ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project reflects my background as a pianist. I gratefully dedicate the published CD to my parents and my family, for their unconditional love and support through the years.

Great appreciation goes to my teachers, Zhu Yafan, Nicholas Zumbro, Paula Fan, and many others who have strongly influenced my life and career.

Thanks to my colleague and mentor, professor Seymour Fink, the knowledgeable scholar, for your patience and valuable suggestions; to my dear friend, Dr. Sylvia Eckes, pianist extraordinaire, for your great encouragement; to Dr. Rosemary Platt, my American mother, you are my inspiration.

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Recording Engineer / Producer: Chad Loughrigge

Cover Design: Jian Wang and Ying Lin

Program Notes: Tianshu Wang

The Music

The Russian born composer and pianist Alexander Tcherepnin (1899-1977) lived in Paris at the beginning of 1930’s. In 1934, his manager arranged a world tour designated primarily to study and collect Asian folk materials. When he arrived in China, he was fascinated by the country’s rich cultural heritage and he canceled the remainder of the tour to settle in China for three years. He taught composition at the National Conservatory of Music (now Shanghai Conservatory of Music), and pursued intensive research on the traditional Chinese art forms. Taking lessons on the Chinese instrument, studying Beijing Opera, he fell deeply in love with the Chinese culture. He became the godson of the famous Beijing Opera scholar, Qi Rushan (齐如山), who gave him a Chinese name of “Qi Erpin” (齐尔品). His studies culminated in the composition of Five Concert Studies, Op. 52: each of them is inspired by a particular type of art including folk theaters (Shadow Play and Puppet Shows), native instruments (the Lute and the Pipa), as well as the Buddhist ceremony (The Chant). In the second and third movements, the composer was imitating typical Chinese instruments. The lute (guqin) is a 7-string long zither that has a uniquely soft timbre. The special result is

Introduction

The piano made its first appearance in China in the late 19th century, having been brought there by an Italian missionary. Chinese piano composition itself did not begin until the 1930’s. This compact disc contains piano music written by seven composers from five different countries. The common thread is their use of traditional Chinese elements and their manifestation of a Chinese spirit. The music selected, spanning the period from the 1930’s to 2007, traces the formation and development of a true Chinese style of piano writing. The examples often contain transcriptions of traditional folk melodies and instruments, one of the primary dimensions of Chinese piano music, and more importantly, they demonstrate the path composers traveled in developing a truly original piano composition. This represents a profound cultural achievement. In addition, a contemporary American piece is included to display the fusion of Eastern and Western elements.
achieved by using both pedals throughout the entire piece without change. The pipa is a 4-string plucked instrument whose main playing techniques feature alternating fingers and strumming. Homage to China was Tcherepnin’s favorite piece, as he dedicated it to Miss Lee Hsiennng (later known as Ming Tcherepnin) as a love offering. All five movements use pentatonic scales, the typical sound of Chinese music. Tcherepnin combined his mature Western compositional skills such as counterpoint, free modulation, meter changes, and chord clusters, to create a captivating synergy. Tcherepnin’s love for China ran very deep. While teaching at the National Conservatory of Music, he dedicated himself to help young Chinese composers find their own voice in piano compositions. In November of 1934, he sponsored a monumental competition, “Contest of Piano Compositions of China National Flavor.” The winning piece was Buffalo Boy’s Flute by He Luting (1903-1999).

Buffalo Boy’s Flute became the first published original Chinese piano composition. The music reminds people of the special atmosphere in traditional Chinese paintings, the so-called “method of xie yi,” or free-hand brush work that is expressive of a refined pastoral poem which speaks of the beauty, the peace, and the colorful life of the village. The form of the work is ABA. A tuneful pentatonic canon opens the piece, unfolding a marvelous ink painting for the listeners: two cute buffalo boys are improvising on their bamboo flutes while leisurely riding on the buffalo’s back in the blooming field. The middle section is a fast and energetic folk dance, which develops from one short phrase appearing in different keys. The last section is a decorated version of the first, a typical occurrence in Chinese bamboo flute music. Buffalo Boy’s Flute describes a traditional Chinese concept, the notion of the bond between nature and humanity. Musically, the composition is one of striking simplicity. According to Tcherepnin, the work showed “originality, clarity, and a sure hand in counterpoint and form.” Composer He Luting ultimately became one of the most important and influential musicians in China.

