

SHANGHAI QUARTET

WEIGANG LI, VIOLIN
YI-WEN JIANG, VIOLIN
HONGGANG LI, VIOLA
NICHOLAS TZAVARAS, CELLO

WITH SPECIAL GUEST PERFORMER, WANG GUOWEI, ERHU

Tuesday, January 13, 2009

~ PROGRAM ~

String Quartet, Op. 11 SAMUEL BARBER
Molto allegro e appassionato (1910-1981)
Adagio
Molto adagio-presto

Listening to the Pines HUA YANJUN
Erhu solo performed by Wang Guowei (1893-1950)

Fiddle Suite for Erhu and String Quartet CHEN YI
Singing (b. 1953)
Reciting
Dancing

~ INTERMISSION ~

String Quartet in F Major MAURICE RAVEL
Allegro moderato (très doux) (1875-1937)
Assez vif - (très rythmé) - Lent - Tempo 1
Très lent
Vif et agité

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SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)
String Quartet in b minor, Op.11 (1936)

Samuel Barber was born in the quiet town of Westchester, Pennsylvania, in 1910. His early childhood corresponded in uncanny ways to that of his British contemporary, composer Benjamin Britten. Both grew up in well-to-do families who were eventually supportive of their musical talents, with mothers who were amateur musicians themselves and fathers who were in the field of medicine. Both boys received early piano lessons, and created their own compositions by the time they started to school. Barber's maternal aunt was the Metropolitan Opera contralto Louise Homer. His uncle, the composer Sidney Homer, primarily a songwriter, served as Barber's mentor for many years. At the age of fourteen, Barber entered the Curtis Institute in its inaugural year (1924). Students at Curtis had ample exposure to both the classical and contemporary repertoire, due to performances by the Philadelphia Orchestra under the direction of the young Leopold Stokowski. Barber spent his next eight school years at Curtis and his summers in Italy with others of his class who were protégés of their composition professor Rosario Scalero—among those students was Gian Carlo Menotti, who was to become Barber's closest friend. During this period (1931) Barber composed his well-known *Dover Beach*, a chamber work for string quartet and voice, as well as the overture to *School for Scandal*. He quickly developed the stylistic elements that were to remain with him for his entire career: long lyric lines, skillful setting of text, and interesting use of instrumental color. His use of harmony was basically that of the late 19th century.

Barber's only full-length string quartet was composed in 1936 when he was twenty-six years old, had left Curtis, and was a resident of the American Academy in Rome, having earned a Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship and the Prix de Rome. In a letter written on August 5, he confided to his teacher, Scalero, "I have started a string quartet: but how difficult it is! It seems to me that because we have so assiduously forced our personalities on Music—on Music, who never asked for them!—we have lost elegance; and if we cannot recapture elegance, the quartet-form has escaped us forever. It is a struggle."

The first performance of the quartet was given by the Pro Arte Quartet on December 14, 1936, at the Villa Aurelia in Rome. At the time Barber was so unhappy with the final movement that, following the performance, he withdrew it for revision and the quartet remained in this Allegro-Adagio form for several years. At a performance given by the Curtis Quartet in Philadelphia, March 7, 1937, to honor Barber's birthday, only these two

movements were included. During the summer of 1938, a radio broadcast by the Curtis Quartet prompted this humorous note by Barber who heard the performance during a car trip from Maine to Lake George:

“Bravo for the quartet for the broadcast on Monday and many apologies for not having wired you at once. I tried to in two towns in Vermont, but the wires were still down from the storm ... I certainly heard it in most picturesque surroundings... We had no radio in the car: and, of course, about 3 o’clock we were in the most deserted stretch of Vermont woods. So we stopped in a small town of three stores. The grocery store was the only house that boasted a radio, and there, surrounded by hams, sausages, and flour I heard your fine performance and very clearly. A couple of Green Mountain boys were hanging around, listened with some curiosity and launched a few well-aimed shots during the Adagio, at a corner spittoon. All very rural!”

The final version of the quartet was not published until 1943. The first movement is in sonata form and begins with a dramatic statement played by all instruments in unison. This section is soon followed by a quiet chorale that in turn gives way to a scherzando section derived from the first theme. A wistful interlude in which all voices participate and a cello pizzicato passage lead to the recapitulation, followed by a coda in which the cello winds down the movement.

The Adagio needs no words of introduction, as it speaks intimately to each individual listener. The long stepwise melody unfolds quietly, builds to a climax, and returns to a peaceful ending. Both the quartet and the string orchestra version of this movement, (arranged at the request of Arturo Toscanini for the NBC Symphony orchestra), are today performed at some of the most moving and prayerful gatherings. The short third movement is not labeled as such in some editions but is instead considered part of the second movement. The Adagio ends with the instruction “attacca” to lead into the Molto Allegro and this Allegro may strike the listener as an afterthought. Themes from the first movement are reworked briefly and rounded off with a coda, giving the entire quartet a cyclical form. The manuscript of the original third movement, the version that was discarded by Barber, can be found at the Curtis Institute of Music. One feels as if Barber found it almost impossible to compose a movement that could follow his Adagio.

