

The sound of heaven

Unifying two musical traditions to awaken the senses

BY IVAN PENTCHOUKOV
EPOCH TIMES STAFF

The disparate sounds of traditional Chinese instrumentation and Western classical music have their distinct origins, characteristics, and timing, making them nearly impossible to unite.

Since 2007, however, the groundbreaking orchestras for New York-based Shen Yun Performing Arts have successfully accomplished precisely this.

By harmoniously combining a classical Western orchestra with classical Chinese instruments, the Shen Yun orchestras have unveiled a new musical realm, appreciated by countless audience members worldwide who have experienced their live performances. There are three complete orchestras that tour together with the three Shen Yun dance companies.

The music traditions of East and West each evoke their own range of emotions and sensations. While the Western orchestra can build up energy and portray grandeur, Eastern instruments carry an intricate voice that is characteristic of China's unique musical tradition.

"Bringing out the quintessence of each of these two great musical traditions, while at the same time presenting a unified theme, is one of the distinct features of Shen Yun's compositions," Junyi Tan, a composer for Shen Yun Performing Arts, said in an interview posted on the Shen Yun website.

East and West, old and new
The Chinese musical tradition dates

back thousands of years, while Western classical music is relatively new in comparison.

China's rich philosophical and spiritual traditions are naturally at the heart of its music. This applies not only to the quality of the sound itself and the composition; it is deeply ingrained and even guides the mechanical process for building each instrument.

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes that all things have a spirit. Reflected in Chinese music, this means that every note is alive. Jing Xuan.

"Take the pipa, for example. It stands three feet and five inches tall: the 'three' symbolizes heaven, earth, and man. The 'five' symbolizes the five elements of Chinese philosophy—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. Then it also has four strings, symbolizing the four seasons," said Shen Yun composer and pipa player Jing Xuan, according to the Shen Yun website.

"Another example is the pairing of the flute and pipe, which are often played together; behind it is the idea of the auspicious dragon

and phoenix pair. The flute symbolizes the dragon and the pipe symbolizes the phoenix," she explained.

This rich symbolism has been a part of China's culture for millennia. It permeates each walk of life but is especially resonant in the arts, which have long been considered a gift from the divine.

"Chinese instruments' tonal quality is also closely tied to Chinese philosophy. Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes that all things have a spirit. Reflected in Chinese music, this means that every note is alive," said Ms. Jing.

This life is apparent in Shen Yun's musical pieces, which utilize the strengths of both musical traditions to create an exceptional level of drama, expression, resonance, and depth.

"When the dance story requires a grand style, we will accord a lot of emphasis on Western instruments. If there's a need to depict Oriental sentiments or scenes, we will use Chinese instruments such as erhu, bamboo flute,



COURTESY SHEN YUN PERFORMING ARTS

The contemporary realist movement (Part 1)

An in-depth look at the emergence of the movement and its effects on the art world

BY KARA LYSANDRA ROSS

The term Contemporary Art has long been associated with the Modernist and Post Modernist Movements because at the time they were created, the words "contemporary art" or "modern art" also meant the art of today. However, these movements started several decades ago and today the terms have become deceptive.

A new movement of living artists is taking back the word contemporary and associating it with the traditional techniques of the old masters applied to the human experience as well as important subjects of the times.

The general public is growing tired of art that needs long explanations and justifications, and more and more people want to



"Promise of Renewal" by Duffy Sheridan, a contemporary realist artist.

recognize what they are looking at and respond to it on a humanist level rather than a purely conceptual one.

The Contemporary Realist movement first started as a reaction to the Modernist and Post-Modernists, who still dominate the art market today.

When one can take a found object, put it in a museum and call it art, the general feeling among this growing movement is that the definition of art has become so broad that the word "art," as defined by the current art establishment, ceases to have meaning.

The modernist movement originated in the early 1900s and the critics of that time noted "the avowed purpose of art has been tampered with by introducing the elements of a missing-word composition.... Many friends of art expect that it will meet its fate, but a few champions see a revolution in progress."

The Modernist underdogs quickly took hold of the art world, completely dominating it by the end of the 1940's. After the tragedy of two world wars and the Great Depression, humanity was left with a heart of cynicism and a mind filled with existentialist thoughts—two qualities Modern and Post-Modern art took to its core.

In reaction to this negative view on humanity and its accomplishments, the Contemporary Realists felt mankind was best served by depicting through art the qualities in life that unite us as people rather than the debasement of civilization.

