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Xiao Xiannian:

New Sounds for Chinese Strings

BY PETE RUSHEFSKY

It was a beautiful spring day in Chinatown when I stopped by the Mencius Society to talk with Xiao Xiannian, a virtuoso of the Chinese hammered dulcimer known as the *yangqin*. Housed in a building on Grand Street near its intersection with Delancey, the Mencius Society—also known as the AiCenter, formerly the Wossing Center—provides instruction in Chinese and Western musical instruments, as well as a number of other arts education programs for youth and adults. It is also the home base of the EastRiver Ensemble, one of New York’s leading Chinese music groups.

The Center for Traditional Music and Dance has recently partnered with the Mencius Society, as well as the renowned Music From China ensemble, to provide group lessons in Chinese music to youth aged eight to seventeen and to create a New York Chinese Youth Orchestra under Xiao’s musical direction. Mencius’s director, Julie Tay, translated between English and Mandarin and provided invaluable cultural and historical background during my discussion with Xiao.

A Folk Instrument with Foreign Roots

Like other hammered dulcimers from around the world, the *yangqin* consists of a trapezoidal resonating chamber that is capped by a thin wooden soundboard. A system of strings and bridges rests upon the soundboard and transmits vibrations

to the resonating chamber when the player strikes the strings with two long, thin sticks called *cui* (pronounced “chway”).

Considering the long history of Chinese music, the *yangqin* is actually a fairly new instrument to China. The instrument’s name provides a clue that it was borrowed from abroad—*yang* means “foreign” and *qin* is the ancient Chinese plucked zither. Although it is commonly thought to have come from Persia through Silk Road trade, recent research has established a more probable introduction of the dulcimer to China by European sea merchants in the eighteenth century. Indeed, the traditional *yangqin*’s shape, diatonic tuning, and long hammers held between thumb and index finger suggest a provenance from the hammered dulcimers of Europe, rather than the Persian *santir*. As hammered dulcimer historian Paul Gifford notes, performers of the *yangqin* make up what is certainly the world’s most vibrant hammered dulcimer scene. There are hundreds of thousands of players throughout China.

Growing Up during the Cultural Revolution

Xiao Xiannian was born in 1962 in Fuxin, a medium-sized city located in the Liaoning province near the Mongolian border. Xiao’s mother, Gao Mingfan, is a physician who grew up in Anshan, a larger city also in Liaoning. The provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang make up China’s

Dongbei (Northeast), a region known for cold winters, steel-based industrial factories, and warm hospitality—perhaps akin to the rust belt of the American Midwest. While Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese dominate the Dongbei, Manchurian and Mongolian are also spoken, as well as a number of other minority languages. Xiao’s father, Xiao Zhenduo, is an electrical engineer originally from the neighboring province of Hebei, which surrounds the capital city of Beijing and is known as the birthplace of Beijing opera.

When Xiao was three, the family became caught up in the politics of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, which started in 1966. Xiao’s parents were considered by the Communist Party to be of an intellectual class, and the senior Xiao ran afoul of party leaders for advocating on behalf of factory machinists, with whom he worked as an engineer. The family was forced to relocate to a rural village near Anshan. Xiao’s parents were subjected to public humiliation (as were many other intellectuals) and made to parade in the streets wearing tall conical hats that advertised their alleged transgressions.

While not a professional musician, Xiao Zhenduo taught himself to play a number of different Western and Chinese instruments—*yangqin*, *erhu* (two-string fiddle), *dizi* (transverse flute), *qin qin* (four-string banjo-like lute), accordion, saxophone, and the bass drum employed in marching bands.



Xiao teaching I.S. 89 students in Lower Manhattan to play traditional Chinese music. Photo: Eileen Condon/CTMD

In addition to his father's love for music, some wider social and political factors help explain Xiao's entry into the musical profession. Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, was a devoted fan of Beijing opera, and so the Communist Party heavily promoted newly written "model operas" (*yang ban xi*) that featured narratives laden with party rhetoric. The Communists organized musical associations throughout China to perform the model operas. Known as *xuan quan dui*, these groups were organized at all levels of society, serving collective farms, factories, schools, and the military. Participation as a performer or audience member was expected by all—in fact, many chose to perform simply to get time off from their

normal occupations to attend practices. Xiao's first formal experience with music was, at age six, attending a music society practice with his father.

Music was also a way for young Chinese from economically depressed regions to find careers in larger cities. The examination system begun during Imperial times and continued under the Communists identified talented youth for admittance to prestigious conservatories. Given the family's exile to a rural area, Xiao's parents encouraged their four children's musical development as a way to escape the hardships of the village.

Ultimately, Xiao was the only one of the siblings to enter the musical profession. As a young child, Xiao experimented with

a variety of instruments—erhu, dizi, and accordion—in school. He also participated in choral singing of *minge*, or "songs of the people," that often incorporated traditional folk melodies with newly composed lyrics paying tribute to the Communist Party. At age ten, Xiao began to study yangqin seriously by borrowing his sister's instrument when she brought it home from school.

Learning the Yangqin

Xiao's father was his first teacher, but the young musician also learned from records. At this time the first solos for yangqin were published and recorded. In its folk form, the instrument had traditionally been limited to ensemble performance. Under the



Xiao Xiannian performs on a large *yangqin*. Photo: Pete Rushefsky/CTMD

Communist conservatory system, however, the yangqin was enlarged and reconstructed to allow for a greater tonal range and Western-tempered chromatic scales. (The older instrument was tuned diatonically.) In addition, the conservatories supported a class of highly specialized faculty members who standardized repertoire, created rigorous pedagogical methods, and developed a new virtuosic performance style that began to take shape in the 1950s and 1960s.

