thousand varieties of folk music still thrive in China’s villages, but after 60 years of communism, Red Guardism, and rampant capitalism, China’s court tradition has withered on the vine. Relentlessly, the country’s rulers have now woken up to the musical heritage they have all but lost. Hence the eagerness with which they are now promoting young virtuosos on the pipa, which historically spanned both court and folk traditions, without belonging entirely to either. And hence the close attention Western musicians are paying to the new soundworlds being opened up through cross-cultural collaborations led by the instrument’s most celebrated exponent, Wu Man. “The shape and the sound of the pipa is elegant, yet also dramatic,” she says. “And its personality is strong – you can express yourself in many ways.”

As a soloist, the effects Wu Man can extract from her instrument cover a very wide spectrum: it can carac, crack jokes and sing sweetly, or it can howl and roar to a degree you’d scarcely dream possible with ten fingers and four strings stretched over a shallow rosewood box. Her musical lineage plugs directly into imperial times. Her professor at the Beijing conservatoire was the virtuoso Lin Shicheng (1922-2006), whose tutor Shen Hashe (1889-1953) had published a seminal pipa manual in 1929. He himself had studied with Chen Zijing (1897-1951), a brilliant young player who had been pressed into service by the royal family after he won a competition in Shanghai, before being summarily dismissed for being caught giving lessons to a prostitute: the solo pipa was the preserve of the elite.

Pipa history

Wu Man’s distinguished musical lineage is nothing compared to that of her instrument. First known as the han pipa, its earliest representations are in sculptures from the Gandhara kingdom, which held sway, with its civilising Greek and Indian influences, in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan in the third century BC. Literary legend has it that in the first century BC, two elders Han princesses had it played to them to assuage their homesickness: one of them, Wang Zhaojun, is remembered as a “child of the Cultural Revolution,” find her métier? Born in 1963 in the historic city of Hangzhou, near Shanghai, she loved the marching bands and Madame Mao’s “Eight Model Opera,” and it was a song from one of those that a neighbour heard her sing while she was working in the communal laundry when she was eight. “He was so surprised by my musicality,” she recalls, “that he told my parents I should study music.” She began to take lessons on a miniature version of the pipa called a liu qin on a miniature version of the pipa called a liu qin, and four strings stretched over a shallow rosewood box. Her musical lineage plugs directly into imperial times. Her professor at the Beijing conservatoire was the virtuoso Lin Shicheng (1922-2006), whose tutor Shen Hashe (1889-1953) had published a seminal pipa manual in 1929. He himself had studied with Chen Zijing (1897-1951), a brilliant young player who had been pressed into service by the royal family after he won a competition in Shanghai, before being summarily dismissed for being caught giving lessons to a prostitute: the solo pipa was the preserve of the elite.

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top, and was made a professor: “And people told me, you are the rising star, the next pipa master. But I couldn’t limit myself to the ten big traditional pieces all my life – that would have been a prison. So I thought, what’s next?”

Fleeing the unnatural silence which fell on the streets of Beijing after the Tiananmen massacre, she took her pipa (plus four other string instruments) to New York, where she was welcomed with open arms by an expat Chinese ensemble. The turning point came with a phone call from David Harrington, leader of Kronos Quartet, who had seen a video of her performing a piece by her fellow expat Zhou Long. Thus began a creative partnership which has led to several others. When Wu Man and Kronos were premiering Tan Dun’s *Ghost Opera* in 1995, the composer Terry Riley happened to be in the audience: that has led to further collaborations, with Riley accompanying her by singing and playing the *tanpura* drone. “I realised that her nuances on the pipa – what happens between the notes – were very similar to the way they are in Indian classical music,” he says.

But what makes the tone-colour of the instrument quintessentially Chinese is its absolute transparency, and the way notes are bent. Where, I ask, do beginners start? “With a tremolo,” responds Wu Man. “I had to practise it non-stop for three years, and it’s the hardest thing. You start repeating the same note slowly, and then speed up.” She demonstrates, getting faster and faster, and then with all five fingers: her hand is now a blur. “It’s less a matter of speed,” she explains, “than of absolute evenness, and making a good sound.” The next big thing, she says, is a left-hand scale, pressing the string between the frets. Then, making the most of her plastic fingernails, she demonstrates a wailing slide, making a sound reminiscent of the slide guitar and the Vietnamese *dan bau* (monochord). Then she shows how, by pushing a string to one side, she can bend the pitch by a third of a tone. And yes, she gets calluses on her fingers.

Wu Man was trained by Lin Shicheng in the southern Pudong style, which is more elegant and leans more on vibrato and harmonics than the wild and forceful style of the north. She adds that the silk strings in use one hundred years ago would have created a very different effect from nylon, which appeared in the 50s, and even more from today’s steel strings, more suited to bigger auditoria.

