes from her hometown of Hangzhou in southeast China.

“We have the ocean, the mountains, bamboo and a lake,” she said. “And we produce green tea, which is very well known in China.”

The concerto has three movements but is played continuously, with no breaks.

Wu Man will be playing a brand new pipa. The neck of her old pipa was broken off by a flight attendant, who dropped it while trying to stow it last fall.

The painful incident had a silver lining. US Airways paid for a new pipa to be made by the same master in Beijing who made her old pipa.

“It's got a bigger voice than my older one,” she said. “My older one had a much warmer voice, but I'm working on it. It's like a person. You have to train it.”

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