Nothing says more about a culture than the art it idolizes. It

and pipa, which best express deeper emotions," Shen Yun conductor Chia-Chi Lin told The Epoch Times.

Dance and music: Unprecedented synchronization

While Shen Yun's dancers have amazed the dance world with their masterful degree of coordination and synchronization, the three orchestras have also received countless accolades. It is the Shen Yun conductors who serve as the medium between the dance and the music that accompanies it.

"I thought the orchestra was extraordinary," Colin Clarke, a renowned Ontario conductor, told The Epoch Times in a post-performance interview last year.

"You have organic activity with the musicians, who are following the conductor, who in turn is watching the performance on stage. So to get a 30- to 40-piece orchestra to time their performance with the dancers who are moving at different times is a difficult task," he said.

Beyond technique, beyond art
Audiences everywhere and the elite

All but lost in the East, the essence of an age-old culture rises in the West. In a special series, The Epoch Times takes a close look at the renaissance of China's traditional culture and how a New York-based performing arts company has become its driving force.

of the music world have praised the Shen Yun orchestras for their ability to transcend the realm of music and to fulfill the senses.

"I caught my breath. I dared not even breathe. It was very, very beautiful," said Touve Ratovondraheta, a pianist for the Ballet Opera House of Paris, after watching a Shen Yun performance.

"I discovered this evening that all the gestures, the musical

notes, and everything had a meaning. We are invited to discover spirituality."

Achieving such an effect is not a simple matter of technique. Although the musicians come from world-famous symphonies and conservatories, it is a simple conviction that guides them to achieve such extraordinary results.

According to a video on the website, the Chinese have long believed that to create true art one must first have a beautiful and pure inner self. Artists, poets, and people of all walks of life valued virtues, study, and meditation. All of the performers involved in Shen Yun Performing Arts hold fast to this principle.

The result is a performance worthy of its title. Translated from Chinese, Shen Yun means "divine beauty."

Xiaochun Qi is an Erhu soloist and Shen Yun Orchestra member. She has captivated audiences worldwide with her mastery of the two-stringed instrument, which produces a melancholic sound that is both hauntingly beautiful and stirring.



"Foreclosure" by Max Ginsburg, 2011, depicts the anger and despair of being evicted from home.

represents what it values, what it thinks about, and essentially what it deems worth remembering. Art is the representation of a people, encapsulating its essence on every level, and these artists believe there is more to great art than Marcel Duchamp's Fountain, which is really nothing more than a toilet, or Jackson

Pollack's oeuvre, which is nothing more than splattered paint.

Contemporary Realists looked back at the art that pre-dated those global catastrophes to the old masters, and especially the classical artists of the 19th century, whose works reached their zenith directly before the onset of Modernism. They are now the

progenitors of a Renaissance with new themes encapsulating freedom of speech through visual storytelling.

Kara Lysandra Ross is the director of operations for the Art Renewal Center in New Jersey and an expert in 19th century European painting.



Sonia Rodriguez and Piotr Stanczyk in "The Nutcracker."

National Ballet's 'The Nutcracker'

Guest conductor debuts

BY MADALINA HUBERT
EPOCH TIMES STAFF

For those living in Toronto, it's hard to miss the dancing bear posters during the holiday season signalling the arrival of the National Ballet's beloved rendition of James Kudelka's classic staging of "The Nutcracker."

The last few shows before the production closes on Jan. 3 mark the debut of guest conductor Nathan Brock, the assistant conductor of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.

This is Brock's first time con-

ducting a ballet, but under the wing of music director David Briskin he found himself growing through the new artistic medium.

"[It's] an experience outside of the box for me and one that I think I will really cherish," he said.

A mostly symphonic conductor, Brock has found himself gaining a new perspective on the familiar score through working with the dancers and choreographers.

"It's a very familiar score, but then to have to reappraise it and to rethink and to accept it in

these different ways is really interesting," says the young conductor, adding that the experience is both challenging and rewarding.

A holiday favourite, not only with classical concert goers but also in shopping malls, Tchaikovsky's score for "The Nutcracker" is one that few fail to recognize. What makes this music so popular with young and old alike?

"There's a spiritedness in the music. It's uplifting in the vast majority of the numbers and if it's not uplifting, it's touching, it's heart-warming, it's all of those things," says Brock, who like most conductors never tires of the works of the great masters.

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