

A Rhapsodic Fusion of East and West from the Canton Symphony Orchestra (Jan. 24)

by Tom Wachunas



Exiting Umstattd Hall after the January 24 “East Meets West” MasterWorks concert by the Canton Symphony Orchestra (CSO), I briefly noticed wide-eyed wonder on the face of a woman just ahead of me as she looked at her companion. I heard her gush, “Oh, those strings, those

glorious strings! I had no idea!” And I thought to myself ah *ha*... another convert.

She was probably voicing her pleasure at the orchestra’s remarkable performance of the last work on the program, Brahms’s *Symphony No. 4*, memorably rendered here with sharply majestic and passionate grace. Still, her glowing assessment could just as well have applied to the entire evening, beginning with Grieg’s *Holberg Suite*, with its rollicking pizzicatos from basses and cellos in the first movement, the delicate lyricism of the fourth movement, and bright dance energy of the fifth movement. Those glorious strings...*con brio* indeed.

But it was the second of the three program selections that delivered a delightfully more expansive sense of string power to these proceedings. *Pipa Concerto No. 2*, composed in 2013 by Zhao Jiping, was commissioned by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and co-commissioned by the CSO for world-renowned pipa soloist, Wu Man, who was the featured guest artist for this Ohio premiere of the work.

The single movement concerto is an adventurous pastiche that deftly weaves together modalities both traditionally Chinese and distinctly Western in flavor. Given Jiping’s distinguished history as a film score composer, it’s not surprising that this work would have a cinematic sensibility. At times it subtly evokes the spirit of John Williams’ most

extravagant orchestrations, and the folkloric poeticisms of Aaron Copland. In all, a lyrical merging of power and gentleness.

The real thrust of the work, however, lies in the astonishingly dexterous hands of Wu Man. You'd think that a four-stringed wooden instrument as ancient and delicate as the pipa would be swallowed up by lavish orchestral sonority. But a well-placed microphone was all that was required for Wu Man's artistry to be heard in perfect balance with the orchestra.

For all of her consummate technical facility in achieving a considerable array of timbres – from percussive and twangy to silken and liquid – Wu Man is as much a magician. She conjured textures and moods at will, joyous and pensive, here fanning the strings in lush cascades of staccato notes, there drawing out lilting melodic lines, or strumming furious, rhapsodic rhythms. She wasn't just playing the instrument. She was making it sing, whether in soaring unison with the orchestra, or in dramatic counterpoint. Particularly savory were Wu Man's various dialogues with other soloists in the orchestra, like gilt threads running through a plush tapestry – a shimmering frolic with the harp or violin, a haunting call and response with the cello.

Through it all, Wu Man's demeanor suggested the serenity of a Buddah, occasionally flashing a coy or knowing smile. When she wasn't clearly caught up in the sheer sweep of the music, she looked closely at conductor Gerhardt Zimmermann, perhaps not so much for cues or prompts, but as a mutually poignant embrace of a lovely or potent moment. They, and the orchestra, were wholly on the same page in a sustained musical meditation.

Late in the work there is a cadenza that seemingly explodes with an intensity reminiscent of brash Russian Romanticism. Yet the work ends not with a bang, but an airy whisper, a harkening back to ancient quiet. The audience clamored for an encore. The magician responded generously with a traditional, electrifying Chinese piece that left us standing in slack-jawed amazement.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 27, 2015.

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