Li Yinghai (1927-2007) was one of the most important and prolific composers of China. As the president of the China Conservatory of Music, Li was responsible for the flourishing development of Chinese national music. His own compositions create marvelous synergies by blending Western compositional devices with the Chinese materials. Music at Sunset is a representative work of the composer, which transcribed from a traditional piece for the pipa. The piece portrays a landscape of a night at the waterbank. Drums, clarinet (xiao), and pipa among other Chinese instruments are imitated on the piano, using a variety of fluent pianistic techniques. The music smoothly strolls through many contrasting sections. This piano transcription was written in 1975; it has gone through many revisions. The version on this disc was published in 1996.

Chinese-American composer Tan Dun (b. 1957) rose to international fame as a result of winning the Academy Award in 2001 for his score to the mystical martial arts film, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Also a Grammy Award winner, his multi-faceted compositions include operas, symphonies, concertos, as well as chamber music. Eight Memories in Watercolor for solo piano was premiered in the United States by Lang Lang in the Kennedy Center in April of 2003. In the composer’s own words, he says: Eight Memories in Watercolor was written when I left Hunan to study at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. It was my opus one. The Cultural Revolution had just ended, China just opened its doors, I was immersed in studying Western classical and modern music, but I was also homesick. I longed for the folksongs and savored the memories of my childhood. Therefore, I wrote my first piano work as a diary of longing. The work is subdivided into eight short pieces. Pieces 2, 3, 4, 8 are based on my favorite folksongs from my childhood in Hunan. I composed the melodies of the other four. In the music, the composer is seeking, as he stated, for “the voice of the human soul” and for “the silence of the nature.”

Chu Wanghua (b. 1941) is a Chinese composer now living in Australia. His collaboration in the creation of the Yellow River Piano Concerto made him famous in and outside of China. A pianist himself, his major compositions are primarily for the piano. The principal theme of The Jasmine Flowers is familiar to the westerners because of Puccini’s use of it in his beloved opera Turandot. Tan Dun also used the same tune as he composed the music for the Medal Ceremonies at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The song was yet used again at the opening ceremony of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Written in 2004, Chu’s piano solo version combined two charming folk tunes (both bear the same name, one from Jiangsu and the other from Zhejiang) to create a fresh, and impressionistic air.

The rising Chinese composer Zhang Zhao (b. 1964) is currently a Professor of Composition at the Central University for Music at Sunset.
Nationalities in Beijing. Pi Huang – Moments in Beijing Opera was completed in 2005, and took the top prize at the “Palatino Contest of Piano Compositions of China National Flavor” in Beijing, 2007. The music vividly describes the typical scenes in a traditional Beijing Opera production, through a display of “recitatives,” “arias,” fighting scenes along with percussion punctuations and imitations of typical instruments used in this theater. One striking feature of Chinese traditional music is the flexibility of rhythm, as in the introduction of this piece, the composer did not mark a specific time signature.

The entire music is built upon three pitches – G, B-flat, and C, which are skillfully blended in its charming melodies and harmonies. With a variety of meter, mood, and color changes, Zhang has masterfully transformed the theater music into a brilliant and effective solo piano piece.

Jonathan D. Green (b. 1964) is Provost and Dean of the Faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. He is the author of six music-reference books. As a composer, he has received awards from ASCAP, the Conductors Guild (board member), and of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.

