

Opinions

The future of classical music is Chinese

By Inna Faliks March 22 at 5:23 PM

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It was December 2018, and I was on my third concert tour of China. I took my final bows, a gargantuan bouquet of pink lilies and an ornate document in hand. I had just finished a piano recital at one of China's music conservatories and had, without realizing, apparently accepted a visiting professorship position there. I would have to drink to that later, during the banquet. (By the end of my tour, I mastered the art of discreetly pouring out clear shots of Baijiu underneath the table and filling my shot glass with water.)

I then sat next to the piano like Santa while throngs of students and parents took pictures next to me for what could have been hours. On tour for weeks, I braved long flights, drank fermented milk from a shofar-like horn in Inner Mongolia, hiked through Buddha caves, read my name on red banners the size of buildings and endured the most annoying electronic renditions of Christmas songs available to humankind.

I immigrated from Odessa, of the former Soviet Union, to the United States in the late 1980s as a Jewish refugee. Touring China felt like meeting with a familiar past — the banners, the declamatory long speeches, the inefficient heating systems, the squat toilets with no toilet paper. (Flowing pants with heels are not advisable concert attire.)

But as I looked at the line of young pianists, I thought that I stood face-to-face not with the past, but with the future of classical music.

I found the passion, drive and work ethic of Chinese music students staggering. And the dedication from the audiences was evident, as every seat — regardless of the city — was always taken. Reverence for Beethoven, Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Schumann seems to have no connection to any economic or political agenda. Living Chinese composers such as Gao Ping and Liu Sola combine the most current trends in new music with Chinese tradition.

Seventy-five percent of my students at UCLA are Chinese or Chinese American. Pianists from China, after graduating from the best music schools in Europe and the United States, return home to pass on classical music traditions in their own distinct ways. This musical exchange is exponentially growing. Concert halls may remain empty in our nation's cities, especially when traditional classical recitals are offered by a non-household name, but in China, playing a Beethoven/Chopin program is not boring or unhip. Chinese audiences are hungry for more.

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As a child, I was trained with an intensity familiar to Chinese piano students. By the time we left my home country, I was a performing pianist and composer. Throughout months of immigration, lacking access to a piano, I practiced on tabletops in Jewish refugee centers in Vienna and Rome. Upon arrival to the States, my musical nerdiness set me apart in junior high. Being into Mozart was decidedly uncool. It is, however, very cool to be a classical musician in China.

Within the echelons of the classical piano world, one will often hear a xenophobic stereotype — from competition judges, teachers, audience members — that Chinese students' interpretations of Western music are anchored by technical brilliance but lack relevance and understanding. This is a stereotype of race and nationality as reprehensible as gender stereotypes prevalent in the music profession. Technical freedom is a must for any performer who hopes to have a career in music. Music students in China, while living in a restricted society, are eager to embrace music from the West and make it their own. Have we in the West ever shown a comparable passion for anything that is not immediately lateral to our culture?

Among China's endless paradoxes, bizarre manifestations of Western influence go hand in hand with an ancient cultural heritage and iron-clad politics — with blinding bling of economic rise. This brew is unlike any other — and young classical musicians coming up in this extraordinary landscape are bringing an entirely new energy to the art.

What other country can boast a classical music celebrity such as Lang Lang? Where else can a classical musician advertise vodka and bathroom tiles? At first glance, the ads are joltingly tacky, but I also find them thrilling and hopeful. Classical music is not dying in China. Its audiences are young and eager; its performance halls are new, architecturally stunning and full. Indeed, China's current political landscape is as complicated as the country I left in the late '80s, but it now holds a priceless gift for posterity: the key to classical music's future.

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