A Conversation with Pipa Soloist Liu Fang

Liu Fang’s mastery of the pipa and the guzheng has established her international reputation as one of the great young interpreters of traditional Chinese music. She aspires to combine her knowledge and practice of Eastern traditions with Western classical music, contemporary music and improvisation, thereby creating new forms, uniting different cultures and discovering new audiences.

Q. What are the biggest challenges of playing the pipa and guzheng?

The pipa has existed in China for over 2,000 years and its playing techniques are highly developed and complicated. To master these techniques is a challenge. For instance, the tremolo with five fingers played from inside toward outside (“Lun” in Chinese) can be used as one of the most important criteria to judge a player’s abilities. Each of the five fingers should give a clean sound with equal strength. This needs a lot of practice and native talent. If this technique is lacking, the pipa sounds very uncomfortable, and this will be an obstacle in presenting true classical Chinese pipa music.

The repertoire for pipa is comparatively large, with some pieces handed down from the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). There have been several pipa schools through the ages, each having their special ways of interpreting the classical works. The traditional scores combine symbols representing pitches and finger techniques, but there are many nuances in the music which cannot be notated in the score. Chinese classical music by nature is very individual in character. The interpretation depends on the performer’s understanding of the tradition as well as his personal experience. There is no way to tell whose interpretation is the definitive one. Thus, the biggest challenge is how to respect the tradition while keeping one’s own conviction and musical outlook. If all elements are in place, the performer will touch the heart and bring about spiritual elevation.

On top of all this, the challenge for me is to fully express the soul of pipa and guzheng (my second instrument—in my solo recitals, one third of the program is devoted to guzheng solo pieces, intended to introduce it more widely) in every concert. To give a good concert today doesn’t mean that tomorrow’s will also be as good. To have given a hundred excellent concerts doesn’t guarantee the excellence of the 101st. This is a constant challenge more for the heart than for the fingers. This means one needs always to learn to keep the heart in such a state as to keep the music fresh and alive. For this, one needs to learn and be engrossed in many things besides music. I believe this is true for all kinds of music.

Q: What are or were your musical influences?

The first influence was traditional singing. In part because my mother is an opera actress, I had the opportunity to listen to traditional opera singing and a lot of folk songs in my childhood. This is planted so deeply within me that when I am playing a tune, I feel that I’m singing in my heart. When I play a sad tune, I feel I’m crying in my heart. Listeners often tell me that they heard singing in my music. I love poetry and painting and these hobbies help me understand Chinese tradition, which in turn helps me interpret classical Chinese music.

I also love Western classical music and the traditional music from other cultures such as Indian, Japan, Persian, Vietnamese and Arabic music. I cannot say how much these traditions influence my musical understanding, but surely they help me in communicating with the musicians and audiences alike from other cultural backgrounds.
Q. How does this traditional music relate to other Chinese art forms?

Classical Chinese music is closely related to Chinese poetry and various forms of lyric drama. So it’s not surprising that most of the classical pieces have poetic and sometimes philosophical titles. In the same manner as poetry, music sets out to express human feelings, soothe suffering and bring spiritual elevation. Therefore, it is important to understand the content and message of a work and set the mind and the heart so they are “in tune” with the music. It can be very dull and lifeless when the sound is delivered without proper meaning.

I feel that our closest relative is Chinese calligraphy, which has been regarded as the highest art form in our tradition. I have always been interested in it, and indeed, great calligraphy gives me immense inspiration. Though I don’t practice it myself, I understand and love its aesthetic principles. Through the study of master calligraphers, I recognize that the same spirit inspires both disciplines: the energy, the feeling, and the breath that give life to the calligraphy are the same that animate our music. The dynamics and movement of strokes of the brush, the line and the points, and the whole structure, are all comparable.

Finally, classical Chinese music and traditional painting are twin sisters. Take, for instance, landscape paintings: There is no central focus, but rather each part seems to have its own gravitational independence—including the unpainted or inactive parts of the landscape—while still harmonizing with the composition as a whole. The empty parts contribute equally, giving the whole painting breath and life. The appreciation of a painting is an interactive and dynamic process between the viewer and the painting; were the entire canvas painted, it would diminish the freedom and imagination of the viewer. The same is true with classical Chinese music. We depend on silences to connect the sounds harmoniously in a spiritual link between performer and audience. To achieve this, technique alone is not sufficient. It is a heart-to-heart process.

Adapted from an interview with Award-winning young pipa virtuoso Lin Fang talking about her passion for Chinese classical music with Paula Kirman of Inside World Music www.insideworldmusic.com