Study on the Life Cycle of the Phoenix was composed for Tianshu Wang in 2000, and is dedicated her. Dr. Wang premiered the work at the Mid-Atlantic Chapter meeting of the College Music Society at James Madison University in March 2001, where her performance and the piece received strong praise from the keynote speaker, David Amran. The composition takes a western approach to musical chinoiserie including rapid figurations on a collection of exotic pitch sets while trying to evoke musically the imagery of the mythical phoenix thrashing in the flames as it fights for survival, being consumed in the inferno, and rising peacefully from the ashes as it is reborn. Even among the calm final moments of the composition, the phoenix shows us a glimmer of his earlier precociousness perhaps suggesting to us that we are hearing a single cycle of a recurring process. The tranquil coda purposefully pays homage to the Le jardin féerique movement of Ravel’s Ma mère l’oye, another piano composition that incorporates elements of east and west in an attempt to create a magical landscape in sound. (Jonathan Green)

The Pianist

Acclaimed by the press as a “superbly talented pianist” who plays with “prodigious technique and eloquent phrasing,” Steinway Artist Tianshu Wang has graced concert stages in the United States, China, Mexico, Singapore, Thailand, and Taiwan.

Winner of many competitions, including a national first prize, she is active in both solo and collaborative performance and has performed with major orchestras in China and the United States. She has been a regular juror of the National Piano Competition in Beijing since 2005. Respected as a distinguished artist and teacher in her native China, she was featured in a cover story of the country’s most prestigious piano magazine, Piano Artistry.

Tianshu has presented lectures and recitals in numerous state, regional, and national conferences; she has given master classes at California State University (Long Beach), Ohio University, Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore, and the Rajabhat University in Bangkok, Thailand, among others. Her article on piano pedagogy was published in Keyboard Companion.

Dr. Wang is Professor and Head of the Keyboard Area at Capital University’s Conservatory of Music in Columbus, Ohio. She received the Praestantia Award for Distinguished Teaching in 2011, the highest honor given to a faculty member at the university. Prior to Capital, she served on the piano faculty of Sweet Briar College in Virginia. She is also a professor and chair of the Piano Department at the Shenyang Conservatory of Music in China, where she teaches for part of the year.

Dr. Wang holds degrees from the University of Arizona (M.M. and D.M.A. in Piano Performance) and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (B.M. in Piano Performance). Her teachers include Zhu Yafen, who also taught Lang Lang, and Nicholas Zumbro, a student of the legendary Rosina Lhévinne.

Tianshu Wang’s biography appears in Who’s Who in America, Who’s Who of American Women, and Who’s Who in China. The CD set Encyclopedia of Chinese Classical Piano Music in which she is featured as a major performer, has been a best seller in China; and her chamber music CDs, recently released by Albany and Mark Records, have been well received enthusiastically by both the public and critics.
The Piano in China
Development & Expression of the Chinese Spirit
Tianshu Wang, piano

Alexander Tcherepnin (1899-1977)
Concert Studies, Op. 52
1 Shadow Play [3:10]
2 The Lute [4:24]
3 Homage to China [2:26]
4 Punch and Judy [2:50]
5 Chant [5:30]

He Luting (1903-1999)
6 Buffalo Boy’s Flute [2:54]

Li Yinghai (1927-2007)
7 Music at Sunset [7:46]

Tan Dun (b.1957)
Eight Memories in Watercolor
8 Missing Moon [2:30]
9 Staccato Beans [1:32]
10 Herdboy’s Song [1:56]
11 Blue Nun [5:58]
12 Red Wilderness [2:07]
13 Ancient Burial [2:07]
14 Floating Clouds [2:17]
15 Sunrain [1:34]

Chu Wanghua (b.1941)
16 The Jasmine Flowers [7:07]

Zhang Zhao (b.1964)
17 Pi Huang – Moments in Beijing Opera [6:33]

Jonathan Green (b.1964)
18 Study on the Life Cycle of the Phoenix* [7:10]

Total Time = 64:55
*premiere recording