

IN CONCERT : When East Drifts West - To kick off its 21st season, the ambitious Camerata Pacifica opens this weekend at Hahn Hall with a treat of a piece

BY JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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CAMERATA PACIFICA

When: 1 and 7:30 p.m. today

Where: Hahn Hall, Music Academy of the West, 1070 Fairway Road

Cost: \$42, \$10 student rush (30 minutes before show, with ID)

Information: 884-8410, cameratapacifica.org



Courtesy photo

It was a year ago at the Santa Barbara-born and based chamber group Camerata Pacifica launched its 20th anniversary season with a notable wave of novelty in the form of a dramatically staged world premiere by Chinese composer Huang Ruo. To launch season 21, the Camerata follows a similar course, but ups the ante, commissioning one of the better-known living composers in America, the Chinese-born émigré Bright Sheng.

In fact, the commission for "Hot Pepper" for violin and marimba represents a luminous musical pact with one of the most famous composers of any Santa Barbara-spawned commission to date. Officially, the premiere — performed by violinist Catherine Leonard and percussionist Ji Hye Jung — takes place at Music Academy of the West's Hahn Hall tonight (and at the 1 p.m. lunch concert), before the group repeats the work in its usual SoCal concert stops in Ventura, San Marino and Los Angeles' Zipper Hall next Thursday.

Sheng, who has lived in the U.S. since 1985 and been on the University of Michigan faculty since 1995, is one of several important Chinese composers from his generation who emigrated to America. He made a strong impression with his skillful, inventive East-meets-West approach, and fittingly, he was the recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant.

A composer whose music has been performed by Yo Yo Ma, New York Philharmonic and in countless other high-profile situations on the international classical music scene, he was a key

figure in this year's Chinese Festival presented by Carnegie Hall and was the composer-in-residence with the New York City Ballet from 2006-08.

During a recent trip to Hong Kong, Bright discussed his new Santa Barbara-bound composition, and touched on his illustrious career in midstream.

Can you tell me something about "Hot Pepper," the piece you have written for violin and marimba, concepts behind it and how you approached this task?

When I was approached by Camerata Pacifica for the duo, I was intrigued by the combination of instruments. For years, violin has been one of my favorite string instruments for my works, but I have also learned to love the marimba recently. A few years ago, I wrote my first marimba concerto, "Colors of Crimson," for Evelyn Glennie and the Luxembourg Philharmonic for its U.S. tour. Through the writing of that work, I learned many new possibilities in texture, timbre and mostly the singing quality of the instrument, which is not often featured in marimba writing.

In "Hot Pepper," I really treated each of the duo as equal partners and tried to highlight its collective sound as well as individuality.

Do you like to maintain a balance and variety in terms of the compositional work you do, between, say, chamber music and larger scale writing for orchestra and opera, and now ballet, in your role as composer-in-residence for the New York City Ballet?

Yes. I often found that writing chamber music I can experiment, therefore risk, a lot more in terms of form and handling of the materials. Frequently, I would later apply what I learned into works of larger scales, such as orchestral and opera.

In your composition, are you aware of the interactive elements of Chinese and non-Chinese musical influences — the East and West aspects — or is it a much more fluid and intuitive process now, where the components just blend naturally?

I usually decide from the very beginning the basic materials and the style of the work, such as the Sichuan folk influence in "Hot Peppers." But once I have started, I would no longer be self-conscious about this. I just write whatever excites me and make the work sound good.

Of course, I got this far through years of agonies. But now, since I often write music — maybe deliberately — not under Chinese or even Asian influences, I really do not think it matters to much of a composition's basic material. A composition should take its own course, like a poem written in different languages or about different subject matters.

You studied with Leonard Bernstein. Would you say that his music, or ideas about music, had a strong imprint on your own?

Yes, mostly his strong beliefs of a new composition's link with what have been done before — past and future risks. We are not living in a vacuum, and even geniuses like Mozart or Beethoven wrote music based on their predecessors.

It does seem like yourself and several of your contemporaries, Chinese composers who came west, including Tan Dun and Chen Yi, have represented a new strain of interest in contemporary music, a fresh approach. Do you feel that you are part of a movement, in a way? Is there a kind of kinship and a special bond you feel with those contemporaries?

I am not sure of the movement. I think it might just be coincidence in history. Yes, we are from the same generation — of the "Cultural Revolution" generation — and had similar life experiences growing up in China, and we all have written our compositions using something most intimate and familiar to us: Chinese folk and traditional music. But our similarity stops here. Our music and compositional approaches are quite different.

There is a saying in Chinese: "Eight gods cross the sea, each exhibiting his own trick."

TWENTY-ONE AND STILL GROWING

One of the greater success stories in the classical branch of Santa Barbara music, Camerata Pacifica is the brainchild of flutist, founder, organizer and sociable cultural conduit Adrian Spence. This year, the group comes of age, so to speak, at 21, after having both expanded its operations considerably and resourcefully braved the storms of the recent fiscal downturn.

Spence launched the group in Santa Barbara in a more Baroque vein, as the Camerata Bach, in the late '80s. In its incarnation with the more open-ended moniker Camerata Pacifica, the group has become an impressive phenomena, building up a dazzling roster of musicians from various global reaches. For instance, violinist Catherine Leonard is Irish, like Spence, and violist Richard Yongjae O'Neill is Korean. This global reach has been obtained, and Camerata Pacifica has expanded its performance operations to include monthly concerts in four locales around Southern California.

Looking at the 2010-11 season schedule, Camerata is up to its usual agenda, blending crowd-pleasing conventional repertoire with a range of contemporary and off-the-radar music for those with a sense of adventure. Another aspect of the Camerata's mandate is to expand the tastes of willing listeners.

On this season's seven-concert program, landing each month (with the exceptions of December and January) at Hahn Hall, music of chamber music staples — such as Brahms, Mozart, Beethoven and Dvorak — are carefully mixed with more contemporary and obscure composers, such as Paul Hindemith, Elliott Carter, Astor Piazzolla, Nino Rota and, of course, Bright Sheng.

Once again, the Camerata, a home-grown and board-based organization, offers plenty for local classical music lovers to get excited about.