After all of the indecision and the rewriting of this quartet, Barber did not seem enthusiastic about writing another string quartet and, though he initiated an attempt in 1949, it was never completed.

Program note © Margaret Bragg, September 2008

HUA YANJUN (1893-1950)

Listening to the Pines

The composer, popularly known as Abing the blind musician, lived in the southern city of Wuxi in the early 20th century. His music reflects an undaunted spirit in the face of the hardships of life. The majestic pine tree is a metaphor for the strength and experience of age. Big melodic skips with dramatic changes in tempo and dynamics create a heroic effect.

Program note © Wang Guowei

CHEN YI (b. 1953)

Fiddle Suite for Erhu and String Quartet

The *Fiddle Suite for Erhu and String Quartet* is one of composer Chen Yi's most-played works (with four performances already scheduled for later this year and next in the U.S. and in Germany). The erhu belongs to a family of similar Chinese bowed instruments (essentially a two-silk-stringed, vertically-played violin) that vary in size and character, and whose signature sound can have many applications. With the *Fiddle Suite*, Chen Yi has created a fascinating exploration of the many capabilities of this quintessentially "Chinese" instrument, employing the characteristics and capacities of a medium-, large-, and small-sized (or "Peking Opera") erhu, respectively, in each of the *Fiddle Suite's* three movements. A demonstration of these instruments by the featured soloist, world-renowned erhu master Xu Ke, preceded the performance of the suite.

In the first movement, "Singing," a figuratively singing folk-like unison of the strings soon becomes a polyphonic arrangement that eventually retreats into the background as a contrasting dissonance to the erhu's melodiousness. Later on, the cello recapitulates the opening folk melody as a preparation for a virtuosic erhu passage that sounds like a cadenza-like improvisation of the melody.

The second movement, entitled "Reciting," was intended to have the erhu replicate the exaggerated reciting voice used in Chinese operatic style. The closest Western analog to this reciting style is Schoenbergian Sprechstimme, the highly inflected and elongated articulation of syllables one hears, for example, in *Pierrot Lunaire*. As the movement begins, trills, tremolos and glissandi in the strings set the sonic stage for the larger and deeper-sounding erhu's "recitation" of the poem "Bright Moon, how oft art thou with us?" by Sung Dynasty poet Su Shi (1036-1101). The reciting is

joined by the strings, which soon grow silent as the erhu goes on to complete its declaiming. Once the erhu is finished, the strings return with the trills, tremolos and glissandi, and then evaporate. In "Dancing," the higher-pitched small erhu gives a biting edginess to an intensely frenetic third movement, whose propulsive energy one expects can only come to a sudden stop, as eventually it does.

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)
Quartet in F Major (1902-03)

The movement of French artists away from Germanic influence after the nation's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war was the result of a deliberate, albeit spontaneous, impulse to distance themselves from everything German. Thus, post-war France saw the explosive emergence of a distinctive French voice in literature, poetry, painting, and music. Into that world Ravel was born in 1875, to a Swiss-French father and a Spanish-Basque mother. His father, an engineer-inventor with a Swiss degree in music harmony, was in Spain building railways when he met and married the young Basque. Maurice, was born there, a first child. The Ravels soon moved to Paris where they seem to have provided their young son with a happy and music-filled childhood. At age 14 he entered the Paris Conservatory as a piano student. Although admired for his compositions by fellow classmates, he failed to impress the staid faculty of the Conservatory, won no prizes, and left at age 20. Away from the Conservatory, he worked with Stravinsky in Switzerland while continuing to experiment on his own, viewing with admiration the iconoclasts Satie and Debussy. At the same time he was drawn to the individuality of the self-taught composers Chabrier and Mussorgsky. He ultimately returned to the Paris Conservatory, now under the direction of the more forward-looking Gabriel Fauré with whom he would study until age 29. This second apprenticeship at the Conservatory was also characterized by frustrations and disappointments thanks to an academic hierarchy largely uninterested in contemporary ideas. Despite Fauré's support, Ravel failed four times to win a Prix de Rome, even though he already had recognition outside the school. When, now aged 28, Ravel showed Fauré the mostly-finished score of his string quartet, Fauré criticized it severely and asked for a revision. Instead, Ravel sent it to Debussy whose own string quartet was a success of 10 years' standing. Debussy's famous response: "In the name of the gods of music and for my sake personally, do not lay another finger on your Quartet." At publication it was dedicated to Fauré.