Wu Man has four instruments; all have different decorations on the head. One for instance has a *yue* (flower), the Chinese character for music, while another is currently performing on has a dragon on it which symbolises power. This instrument has special significance, having belonged to her late master Lin Shicheng. Made from a single piece of rosewood, it’s surprisingly heavy.

**Pipa evolution**

A variety of materials go into the instrument’s making. The back of the most common kind is made of teak, and the soundboard of light wutong wood, also commonly used for the *qin* and *guzheng* zithers. The upper frets (on the neck) and the tuning pegs are made of ivory; buffalo horn or wood; the lower frets (on the body) are made of bamboo. The head is slanted slightly, with its middle part often inlaid with jade or ivory. Over the centuries, the number of frets has steadily increased: most now have 16 frets and span three octaves, but a type developed in the 50s had 30 frets, with a correspondingly larger register. Most of the frets produce intervals corresponding to Western whole-tones, with a few producing three-quarter tones. The intervals between the four strings are a fourth, a second and a fourth – *A, D, E, A* from bottom to top.

Wu Man has made her own modification, adding a wah-wah pedal which she uses for jazz collaborations. In the 70s, she says, some pipa-makers started producing electronic pipa, but the all-important tremolos sounded so muddy that nobody wanted to buy them. It’s by no means the most popular instrument in China now, but quite a lot of children in the big cities take private lessons in it and a basic instrument costs between $500 and $1,000. Since Wu Man is now such a celebrity – Ryuichi Sakamoto drafted her in for the soundtrack of *The Last Emperor*; Ang Lee used her music in *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink Man Woman*; and Bill Clinton made her the first Chinese musician to perform at the White House – the Chinese government has been cashing in, getting her to help open the Special Olympics in Shanghai. “They are happy for me to give masterclasses to students,” she says, “but though I’m respected in Chinese musical circles, and have pipa followers who play the pieces I have premiered, I’m not...
famous like Lang Lang [the pianist].” Quite so.

In China the piano has now eclipsed the pipa, to a point where its future probably lies more with enthusiasts in the West. And with avant-gardists leaping on the bandwagon and queuing to write pieces for Wu Man, as Lou Harrison, Philip Glass, Tan Dun and other composers have done – the pipa’s future looks good. Her recent recording of Lou Harrison’s Pipa Concerto won her a first Grammy nomination for a Chinese instrument. Kronos Pipes and with an ensemble.

The composer says. “The pipa can combine with Western instruments to explore new sonorities, textures and timbres – it can create new soundworlds, and Wu Man is helping my explorations. I can combine the pipa with string instruments in a joint pizzicato, and I can also make it create long lines by fast rotation of the fingers on one note, so that the pipa seems to be playing one long note while the bowed instruments can be plucking, so their traditional roles are reversed. This is music for the 21st century.”

The pipa remains essentially a solo instrument, in irreducible symbiosis with its player. How does Wu Man sum up her feelings for it? Her reply comes quick as a flash: “My instrument is my child, my lover, the other half of me.” Then she lays an affectionate hand on its closed box. “We’ve been through so many things together, in the last 30 years. We have down-time together too – sometimes things don’t work between us.” Does it have a gender? “Yes. It’s a she.”

Win

We have three copies of Wu Man’s Wu Man and Friends album to give away. To enter, answer the following question: What year was Wu Man born in?

See Wu Man performing on this issue’s podcast. The Pipa from a Distance (Naxos World, 2003) New music for pipa including collaborations with didgeridoo, trombone, guitar and sampling.

Various Artists, Traditions and Transformations: Sounds of Silk Road Chicago (CSO Resound, 2008)

Wu Man with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in Lou Harrison’s Pipa Concerto, the first by a Western composer dating from 1997. Plus works by Prokofiev, Bloch and Mongolian composer Sharav.

Yu Lingling, Xu Lai (Felmay, 2009)

A young player who has her own kind of virtuosity. One to watch for the future. Reviewed in #61.

Liu Fang, Le Son de Soie (Accords Croisés, 2006)

Fusions with oud, flute and kora master Ballake Sissoko. Liu Fang is another fine virtuoso on pipa and guzheng.

Liu Fang, The Soul of the Pipa 2 (PhilMultic, 2006)

Solo collection of Chinese pieces from ancient to modern.

LIVE Wu Man performs with the Silk Road Ensemble at the BBC Proms on September 11

PODCAST You can hear a track from Wu Man on this issue’s podcast

EXCLUSIVE VIDEO See Wu Man performing a traditional piece on our interactive sampler: www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/062