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China's Music Lessons for the West



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In Shanghai, dozens of pianists celebrate the anniversary of Chopin's birth.

By Noel Zahler

In a 2010 *New York Times* article ("Boom Times for Opera in China"), Shirley Young, chairwoman of the U.S.-China Cultural Institute, is quoted as saying, "They are all looking to China for the survival—the only hope for growth—for all classical music, frankly. The future of classical music is here." The *Times* story focuses on opera, both Chinese and Western, but the situation is similar in orchestral and chamber music, with unprecedented government support for the creation of musical facilities and the training of the next generation of performers.

In 2007 it was estimated that there were nearly 30 million piano students and 10 million violin students in China. Comprehensive tests to enter the top conservatories attracted nearly 200,000 students a year, compared with a few thousand annually in the 1980s, according to the Chinese Musicians' Association.

The Carnegie Mellon School of Music has been recruiting in China for more than 20 years. Two years ago, we increased the number of cities in which we hold auditions from two to five. Chinese students make up 9.3 percent of the School of Music's enrollment, 312 graduate and undergraduate students combined, and 42.6 percent of the school's international enrollment. Piano is by far the largest interest among the Chinese students, followed by music and technology, and percussion. But there are Chinese students studying woodwind, brass, and string instruments, and conducting and voice as well. Almost all receive some financial aid.

Other well-known American and European institutions—including the Oberlin Conservatory of Music; the Yale School of Music; the Manhattan School of Music; the Paris Conservatoire; the Franz Liszt Academy of Music, in Budapest; and the Sibelius Academy, in Finland—also recruit in China, a turn of events that would have seemed absurd a few decades ago. Until the 1990s, China was probably considered one of the last places on earth one might seek any serious activity in classical music. Yet now major Chinese conservatories are bursting at the seams. Two years ago, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music opened three new buildings. And last year the Central Conservatory, in Beijing, opened one of the largest academic buildings on its campus.

The rise of a middle class in China has been one factor contributing to the boom in classical-music training and performance, but an equally important development has been the designation of Chinese schools of music as "international schools," where relationships with schools from outside the country are as crucial to fostering Chinese talent as recruiting Western faculty and soloists. Further, the importance of a degree from a prestigious American, European, or Australian conservatory or university is not wasted on this generation of Chinese entrepreneurs. Along with the central government, they encourage their sons and daughters to seek these credentials, and they have the wealth to pay for it.

Within the last 30 years, early training in music in China has come to equal or exceed the training that takes place in the West. There has been a consistent rise in the quality of young performers from China, and we've now witnessed an entire generation of young Chinese virtuosi in almost every musical specialty imaginable. Think of the pianist Lang Lang, the violinist Xiang Yu, the conductor Xian Zhang, the cellist Wang Jian, the composer Tan Dun, and the bass opera singer Hao Jiang Tian. Once upon a time, the ability to train at a prestigious Western music school was a way out of China. Today the Chinese seek these credentials to return to their own country with the knowledge that it will guarantee them lifelong financial and professional success.

Western institutions have been feeding for years on this demand for training, but as more Chinese return to their country armed with the skills obtained from Western institutions, the need to go abroad, or to import Western teachers, has diminished. Mao's Cultural Revolution wiped out generations of well-trained musicians. For the last 30 years, the oldest generation of the Chinese has been educating the youngest generation. But soon the ranks of the middle generation will fill.

The picture in America is quite a contrast. Support for children's arts training has largely dried up, increasingly becoming an extracurricular luxury for the affluent. And the cultivation of arts audiences has been lackluster and largely unsuccessful. More than 16,000 students graduate yearly from American conservatories, schools of music, and college music departments. But professional American orchestras offer roughly 160 openings a year.

American students know that excellent performers are a commodity at American conservatories and colleges, and colleges rely on this upper tier of musicians when recruiting. The quality and numbers of recruits dictate institutions' ability to perform at a particular level, as well as the repertoire that can be undertaken. It is impossible to have a student orchestra, choir, or opera program without the requisite number of bassoons, violas, altos, or baritones, and it is impossible to perform Mahler's Sixth Symphony without unusually gifted, well-trained performers.

College-level music programs expect students to come to them with at least eight to 10 years of training in instrumental music (somewhat less in vocal music), and students and their parents have great expectations with regard to the lengths these schools will go to recruit talented students. At stake for the best musicians are full-ride scholarships, worth some \$200,000 for undergrads and \$63,500 for master's students. The Chinese have only begun to realize that the same rewards can be available to their children, and they are, on the whole, preparing more effectively to compete for them.

There are lessons, and warnings, in all this. The Chinese have chosen to diversify and modernize their country socially, economically, *and* culturally. A major part of their new cultural revolution is using the

arts as a cultural economic engine. Western classical music and opera figure significantly in this campaign. Concert halls, opera houses, ballet, and the visual arts have all enjoyed huge government subsidies, which have also generated, and educated, audiences for those activities. Westerners have enjoyed providing guidance, instruction, and, in many Chinese and other Asian orchestras and opera companies, they have also taken on artistic leadership and filled the ranks. But for how long? The demand for such Western "experts" in the near future is bound to soften.

Unless the West takes a good hard look at itself in the mirror, we risk losing some of our most impressive cultural gifts. The Philadelphia Orchestra has declared bankruptcy; the Detroit Symphony Orchestra has seen bruising labor strife. Europe is seeing similar deterioration of its cultural infrastructure. The writing's on the wall. It is very possible that in 50 years, if you want to hear top-tier symphonic, opera, or chamber music live, Chinese performers will provide it.

Perhaps that's the natural succession of Western art music. Or perhaps it's what happens when countries neglect their heritage.

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