Xiao's playing soon outgrew his father's ability to teach him. When he was fifteen, his father took him to Anshan to learn from Yi Daxin, a performer in the city's professional orchestra. To comply with Communist restrictions against private commerce, Xiao would provide his teacher with produce from the village such as eggs, or even cigarettes, rather than paying money

for the lessons. Julie Tay notes that this practice also harks back to the traditional master/apprentice model. Often these relationships would last a lifetime, and like a family member, the apprentice would be considered a mourner when the master died.

Under Yi Daxin's tutelage, Xiao switched from the small, traditional yangqin to the new chromatic instrument. He took lessons once every week or two, learning the Chinese numerical solfège system of musical notation. (The Chinese system uses numbers to indicate pitch and lines below the numbers to indicate duration.) After three years with Yi Daxin, Xiao became a student of Zhang Xuesheng, a professor at the prestigious Shenyang Conservatory. Professor Zhang was part of the first generation of conservatory faculty specializing in the newly reconstructed yangqin. Because

Xiao had not yet formally enrolled at the conservatory, he continued to live at home and traveled by bus and train more than three hours each way to get to Shenyang for his monthly lessons.

In between lessons, Xiao played with the village's music societies and informally at home with his family and other musicians. He was recruited to join a military ensemble, but declined after his parents pleaded with him not to leave home for the army. Through these sessions, Xiao learned a range of repertoire, from model and traditional operas to local wedding and funeral music. As a musician on a conservatory track, however, Xiao did not play with the older musicians in traditional wedding and funeral ensembles, even though some of this work (particularly weddings) could be lucrative. Although much of the repertoire

taught in conservatories and considered “classical” is rooted in folk melodies, the conservatory culture works to separate professional musicians from the world of folk ensembles. The classical performers play modern instruments that have been redesigned for classical music, with its highly embellished and orchestrated repertoire, and they are taught to read music, rather than play by ear. As a result, classical musicians are considered to be of a higher social standing.

At age twenty-one, Xiao entered the prestigious Shenyang Conservatory, continuing his studies with Professor Zhang, as well as a younger professor named Liu Hanli. In addition to yangqin, Xiao studied percussion, piano, chorus, composition, and music history. He was required to study the music of fifty-six official minority groups and

be able to identify each of them during examinations. Xiao was the only student in his year to be admitted for yangqin. The limited enrollment virtually ensures a Shenyang graduate a lifelong career as a professional musician in China, but also imposes a significant burden to succeed. Adding to the pressure, it is not uncommon to hear of faculty members jockeying with one another to be recognized as the main tutor of a notable student.

Xiao passed his final solo recital at age twenty-five, and upon graduating from Shenyang, joined the Liaoning Ballet Company. The company performs Western-style ballet, but over time has expanded its program to include Western popular musics and even rock and roll. Xiao played percussion and drum kit with the company for a few years, before joining the Liaon-

ing Dance and Song Ensemble, which is also under the auspices of the provincial culture ministry. The Liaoning Dance and Song Ensemble is a large orchestra with more than fifty musicians, which performs Chinese orchestral works using Chinese instruments. It also presents highly choreographed folkloric dance productions. When Xiao joined the ensemble, it already had a couple of senior yangqin musicians, so Xiao instead directed and performed as part of the orchestra’s percussion section.

In New York

After ten years of touring domestically and internationally with the Liaoning Dance and Song Ensemble and going through a divorce, Xiao was looking for a change of scene. He decided to leave Shenyang for New York in 2000. He quickly established



Xiao and Julie Tay outside the AiCenter on Grand Street in Manhattan’s Chinatown. Photo: Pete Rushefsky/CTMD

himself in New York's Chinese music community and joined the EastRiver Ensemble, which had been founded by Julie Tay and erhu player Cao Buo'an. His son Xiao Meng has since come to join him in New York, and together they live in Rockaway.

As the musical director of the EastRiver Ensemble and the Mencius Society's teaching programs, Xiao is developing a new role for the yangqin within the context of the traditional ensemble. In Chinese classical music, soloist roles are normally limited to players of the erhu, dizi, and *pipa* (lute). In the EastRiver Ensemble, Xiao's yangqin takes center stage, trading solo parts with the other instruments and often being featured unaccompanied in fantasia-styled medleys.

EastRiver focuses on the folk music of northeast China, especially the Hebei and Dongbei regions, but the ensemble has also experimented with American musics, including old-time music and even klezmer. This eagerness to enter into musical exchanges across genres led Xiao (along with Julie Tay) to join the faculty of the Augusta Heritage Center's 2007 Spring Dulcimer Week, held in Elkins, West Virginia. The Center for Traditional Music and Dance nominated Xiao and yangqin student Ada Li for a New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) Folk Arts Apprenticeship award, which the pair received, supporting an intensive learning exchange between teacher and student in 2009.

Xiao has released two recordings of solo yangqin music and an album with Tay through their duo Bamboo Breeze. Xiao hopes in the near future to produce a CD of original yangqin music, as well as a second recording as a soloist with a large orchestra.

For more information on the yangqin and other types of hammered dulcimers, see Paul Gifford's *The Hammered Dulcimer: A History* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001). I thank Julie Tay for her assistance with this article and for her translations during the interview with Xiao, which took place on May 11, 2007. ▼

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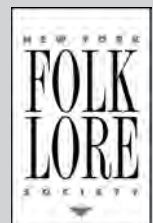
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