

Introduction of Butterfly Violin Concerto

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Abstract: The Butterfly Lovers' violin concerto is the most popular violin composition in mainland China. It is also called Liang Zhu (Chinese name for Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto), the abbreviated names of Liang (family name) Shanbo and Zhu (family name) Yingtai, the central protagonists in the original tale.

Keywords: Butterfly Lovers, Violin, Music, Traditional operas

1. INTRODUCTION

Liang Zhu is the Chinese concerto with the most performances and recordings in the world. There are two main composers listed in the score: He Zhanhao (1933-present) and Chen Gang (1935-present). (In this dissertation, I present Chinese names according to the preferred order in China, last name followed by given name). He and Chen were both students studying in Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1950s. At that time, Chinese people had very little exposure to violin compositions, thus it was necessary to have a piece written in violin with the most familiar tunes from traditional operas and folk music so that the general audience could understand both the music and the instrument. The main music elements for this concerto are from *Yue* Opera (Opera, 2020). *Yue* opera, also called Shaoxing Opera, is one of the major Chinese operas. Originating in Shengzhou, Zhejiang province, *Yue* opera flourished in Shanghai and southern regions of China. It is now the second largest Chinese opera. The tune of the *Yue* Opera is very soft, sweet and graceful, also full of color. In the early times, *Yue* Opera had only male actors. After the opera entered Shanghai, female actress became popular, and it developed into an opera with all roles played by actresses. The basic stage voice of *Yue* Opera is the Sheng topolect of Chinese, and later it absorbed Zhongzhou and Mandarin topolects, which promoted *Yue* Opera to expand the audience. The main musical instruments of *Yue* Opera orchestra are bangu and yuehu (Zhang & Greive, 2001). Like erhu, yuehu is a two-stringed instrument mainly accompanying for *Yue* opera. Other accompanying instruments include yangqin, erhu, zhonghu and cello. The famous *Yue* opera pieces are: Butterfly Lovers, The Dream of the Red Chamber, The Romance of The Western Chamber, Xiang Lin's wife, Han Palace Sorrows, and many others.

According to He Zhanhao, he also absorbed the motives and melodies from Kun opera, especially in the reformation section of the concerto (Li, 2015). Kun opera, also named Kunju or Kunqu, is a drama that uses a single sound to play the stories (Opera, 2021). Kun Opera was formed in Wanli Period of Ming Dynasty. It is one of the oldest traditional operas of the Han nationality. Kun opera uses beautiful melodic lines to express the voice, and it is known for its lingering, gentle and long-distance. In order to make it perfect, the performer should pay attention to the sound, rhythm and speed, and also the pronunciation and articulation. The main accompaniment instruments are pipa and sanxian, a three-stringed erhu primarily used in Kun opera. This concerto borrowed several playing styles from traditional Chinese music instruments.

The first one is erhu, a two-stringed Chinese fiddle. It is the most famous Chinese traditional musical instrument. A bowed instrument, like the violin in the west, erhu appeared as early as one thousand years ago, in the Tang Dynasty. Due to the change of the different local opera style, Erhu gradually diverged into different styles, with banhu meeting the needs of Shanxi Opera and Henan Opera, jinghu meeting the needs of Peking Opera and Han Opera, hanghu meeting the needs of Henan Zhuizi, and gaohu meeting the needs of Cantonese Opera. They are used in many regional operas and folk music. Erhu has two strings, tuned to a perfect fifth (usually D and A), and a register of around four octaves. It consists of a long neck, two tuning pegs and a small sound box in the bottom, which covered with snakeskin. In the *Butterfly Lovers' violin concerto*, the solo violin borrowed extensively the playing style from erhu in both left-hand and right-hand techniques (Chien, 2014). Jinhui is another bowed instrument in the huqin family, like the erhu. The main purpose to use this instrument in Peking opera. It is the smallest instrument in Huqin family and therefore it has the highest pitch, with a register of only two octaves (Yang, 2021). Pipa is the most important Chinese plucked instruments and is used as both solo and orchestral performance. It originated from Middle and West Asia, arriving in China during the Qin Dynasty. The instrument has a pear-shaped body and a wood belly, with four strings together with twenty-nine to thirty-one frets on the neck and body. The sound of pipa is crisp like two jades colliding with each other. The performance technique is complicated, and include glissando, harmonics and tremolos. The name pipa is derived from the right-hand techniques: pi means to play forward (also called tan) and pa means to play backward (also called tiao). The four strings tunes to c-f-g-c'. There are all in relative pitch and the last c is equal to middle C. Guzheng (or just zheng) is a Chinese plucked zither, with a

history that also traces back to the Qin Dynasty. The modern zheng has twenty-one strings across an oblong wooden box is 163 centimeters (5 feet) long and 30 centimeters (11 inches) wide. The movable bridges have the function of tuning, and also divide the strings into right and left sections. The tuning register for zheng is four octaves in a pentatonic scale. The performer uses the right hand to pluck the notes to the right of the bridges while the left hand adds ornaments to the left of the bridges. Performers also use plectra made of ivory, jade, or tortoise shell on the four fingers of each hand.

2. BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF THE CONCERTO

In this part, I provide a brief biography and describe the writing process of the two main composers, He Zhanhao and Chen Gang, talk about their collaborations with other students to complete the Butterfly Lovers' concerto, as well as the violin student who gave the premier, Yu Lina. This chapter will also explore their innovative writing and creation of new violin techniques. Yu Lina was the student of Shanghai Conservatory in 1959 and she, together with another student, Shen Rong, were asked to prepare the premier concert by school (Sheng, 2018). Both of two violin students worked closely with He Zhanhao and Chen Gang in the composition process.

