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At the NYPhil, *A Happy Excursion* but a Choppy *Pathétique*

 March 8, 2019 | By [Clive Paget](#), *Musical America*

It's always gratifying to see a good turnout for new music, and if the line snaking through security at David Geffen Hall on March 6 was anything to go by, Zhao Lin's Concerto for Pipa, Cello and Orchestra was a highly anticipated premiere. Of course, that might have had something to do with the soloists—Yo-Yo Ma remains one of classical music's genuine superstars, and pipa virtuoso Wu Man is his equivalent on her instrument. But the standing ovation that greeted the final punchy chords of *A Happy Excursion* felt as much of a seal of approval on an appealingly accessible new work as it did a tribute to the emotional and technical achievements of the musicians.

The work, a New York Philharmonic co-commission with the Beijing Music Festival and Hangzhou Philharmonic Orchestra, where it premiered last year, takes its title from a passage in third-century BCE philosopher Zhuang Zhou's *Chuang Tzu*, one of Taoism's most celebrated texts. In our quest for transcendence, he posits, even the man who can soar on the wind is still dependent of the wind. But, he writes, "suppose there is one who chariots on the normality of the universe, rides on the transformations of the six elements, and thus makes excursions into the infinite, what has he to depend on? Therefore it is said that the perfect man has no self; the spiritual man has no achievement; and the true sage has no name."

Thankfully, Zhao Lin's double concerto is a lot less cryptic than that. Cast in three movements, Yo-Yo Ma summed it up neatly in a verbally delivered program note from the stage: the first movement concerns the idea of becoming—what was China before it became China?; the second movement transforms a 200-year-old theme from Zhao Lin's home province, a time and a place of tolerance where temples co-existed with mosques and synagogues; the third movement represents "now."



Wu Man and Yo-Yo Ma perform the U.S. premiere of Zhao Lin's Concerto for Pipa, Cello and Orchestra

Several things strike you about the work, not the least being the sensitive way that Zhao Lin wields his substantial forces—*A Happy Excursion* calls for four horns, three trumpets and three trombones—to ensure that the delicate tones of the pipa are never buried in the sonic wash. Conductor Long Yu deserves his share of the credit as well. His sure hand kept the Philharmonic in balance throughout, while never sacrificing momentum. And how cleverly the composer has marshalled his themes, giving the more traditional Chinese-sounding music to the pipa, while the cello gets the lion's share of the more Western melodies—and yes, the piece abounds with genuine tunes. Finally, the back-and-forth between the two soloists is both varied and nuanced, a feature that played to the strength of their common bonds as longtime Silkroad colleagues. In fact, the sense of communion and an evident friendship was an almost tangible pleasure throughout.

The first movement pitches soloists against stalking brass and glittering percussion, Wu Man's fingers flying across her fretboard as bustling strummed passages alternate with delicately plucked airs. Yo-Yo Ma plunged into his rapt, romantic lines with a will, his body language fiercely expressive. Catchy, syncopated themes jostle with moments of occasional bombast in music that is a positive riot of color. In the second movement, a magical pipa entry over pointillist harp is followed by a lyrical duet and a lively central section redolent of movie music (with three films scores to his name, Zhao Lin is following in the footsteps of his father Zhao Jiping, who composed the soundtracks to *Farewell My Concubine* and *Raise the Red Lantern*). The chugging, rhythmic finale, with boldly blazing brass, racing woodwind, and clattering xylophone, sees both soloists ducking and weaving deftly in and out of the complex texture. A fitting depiction of modern-day industrial China, the work powers to its noisy conclusion with soaring horns and crashing cymbals.

The rest of the concert was more of a mixed bag. Despite the ethereal violins, some over-prominent woodwind marred the opening of Rimsky-Korsakov's exquisitely orchestrated prelude to Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina*.

Beset by some rare lapses in ensemble, matters only got into their stride with the arrival of the composer's lush Russian theme on cellos over tolling tam-tam.

The weighty start of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* felt similarly choppy, the dots not always feeling as joined as they might. Long Yu gave the big romantic theme a winningly supple shape, followed by some lithely phrased woodwind contributions, but brass in the *Allegro vivo* section had a paint-stripping edge that needed to have been tamed. The swiftly taken *Allegro con grazia* felt a little driven --too much *allegro*, not enough *grazia*-- though the waltz tune felt more compelling the second time around. The brash third movement march drew its own round of applause, the brass raising appropriate hell in the closing passages, though elsewhere the scurrying strings and wind would have benefitted from more of a gossamer feel. The finale, more despairing than Tchaikovsky's marking of *lamentoso*, felt hectic and was simply too loud at times to deliver its full emotional impact.

If that made the concert as a whole feel very much a game of two halves, at least the audience was rewarded with a strong sense that the newest music was the evening's authentic highlight.

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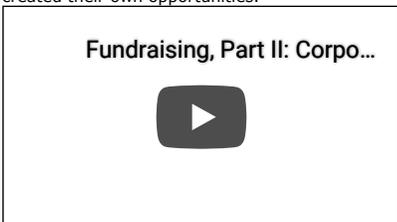
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