

Cleveland Museum of Art: a conversation with pipa virtuoso Wu Man

by Mike Telin



The Cleveland Museum of Art's Performing Arts Series continues on Wednesday, April 8th at 7:30 pm with a concert by pipa virtuoso Wu Man in Gartner Auditorium. "I'm sure that people who are coming to the concert are prepared to listen to something they

are not familiar with," Wu Man said during a telephone conversation from Knoxville, Tennessee, where she was performing at the Big Ears Festival along with her longtime collaborators, the Kronos Quartet.

Wu Man's most recent Northeast Ohio performance was in January, when she performed Zhao Jiping's *Pipa Concerto No. 2* (2013) with the Canton Symphony Orchestra. Her concert at the museum will feature another 21st-century work, [*Ancient Dances*](#), a three-movement piece by Chen Yi for pipa, percussion, and video, combined with Chinese calligraphy. "*Ancient Dances* will make up the second half of the program. The first half will highlight traditional pipa repertoire and some of my own compositions and improvisations," Wu Man explained. "I will also include music from the time of the cultural revolution in the 1970s and 1980s. It's going to be a fun musical journey. During the concert I will talk about the different musical styles. My hope is that people will leave not only thinking the concert was cool, but also have a greater curiosity about other cultures."

Since arriving in the United States in the early 1990s, Wu Man has established a distinguished career as a pipa virtuoso, educator, composer and commissioner of new works for her 2,000 year-old instrument. She has worked tirelessly to engage audiences through concert tours (she is a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project) and multimedia projects that highlight the richness of China's ancient musical traditions, as

well as collaborations that cross artistic disciplines. She is a leading interpreter of contemporary pipa music by composers including Tan Dun, Philip Glass, Lou Harrison, Terry Riley, Bright Sheng and Chen Yi. Wu Man has also performed with many of the world's major orchestras, including the Austrian ORF Radio Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic and the New York Philharmonic. In 2013 she was named Musical America's Instrumentalist of the Year.

Why did Wu Man first begin playing the pipa? “When I was nine years old my parents decided for me — like typical Chinese parents (*tiger* parents, she added with a laugh). Of course they saw that I had musical talent. My father is a painter, and my mom is a teacher, so I grew up in an artist family — surrounded by all of my father's paintings, along with poetry and music. So for my parents, it made perfect sense for me to study music, particularly traditional music.”

Her first music teacher was a friend of her father's, who said he wanted to give her lessons because he had heard her sing and thought she had talent. At the age of thirteen she moved to Beijing to continue her studies at the Central Conservatory. “It's a very different system in China than in the United States when it comes to early education,” she pointed out. “And by then my parents and I all knew that I was going to have a career as a musician.”

What events led her to make the decision to come to the United States? “In the early 1980s the Chinese government opened the door to the West, and for the first time, I had the opportunity to hear Western music. I remember when Seiji Ozawa brought the Boston Symphony to Beijing. They visited my school, and Isaac Stern gave a master class.”

That was the experience that opened her eyes and mind to the world, she said. “I was in middle school, sitting in the master class with Stern. Although he was teaching violin, music is all the same, and it totally piqued my curiosity.” Following her graduation, she decided she wanted to see the world that existed outside of China. “I wanted to know things about the people. What do people do for work? What do they look like? How do they spend their days?”

Still, there was one very big question that was left unanswered: could she survive as a musician playing a Chinese instrument in the West? “So I challenged myself,” she said matter-of-factly. “I wanted to bring the pipa to a much bigger stage, to step outside of China with what I think is a cool instrument.”

That was what Wu Man wanted, but were Western audiences willing to listen? “It's always a challenge at the very beginning with anything you do. That's not to say that I still don't have challenges. But yes, 20-something years ago nobody knew Chinese music.

Nor did they know what a pipa was. This was back in the early 1990s, so the first challenge was figuring out the best way to introduce people to the instrument.”

Soon after arriving in the U.S., Wu Man became involved with a Chinese ensemble in New York’s Chinatown which presented educational activities in high schools, senior centers, hospitals and any place there were people who would listen. “The ensemble was great. Not only did I have a chance to play the instrument, but I could see how the audience would react when they heard it. It didn’t matter to me who they were, young or old, I just wanted to see their reaction. At first it was difficult, and of course my friends were all laughing and telling me that I was very stubborn when I refused to stop trying. But I *am* very stubborn. And then a great thing happened. I had the opportunity to work with the Kronos Quartet back in 1992 or ‘93. That gave me the bigger stage I was looking for and it opened up my career. We’ve been working together for almost 25 years now, and constantly doing different projects. We’re all like a family.”

Wu Man continues to find pleasure in sharing her artistry and culture with communities around the country. This year she served as the first Musician-in-Residence at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. “They have a beautiful Chinese garden that was renovated a few years ago. It has a stage, and they thought it would be nice to create an artist residency in the garden. I was the first lucky person to be chosen. The garden is exactly like the gardens in my hometown in China. I have done a lot of educational activities like giving lectures about Chinese music at middle and high schools in the area. I also invited musicians from Japan and Korea to share the stage with me and gave recitals in the garden. It’s really about giving audiences a different experience. When you’re sitting in the garden, playing the pipa under the moonlight with the birds singing, it’s like ‘yes, this is it!’”

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