

Wu Man presents new Pipa Concerto and Sonoma glows



Wu Man is known as the world's top player of the four-stringed Chinese instrument called the pipa. (© Stephen Kahn)

By Robert P. Commanday

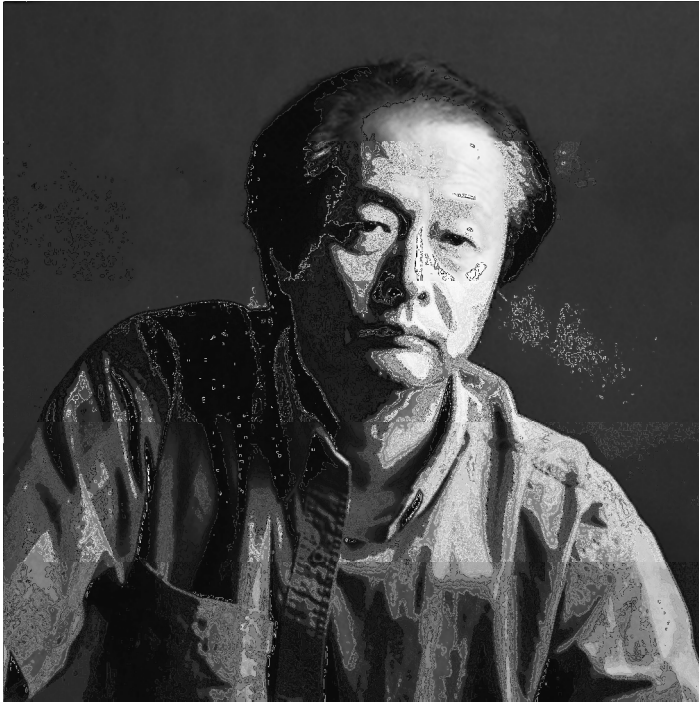
ROHNERT PARK, CA – The culture gods are smiling on California's Sonoma County. The two-year-old [Green Music Center](#) is performing beautifully, up to its initial promise, and the resident [Santa Rosa Symphony](#) is thriving in the acoustical ambiance of its [Joan and Sanford I. Weill Hall](#). The orchestra is also enjoying an enviable good health institutionally. Its Jan. 12 program was pleasing and well done: early Mozart, the Symphony No. 15 in G, K. 124; the U.S. premiere of [Zhao Jiping's](#) Concerto No. 2 for Pipa, featuring [Wu Man](#), pre-eminent soloist on the instrument; and Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, the "Pastoral."



Acoustically fine Weill Hall has pine floors, blond woods throughout.

Such a concert is embraced and enhanced by the gracious hall with its blond wood interior, pine floors, delicate railings and finely trimmed windows, its surround balconies and clerestories, its comfortable, generously spaced chairs. Under a guest conductor, [Enrique Diemecke](#), the Mozart flowered. The phrasing was natural, the lyric flow and clarity of texture encouraged by the surrounding instrument, the hall itself. Diemecke paced it well. This is unremarkable young Mozart, but it's still Mozart all by itself, with every note in the right place.

Zhao's Concerto for Pipa is a warm, rhapsodic piece in one 22-minute movement. The harmonic style recalls 20th century Russian composers and there are flavors of Chinese musical modes. The bright, tangy voice of the pipa speaks in sharp contrast to the orchestra's long-phrased melodic lines and sustained sonorities. This four-stringed Chinese lute of ancient design has a much more pervasive tone than the western Renaissance instrument. It produces a strong presence, even against an orchestra. Wu Man's dexterity with thumb and first three fingers rapidly articulating single notes spun out broad ranging melodies, a kind of dramatic lyricism. At times, it was a type of singing, which of course is what she was doing on the instrument.



Chinese composer Zhao Jiping wrote his Pipa Concerto for Wu Man.

The concerto opened with a bass-cello theme, not developed but to recur later. Her short solos gave way to an unaccompanied exposition on the pipa. Successive sections of pipa and orchestra were, in character, scherzando, rhapsodic, slow and grave, then cantando. Wu Man was brilliant drawing out the line, energizing the quick rhythmic elements, and then producing an eloquent cadenza, the work then returning to the theme in the low strings.

She was performing on a new instrument that replaced a treasured one valued at \$50,000, [broken last June](#) when an airline's flight attendant dropped it. It had been made in Beijing 17 years ago. This new one was built by the same master. ([Click here](#) to watch Wu Man talk about the pipa and demonstrate the concerto at the time of its 2013 world premiere in Sydney.)



Enrique Diemecke, guest conductor.

Diemecke supported her very closely, guiding the orchestra in a smooth and responsive performance of Zhao's concerto. He is currently music director of the Bogota and Buenos Aires Philharmonics as well as the [Long Beach](#) and [Flint \(Michigan\)](#) symphonies. A highly self-confident conductor with a demonstrative, programmed style, it's not clear that he's responding to and working with the actual playing of the orchestra.

However, the Beethoven Sixth Symphony that followed was sound, sympathetic and drew a good, convincing performance from the Santa Rosa Symphony. The horns and timpani were rather loud. Putting the five string basses in their place against that back wall where they would sound like seven and moving horns and timpani from the back to the right side would help moderate the balance.



The Santa Rosa Symphony is resident orchestra at Weill Hall.

As for the Santa Rosa Symphony, whose music director is [Bruno Ferrandis](#), it is a leader among regional orchestras, playing each year seven programs in sets of three performances plus the usual pops and family concerts. The community support it has earned and enjoyed down the years is exemplary.

Whether Sonoma's Donald and Maureen Green Music Center will draw comparable support is the challenge. The audience is principally drawn from a population watershed of about 200,000, with 168,000 of these in Santa Rosa and the rest from surrounding communities. Located on the north end of the campus of [Sonoma State University](#), which administers it, the Green Center is 55 miles north of San Francisco and the North Bay. Napa County adjoins Sonoma County, but there is not much crossover between the neighboring populations for reasons of geography and traffic patterns. Not helpful is the absence of any sign for the Green Center from the main highway, 101, and half a mile up to and including the turnoff to the Center. Incredible.



Weill Hall has a back wall that can open for a lawn audience.

The Center's handsome facilities must be kept active, specifically of course, the 1,400 seat Weill Concert Hall, the back of which can be opened in the summer to an additional lawn audience. For this season, approximately 96 dates are filled, including Sonoma State-generated performances, plus evening rehearsals. That's fair for a new hall. The bookings, which include top-notch artists and ensembles, are now being planned by [Zarin Mehta](#), former president of the New York Philharmonic. Mehta was hired as co-executive director of the Green Center late last year by the Center's angel and prime mover, Sanford I. Weill, banker, financier and philanthropist, former chief executive and chairman of Citigroup.



The concert hall is named for benefactors Joan and Sanford I. Weill.

Weill had bought a 360-acre estate in Sonoma County in 2010. He and his wife later gave \$12 million to finance the completion of the previously stalled Green Center. Since then, he has taken a leadership role, calling most of the shots. He is paying 80 percent of Mehta's \$300,000 salary. Weill selected the Center's board members, none of whom, it turns out, were known by Santa Rosa Symphony's former president, a resident of long standing. This suggests that there may be something of a disconnect. Members of the orchestra board, after all, were critical in the initial stage of the Center's conception and planning. In response to the Sonoma State University's request, the board produced \$10 million. As agreed, that covers 25 years of the Weill Hall rent for the Symphony, the major resident institution after the university.

Viewed from the outside at least, everything for the orchestra, the Center and the Sonoma audience looks good, Green and coming up roses.

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