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Wang Stretches Chinese Music Beyond Old Borders

Melody of China includes Irish, jazz improv

By Brian Kluepfel |
Special to AsianWeek



When he was traveling in Europe in 1991, Hong Wang heard an Irish group called the Red Army playing Chinese traditional music — and doing it very well. Since arriving in America two years later, Wang has dedicated his energy to the dissemination of his country's music, blending it with other cultural flavors to keep it vibrant and alive.

Wang brings his Melody of China ensemble to San Jose on Friday and to San Francisco on Sunday for another musical meeting of the minds. The concert will feature traditional Chinese instruments like the pipa (lute), ruan (guitar) and hammered dulcimer. Joining the Chinese musicians onstage will be local jazzman Anthony Brown and an Indian tabla player, Ty Burhoe, from New York. That, says Wang, is what America means to him.

“It would be impossible to learn about all this different music in China,” said Wang. “In San Francisco, it’s easy to find.” He stresses that a unique concert like the one that will be performed at the Herbst Theater would also be unheard of in his native land. “Even in China you can’t see this kind of performance,” he said.

Begun as the Duet of China upon his arrival in 1993, Wang’s circle of musical friends has expanded and in 1997 re-formed as a nonprofit entity called Melody of China. Through school outreach programs and concerts, Wang hopes to educate Americans about Chinese music while encouraging beautiful hybrids of the form by grafting on instruments and themes from

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the Western tradition.

"I like Irish music," said the multi-instrumentalist. "It has all the same instruments — guitar, mandolin, fiddle." He also noted that the pentatonic scales and repeat-and-variation structure unite the Celts and the Chinese. Thus, Melody of China audiences have been pleasantly surprised to hear Irish and country tunes pop up in the middle of a performance — and next year's show will even feature line dancing.

The group has withstood some serious challenges in the past few months. In September, a number of valuable instruments were stolen from their van after a San Francisco performance. In the past two weeks, despite the efforts of Sen. Barbara Boxer, a number of musicians scheduled to perform were unable to obtain work visas to enter the country. Further, the post-Sept. 11 economy has resulted in a bit of a slump in ticket sales.

These setbacks have done nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of Wang, whose collaborators have included jazzmen Max Roach and David Murray, as well as the Oakland Ballet. The man who learned traditional instrumentation as a child in Nanjing now gives lessons on the saxophone and oboe, an outgrowth of his eight-year teaching career at Nanjing Normal University.

The centerpiece of the concert this week is New York-based composer Yuanlin Chen's new suite of music. (Chen composed the music for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.) The world premiere will include six drum sets on stage: a Japanese taiko drum set, the aforementioned Indian tabla, an American jazz drum set and three Chinese drum sets. Conductor Ming Guan Zhu, dean of the traditional instrument department of the music conservatory at Wang's alma mater, Nanjing Normal University, will help the musicians navigate the cross cultural currents. All in a day's work for Hong Wang, a man who finds common ground everywhere he goes.

Catch the Master Musicians Concert on Saturday, Jan. 25 at Le Petit Trianon in San Jose, in a special intimate concert of Chinese music featuring Melody of China's musicians and guest master musicians Wei Wu, sheng; Tao Chen, bamboo flute; Li Liu, guqin and Minguan Zhu, ruan. Tickets are \$20. For information call 415-681-8599. Or see them at Thundering Across the Sky, a special performance featuring Asian percussion and wind instruments on Sunday, Jan. 26 at 3 p.m. at the Herbst Theatre in San Francisco. Tickets are \$28 to \$50. For information, please call 415-392-4400.

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