

Preview

Guo Yazhi with the Cleveland Chinese Music Ensemble at Hiram College on March 2

by Mike Telin



Making his first Northeast Ohio appearance, the internationally renowned Chinese multi-instrument virtuoso Guo Yazhi will present a colorful showcase concert at Hiram College's Frohring Recital Hall on Sunday, March 2, 2014 at 3:00 pm.

During Sunday's concert Guo will play more than ten different traditional Chinese wind instruments, including the *xun* (an ancient clay ocarina dating back 7,000 years), the *guanzi* and *shuangguan* (single and double oboes with clarinet-like tone) and various sizes of *suona* (a shawm with metal bell).

During some of the musical selections Guo will be accompanied by the Cleveland Chinese Music Ensemble, David Badagnani, director, performing on the *dizi* (bamboo flute), *sheng* (mouth organ), *erhu* (fiddle), *pipa* and *yueqin* (lutes), drums, gongs, and other percussion. The program is sponsored by the Music Department and the Hiram Community Trust.

Born in 1966 in Shanxi province in northern China, Guo Yazhi is China's premier performer of the *suona*, also playing nearly 30 other musical instruments. Trained at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, where he also taught for several years, Guo has performed as soloist with orchestras throughout China and around the world. In June 1998 he was selected by the Chinese Ministry of Culture as one of China's most outstanding musicians, and was invited to give a solo performance for the heads of state during President Clinton's visit to Beijing. Between 1999 and 2011 he served as principal *suona* performer for the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, winning a Hong Kong Arts Development Award for Best Artist (Music) in 2012. Passionate about jazz and its relationship to traditional Chinese music, Guo Yazhi is currently studying at the Berklee College of Music. We reached him by telephone in Boston, where his friend Yiyan Zhou served as interpreter.

Mike Telin: I understand you will be playing many instruments during Sunday's concert, can you tell me a little bit about them?

Guo Yazhi: Of course. I'll play the suona and variations of the instrument because they come in different sizes and produce different sounds. Other instruments will be a bamboo flute, xun, a clay ocarina dating back 7,000 years and I'll also play with a tree leaf. And the saxophone, but of course that is not a Chinese instrument but I will play a Chinese song on it.

MT: In addition to being a performer, I understand you are also a famous teacher.

GY: I have lived in Hong Kong for about ten years and during that time I've developed a student base, beginning with just a few students and now several hundred. I have a large following (laughing). Some of the students also became instructors. I also established the first Hong Kong Suona Association.

MT: The first! Even though the suona is a traditional instrument.

GY: The Suona Association in China has been established for a long time, and I am the head secretary over that association. But because of the British influence in Hong Kong, it is rather westernized, so even though it is a traditional instrument, it is a folk instrument and not considered "classical." This also contributed to why people didn't form an association in the past.

MT: I understand your first instrument was French horn?

GY: Yes, my father played it. We had an instrument at home so I started with that.

MT: How did you begin to play folk instruments?

GY: I Started learning the horn at age 9. At 14 I was admitted into the Chinese Opera School and there the French horn did not have a place so I switched to erhu or Chinese fiddle. I also played [a similar] instrument that is used for accompaniments in the opera. It's slightly different than the ehru but from the same family.

MT: How did that lead to the suona?

GY: I was learning ehru as my major instrument. As a minor it was mandatory for everyone to study suona.

MT: Why is that?

GY: Because the main accompaniments for the Chinese Opera are these two instruments. So it is important for everyone to be flexible and be able to play both.

MT: Why did you decide to study at Berklee?

GY: First I have always liked jazz and so it has always been my interest. I also play the suona and many other traditional Chinese instruments and if you play them correctly in the traditional way, it involves improvisation. [Traditionally], you learn to improvise from the masters but because of history this has been lost. Like many musicians, I have learned the instruments at conservatories. And it is a different manner of learning. I can

improvise, but I want to really learn how to do it in a different way. So I thought it would be interesting and very enriching for my personal career development.

I'm really enjoying being there. And I'm about to make my jazz debut in New York.

MT: What instruments will you be playing?

GY: Playing mostly soprano and alto sax and the suona.

MT: Do you have a favorite style of jazz?

GY: Yes, Funk because of the many variations in the rhythm changes and there are fewer harmony changes – but I'm still exploring.

A very special thank you to Yiyang Zhou for her excellent job as translator. She tells me at the conclusion of our conversation, "I have seen Guo Yazhi's concerts and I think he is a natural born performer."

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