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features

Wu Man on performing today's music

The Chinese pipa virtuoso talks to Limelight about playing with Yo-Yo Ma for the Clintons, working with composers Tan Dun and Ye Xiaogang, and collaborating across musical cultures.

by [Angus McPherson](#) on June 26, 2019

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You're making your Australian Festival of Chamber Music debut this year. Have you ever worked with the Artistic Director, Kathryn Stott, before?

Actually no, but I've met her, I went to her concert – and I know she has played with cellist Yo-Yo Ma, so when she emailed me and said that she was going to be Artistic Director and that she wanted to invite me, I'm like, "Oh, yes!"



Wu Man. Photo © KuanDi Studio

On the opening night of the Festival you're playing Bright Sheng's *Three Songs*, which I understand you premiered with Yo-Yo Ma at a state dinner in 1999. How did that commission come about?

I played that piece, a duo for pipa and cello, when former Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji visited the US. We played at the dinner, after they started to serve dessert and coffee or tea. There were about 250 guests, which included former President Clinton and Hilary Clinton. Bright Sheng took three Chinese folk songs and arranged them for pipa and cello, but in his own way. That was the first time in my life I played with cello. The piece, at that time, was quite a challenge for me. I had never played with a cello – a bowed instrument, and mine is plucked. It's a very different sound and also a very different colour, a bigger sound. I remember the first rehearsal – I didn't like it at all. And I think Yo-Yo also felt awkward and very strange. So the second time we rehearsed we decided to change the way we played – I will be more, not to be shadowed and to make it more dramatic, and the cello will come back a bit. It's not like playing Dvořák, it's a Chinese folk song!

Since then you've often played pipa alongside Western instruments like the cello. What are some of the challenges of those combinations?

All the instruments are tuned differently, including the Chinese instruments. I collaborate with musicians from different backgrounds, not only Western instruments but also other traditional instruments. I think the biggest challenge, especially playing with Western instruments, is the intonation, because our tradition has many different tunings – we have a lot of subtlety, like Indian music. On the left hand we have vibrato and bending the notes, and it gives the sound different colours, but it's harder to play with the piano – piano is fixed. We have a totally different system of listening, a different language, and that is a challenge. I remember the first time playing with even a string player – before we played Chinese music they needed to learn the intonation, how the ornamentation works.

Were there things you had to work out with Yo-Yo Ma, performing the Bright Sheng?

Oh yes, a lot! How do you slide from that note to the next – that was a big thing – how do you deal with vibrato? That’s all very detailed.

In Townsville you’re also playing music by Tan Dun. How important has your collaboration with him been for you?

Tan Dun is my schoolmate. Back in Beijing when I was at the middle school attached to the conservatory, he was at the college level, but we shared the same campus – and it’s a small conservatory so we all kind of knew each other. In the 80s when he was at the school, Tan Dun was already looking for new ideas and his music always surprised us. In high school I was already working with him and he wrote some ensemble pieces I played. That relationship continued when we both moved to America – we started collaborating together in America and continued this path in contemporary music. The first piece he wrote for me and the Kronos Quartet, to me that was kind of a revolution. It had never happened before – Chinese pipa with a Western string quartet. I think that collaboration changed people’s mind about what music is – what is Western music and what is Eastern music. So to me that was sort of a turning point in my career.

How would you describe the musical language Tan Dun uses in his concerto for string quartet and pipa?

The music is from his *Ghost Opera*, it’s a theatrical piece which Kronos and I commissioned from him in 1994 – oh, God [laughs] – with lighting and staging. This time in the Festival we will play a chamber music version, pipa with string quartet. The material he took from his home town, Hunan, which is famous for its spicy food in China – all the restaurants, Hunan Garden, Hunan House, that’s all spicy food. So he’s got a lot of spice in his music. The fun part for the musicians is you not only play but you have to shout, you have to act, and that gets very exciting for most musicians. And of course the style and language is different, a lot of sliding notes in the string parts, imitating the Chinese fiddle, Erhu, and my part is more like the spirit part above.

You’re also playing a piece by Ye Xiaogang. How would you compare his music and Tan Dun’s?

Tan Dun and Ye Xiaogang are classmates from Beijing. They are the same generation – a very successful generation of Chinese composers. But they have very different styles. Ye Xiaogang is from Shanghai, his music to me is definitely like urban Shanghai taste – very modern, very avant-garde in some ways, not pentatonic. Tan Dun’s music still keeps the Chinese pentatonic scale, the traditional way, and always added visual parts, but Ye Xiaogang goes in a different direction. His music is very modern to most Chinese audiences, and definitely like Shanghai, big city, a lot of Western music influence.

You’re also playing music you wrote yourself at the Festival. When did you start composing?

Quite late. I still feel I don’t compose in the traditional way, I’m just the musician. I’ve been playing pipa for so many years – since I was nine years old – so I know the instrument very well. I play so many newly composed pieces, working with the composer, and that inspired me – I can do something myself. So I started probably 10 years ago, just to write for myself. I started with improvisation.

Townsville is tropical – will weather be an issue for the pipa, in terms of tuning?

Weather changes will be tough for the strings. The strings sometimes become loose more easily, so I will keep tuning – so don’t mind if I keep tuning on the stage! But the modern techniques for making the instrument are much better and it’s much fancier, so it should not be a problem.

What are you most looking forward to about the Festival?

I can’t wait to meet all the musicians! That’s for sure, we’re going to work together. And I’m also looking forward to meeting the audience. I know this audience is especially coming for chamber music and I can’t wait to show them my instrument – an ancient Chinese instrument – and introduce a different culture and different musical language. But working with the Festival musicians together, it’s going to become something else. It’s not Chinese music, it’s not Western music, but it’s a mixture – it’s modern, it’s today’s music.

Wu Man performs at the Australian Festival of Chamber Music in Townsville, July 26 to August 4

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