The Quartet is in four movements of brilliant color, motion, and

texture. The first, marked "*trés doux*," starts with the bold simplicity of an ascending diatonic scale underpinning a guileless melody. Although tonality is never in doubt, Ravel makes great use of the ambiguous-sounding parallel chord progressions which were a trademark of the modern French School. The effect is dreamy. The second movement is rhythmically complex, with many passages written simultaneously in 6/8 and 3/4 time, evoking the vigorous cross-accented music from the Iberian Peninsula. Ravel introduces extensive use of pizzicato in this movement, alternating that timbre with the muffled sound of muted strings in the middle section. The slow third movement injects thematic material from the first while employing various meters and a lush display of colors. The *Finale* is even more rhythmically bold, opening with a meter of 5/8, then changing to 5/4 and 3/4. A rambunctious Spanish dance influence is unmistakable, as is the music's debt to the French School.

The first recording of this Quartet was made in Paris by the Galimir Quartet in the 1930's on the Polydor label, at the composer's request and under his direct supervision.

Program note © by Nora Avins Klein, September, 2008

Wang Guowei

Wang Guowei has maintained a life-long interest in promoting traditional and contemporary Chinese music both as erhu performer and composer. Born 1961 in Shanghai, he joined the Shanghai Traditional Orchestra at age 17, later becoming erhu soloist and concertmaster. He also earned a degree from the Shanghai Conservatory. He gained national prominence in garnering prestigious awards including the "ART Cup" at the 1989 International Chinese Instrumental Music Competition and received accolades for his performances at the 15th annual "Shanghai Spring Music Festival." In America, Wang Guowei has been hailed by the New York Times and the Washington Post music critics as a "master of the erhu" and praised for his "extraordinary" and "gorgeous" playing of the instrument.

As a composer, Wang Guowei's interest lies in expanding the musical vocabulary of the erhu and other Chinese instruments in both traditional and contemporary styles. His musical compositions reflect his mastery of the idiomatic language and nuanced expressions of the 2-string fiddles and creative use of extended techniques. Varied couplings with other Chinese and Western instruments explore new sonic landscapes.

As a soloist, his first-hand knowledge of erhu's performance techniques and musical idioms has led to the creation of several works that

enlarge the erhu's new music repertoire. His major works include "Sheng," a solo for erhu which he premiered in 1996; "Tea House" for Chinese ensemble and tape which premiered on Australia's ABC Radio National and performed at the 1998 Adelaide and Melbourne festivals; "Two Pieces for Percussion Quartet: Kong-Wu" commissioned and premiered by the Ethos Percussion Group at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall (2000) and recorded on the group's Sol Tunnels CD; American Composers Forum commission "Three Poems for Erhu" premiered by Music From China in 2002; "Tang Wind" commissioned in 2004 by the New York based Multicultural Group incorporating three Chinese plucked instruments with a Western orchestra; and "Two Plus Two" commissioned by Music From China for huqin, cello and percussion supported with grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and National Endowment for the Arts.

Shanghai Quartet

Originally formed in Shanghai 25 years ago, this versatile ensemble is known for their passionate musicality, impressive technique, and multicultural innovations. The Shanghai Quartet's elegant style of melding the delicacy of Eastern music with the emotional breadth of Western repertoire allows them to traverse the genres, from traditional Chinese folk music to cutting-edge contemporary classical works. To celebrate their 25th anniversary (2008-09), the Quartet will premiere commissions from the three continents that comprise their artistic and cultural worlds: Chen Yi, Krzysztof Penderecki, and jazz pianist Dick Hyman.

The Quartet has performed on the world's most prominent concert stages, and regularly tours the great music centers of Europe, North and South America, and Asia. Recent seasons have included tours of Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. The Quartet has made regular appearances at Carnegie Hall both in chamber performance and with orchestra, and in 2006 performed the world premiere of a Concerto for Quartet and Orchestra by Takuma Itoh in Carnegie's Isaac Stern Auditorium.

The Quartet has a long history of championing new music and juxtaposing Eastern and Western sounds. In addition to their 25th Anniversary Commissions, the Quartet's range of commissions and premieres includes Works by Lowell Lieberman, Bright Sheng, and Zhou Long, among others.

The Quartet has built an extensive discography that now totals over 20 recordings, on multiple labels, and has appeared in a diverse and interesting array of media projects. They performed on the soundtrack recording (Bartok

Quartet No. 4), as well as making a cameo appearance on screen, for the Woody Allen film, "Melinda and Melinda." They have appeared on PBS's Great Performances television series. Other on-screen film accomplishments include an appearance by violinist Weigang Li in the documentary "From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China," and cellist Nick Tzavaras' family was the subject of the 1999 film "Music of the Heart," which starred Meryl Streep.

The Quartet has a distinguished teaching record. They serve as the Ensemble-in-Residence at Montclair State University. They also serve as visiting professors at the Shanghai Conservatory and the Central Conservatory in China.

Visit the Shanghai Quartet on the World Wide Web at shanghaiquartet.com.