

CLASSICAL MUSIC:

Ancient journey on 'Silk Road' links East, West

Pierre Ruhe - Staff

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In a remote mountain village near the Taklamakan Desert in far western China, Bright Sheng seeks out an elderly man named Mamaty, who plays the kumuz, a nasal-sounding, traditional two-stringed instrument. Before the music starts, the visitor is feted as an honored guest. "When all of us were half-drunk," Sheng recounts, "he took out his kumuz and started to play. An incredible phenomenon happened: The music sounded so beautiful and heavenly that I was sure I was hearing something special."

A brilliant Sino-American composer, Sheng, 44, is following a section of the Great Silk Road, returning to his native land to study folk music at the source. He's collecting sounds in regions that feel isolated even to the Chinese, sounds that may be just a few imported pop songs away from being snuffed out forever. Mamaty's repertoire includes some 200 pieces, passed down through countless generations. Even his best student knows only half as many. "I worry that in another 20 years, this music won't exist," Sheng said by telephone from Yining, in the Kashzk region of China.

After two months of mixed success, Sheng returns home to the United States on Monday.

While on the road, he has been sending a travel diary via e-mail to his New York publisher, and his dispatches, with a map of his journey, are posted at www.schirmer.com.

Sheng's listening tour is one small part of a grand international effort, already two years in the making, called the Silk Road Project. In another year it will be everywhere: People interested in classical music, world and folk music, as well as food, dance, and arts and crafts, will know more than they ever imagined about this ancient trade route that linked dynastic China and the oasis cities of Central Asia with India, Persia, Asia Minor and Rome.

The plans are big. There will be performances, recordings, films and lectures, plus commissions for new music from Western composers and several based along the route. Scheduled to participate are 14 cities, from San Francisco to Paris to Tokyo, starting with the Salzburg Festival in Austria (August 2001) and culminating with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall in Washington (summer of 2002).

At the heart of the Silk Road Project is cellist Yo-Yo Ma, its artistic director.

Ma was quoted in Harvard Magazine describing the Silk Road as "a metaphor for a number of things: As the Internet of antiquity, the trade routes were used for commerce, by religious people, adventurers, scientists, storytellers. Everything from algebra to Islam moved along the Silk Road."

By the time Alexander the Great marched his army eastward, Asian luxury items such as silk, jade, bronze and spices had reached the Mediterranean. But with the dawn of the Renaissance in Europe and innovations in shipbuilding, seaports gradually replaced overland routes for trade.

While it lasted, traffic along the Silk Road funneled technology, art and merchants freely in both directions. Under scrutiny, comfortably stereotypic East-West boundaries dissolve.

Sadly, for all the publicity about "celebrating local cultures and global connections," the first recording under the auspices of the Silk Road Project, Ma's "Solo" (on Sony Classical), sounds cobbled together, expertly played, international in scope to be sure, but lacking cohesion. The Silk Road might be a mercantile metaphor, one that invites a diverse peddling of styles, but it can also grow until it covers everything and thus nothing.

Sent for 're-education'

Included on this disc is Sheng's "Seven Tunes Heard in China" (1995), a haunting work that, like most everything in his catalog, explores his Chinese past.

His first large orchestral work, "H'un: In Memorium 1966-1976" --- written after he arrived in the United States in 1982 --- was a lament on China's Cultural Revolution, a decade of state-sanctioned madness. As with so many intellectuals, Sheng's family had been harassed, their piano confiscated, his grandfather denounced as an "enemy of the people."

Under Mao Tse-tung's plan, city youths were sent into the countryside to be "re-educated" by peasants. Already a musician, Sheng was sent to Qinghai province to join a performance troupe. Significantly, there was no formal training available, so the young composer learned music organically, by ear and instinct. After the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, he enrolled in the Shanghai Conservatory, and he later studied in New York. Like many refugee artists, he struggled to reconcile two disparate traditions.

Along the way, Sheng caught the attention of prominent champions. Last winter, Robert Spano, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's music director-designate, conducted the Boston Symphony in Sheng's "Red Silk Dance," a breakthrough piano concerto of startling emotional directness and clarity of design. A new CD (on the BIS label) includes another of Sheng's recent "mature" works, the symphonic poem "Flute Moon."

These titles might suggest kitschy chinoiserie, but Sheng's music has guts, forward-propelled force and, yes, elements of East meets West. That's his natural mind-set. Ten years ago he wrote "Song of Majnun," an opera drawn from a Persian "Romeo and Juliet" tale.

The dangers of Coca-Cola

Now, after two decades away, the composer wanted to revisit his homeland, both to deepen his connection with music in his own head and to gather unfamiliar material.

There's a noble history in collecting endangered sounds. In the Balkans, Bela Bartok captured songs just before the upheavals of World War I erased them from the world's cultural archive. Across the American South, starting in the Depression, Alan Lomax recorded rural music (and in the process brought Leadbelly and Jelly Roll Morton to the public). The parallels with losing a bio-diverse ecosystem are abundant: Like clear-cutting a rain forest, 3,000 years of cultural history in China can be wiped out in a couple of generations.

"Folk music used to be one of the only entertainments here," Sheng explained. "But now with such capitalism you see Coca-Cola and CDs and American movies on TV everywhere. The lifestyle changes." He noted that the cultural flow seems overwhelmingly one-directional now, washing away fragile cultures instead of fertilizing them.

A fellowship from the University of Michigan, where Sheng now teaches, covered most of this summer's trip expenses. He is not traveling as a tourist: While in China he has been assigned a driver and an official escort from the local music union. Still, he says, "The Chinese government doesn't pay a lot of attention to folk music, and when it does, often the traditions have been ignored. A few days ago I went to a tape store to see if I could buy folk songs, but what they had was modernized, with MIDI synthesizer accompaniment. I had also wanted to hear some local groups, so it was arranged that some folk singers would perform for me. Well, I was terribly disappointed, because what they sang wasn't really in a folk style --- it had been so modernized, sort of Westernized, and smoothed out. So the second step was going into the villages to find old people, real peasants, mostly farmers, who still remember the raw, almost savage, ways. The traditional ways are the most beautiful."

Outside the city of Xinjiang, Sheng, with a digital mini-disc recorder in hand, went looking for a special kind of music he had heard during his years of "re-education," a strongly rhythmic style made for dancing. It evolved with a plucked instrument called a tongbur, unique to the region. "When I heard some musicians playing now, I noticed they had changed the instrument! This new one sounded different, like a guitar --- and the Chinese government has authorized it as a folk instrument."

'Nothing's pure'

After he returns, he has little time to readjust: Major commissions are waiting to be written. But, Sheng says, "I've absorbed so much right now, I need time to digest. As a composer, I know these experiences will stay with me a long time. And what I think I've learned along parts of the Silk Road is that Chinese music from all the different provinces --- or Japan or Iran or Mongolia or wherever ---has all influenced each other a great degree. Nothing's pure. So talking about music in a national way doesn't make sense. For my own music, I don't think it matters in what ethnic style of music you write. There will always be similarities. What's important is that it has its own strong character."

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