

Sheng virtuoso Wu Wei at CMA (Mar. 11)

By Peter Feher



Wu Wei is one of the world's best players of an instrument you've likely never heard. The Chinese *sheng* virtuoso took advantage of this fact from the start of his dazzling program at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium on March 11.

The stage was barely lit, and the rest of the hall was pitch black, when he made his entrance from the back of the house, down one of the aisles. His playing mingled with the other sounds in the auditorium — a violin line floating along the opposite aisle and spectral notes coming from the cello, harpsichord, and percussion onstage.

The music, a 7th-century piece in the Japanese *gagaku* style (historically used for imperial court music), could have served as a traditional vehicle to showcase the ancient Asian instrument, but Wu Wei kept his part ambiguous. In the dark, the sheng sounded sometimes like the strings, sometimes like the percussion, but most often like a completely different set of instruments: the droning of an organ, oboe, harmonica, accordion, or even bagpipes.

There's a reason for the resemblances. The Chinese sheng, first brought to Japan and later to Europe, was a model for many Western instruments that combine air and reeds. Like a woodwind, the sheng is mouth-blown, but like an accordion or harmonica, the reeds are embedded in the instrument. ("Free reed" is the term for this latter group.)

The program made clever connections between Eastern and Western classical traditions. The opening *gagaku* music, titled *Banchikicho no Choshi*, segued into an arrangement of the Andante from Bach's *Sonata for Violin Solo No. 2 in a*, BWV 1003. Both works seemed to suspend time, an effect Wu Wei accomplished in the Bach by drawing out the transitions that finish one phrase and start another.

Virtuosity was another link between traditions. Antonio Vivaldi's setting of *La Folia*, each Baroque variation of the theme more ornamented than the next, demanded pyrotechnics from the sheng, and from violinist Miho Hashizume and cellist Charles Bernard, who met the challenge brilliantly.

Arrangements of two traditional Chinese compositions — Mao Yuan's *Dance Song of Yao* and Nie Er's *Dragon Dance* — called for more variety from the performers. Percussionist Thomas Sherwood used everything from mallets to bow to fingertips, QinYing Tan alternated between harpsichord and piano, and Wu Wei even took up another instrument, the flute-like *bawu*.

The sheng may have centuries of history to fall back on, but this performer is still looking for ways to innovate. Keeyong Chong's *Jing Xin Hua Hai* had him unaccompanied and experimenting with unconventional techniques — humming, buzzing, throat singing, or just blowing across the wrong end of the instrument.

More contemporary pieces continued to push the abstractions. Fang Man's *Song of the Flaming Phoenix* and Guoping Jia's *The Wind Sounds in the Sky* start with simple conceits — bird song, a rush of air — but quickly grow cerebral and complex, though Wu Wei and his fellow musicians, always in control, kept the music comprehensible.

Huang Ruo's *Wind Blows* represented something of a middle ground. The piano drones a simple left-hand figure while the sheng traces an expressive line above. Breath and air are again the inspiration — a universal theme connecting so much music.

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