Because of the unique interpretation of Chinese music, Yu was finally chosen as the premier violinist and she is a recognized authority on this piece. Her recordings deserve study and analysis. Shen Rong's interpretation and playing style are worth listening to also. The only recording of hers was published in the same album of Yu's, which is a rare and significant audio material available to us (Zhou, 2021). In 1959, the famous Czech Smetana String Quartet traveled to China and played the original version of the piece, "Xiao Liang Zhu," a three-minute version. The Smetana quartet was the first European group to play the piece. This quartet version is valuable because it is the predecessor of the Butterfly Lovers' violin concerto. The violinists encountered some technical problems related to the style of Chinese traditional slides, which they eventually solved with the help of composer He Zhanhao. With the study of several sources including interview by Waitan Pictures and Xin Newspaper, we know that Gil Shaham and Takako Nishizaki put significant research into grasping the soul of the Chinese musical style, resulting in unique interpretations. Their recordings have been very well

received by Chinese press and enjoyed by the community (Deng, 2023; Fischer, 2013).

3. HE ZHANHAO AND HIS “XIAO LIANG ZHU”

He Zhanhao, one of the two main composers of *Butterfly Lovers’* violin concerto, was a member of the Zhejiang Yue opera troupe during his teenage years (Li, 2015). During that time, he learned to play and studied the mechanics of *erhu*, and later used his knowledge of the instrument to incorporate technical elements to be reproduced on the violin in the *Butterfly Lovers’* violin concerto. Later he entered the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and studied violin and composition. In the 1950s, students were required to go to the rural areas to learn from farmers how to cultivate the land. Instead of working on the farm, students of Shanghai Conservatory played the western music to the farmers. Due to poor access to education, most of the farmers were never exposed to western music or culture and therefore could not appreciate either the western instruments or the western pieces (Li, 2015). Through this unsuccessful experience, they realized that the violin must be nationalized so that everyone could understand the music. It was important to choose some Chinese tunes to perform on violin. In 1958, together with another composition student, Chen Gang, He Zhanhao founded a research team to compose a western instrumental piece in Chinese traditional music style. *Liang Zhu* was a piece they wrote as an experiment. The two composers, along with four other violin students founded an experimental group focused on violin nationalization, collecting popular passages from Yue opera and transcribing them for violin. During this period, they first composed *Xiao Liang Zhu* in a string quartet version. This three-minute version of the *Butterfly Lovers’* is the predecessor to the violin concerto. Unfortunately, this string quartet, known as the earliest version in China, was rarely played for a long time. When the famous Smetana String Quartet travelled to China in 1958, they asked to play it (Luo, 2020). The first violinist, Jiří Novák even called He from his hotel room to ask him about the sliding technique in the violin part, since he never saw this Chinese traditional style technique in western pieces. According to He’s explanation, a special sign is commonly used in Chinese folk music to show the performance of glide, but it is rare in Western European music. The musicians from the Smetana quartet did not understand it because it was a special innovation from He Zhanhao. This short quartet version of *Liang Zhu* was never published,

and the full score was missing and could not find till now. He Zhanhao recorded from the score for the earliest recording. After sixty years, the cello part of the quartet score was finally discovered from a collection of old books. In 1959, the experimental group was asked by the conservatory to create a larger violin concerto version of Liang Zhu based on the string quartet version in order to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the founding of new China. Though there are only two names printed on the front page, this concerto was the achievement of a group of students. He Zhanhao composed the melody, Chen Gang was responsible for the orchestration, and Ding Zhinuo handled the violin technique. Ding Zhinuo, now violin professor in Shanghai Conservatory of Music was a student at the conservatory in 1959; her father, Ding Shande, was associate dean and composition professor there. Ding Shande mentored them every week as they worked on this new composition. As we know, the storyline of Butterfly Lovers' violin concerto has three parts: love, protest and transfiguration. When they gave the premier performance in Shanghai Conservatory, the transfiguration part was deleted out of superstition by both composers. But the teachers had different opinions: they considered the piece a combination of realism and romanticism in keeping with the ways of traditional music, a representation of people's expectation for a better and beautiful life. He Zhanhao adapted the motives and melodies from Kun opera, and combined the tunes from Yue opera to form the most touching part, the transfiguration. Overall, the Butterfly Lovers' violin concerto is a collaborative achievement of several generations of Chinese musicians. The collaborative aspect of the project and its success included a great social element and was described as the crystallization of the wisdom by Chinese people (Li, 2015).

4. CHEN GANG AND TAKAKO NISHIZAKI

Chen Gang is one of the most important composers in China. He is the co-writer of the Butterfly lovers' violin concerto. He studied composition with his father, Chen Gexin, and with Ding Shande, when he was a student at the Shanghai Conservatory of music. Liang Zhu is one of his most important pieces. He used one movement sonata form to build a tragic story program music. With all the melodies supplied by He Zhanhao, Chen Gang used his expertise to group the materials together by the western systematic composition method. The premier at the Shanghai Lanxin Grand Theatre was such a big success, the audience kept applauding until

musicians played the whole piece again. However, during the Cultural Revolution (a political movement in China during 1966-1976), many aspects of culture were attacked in unprecedented ways. Western music, regarded as the aggregation of feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism, was a target for these attacks. Listening to classical music became a crime, and many neighbors were searched for copying any music one after another because it was illegal to keep music recordings and scores at that time. Recordings were crushed and thrown into the garbage by the Red Guard, a group mostly composed of students from middle schools and colleges. Liang Zhu was banned from being played anywhere in China (Net, 2020). Only the eight model operas could be played in public; the music world was in unprecedented depression during this ten-years, there was nothing else to listen and play at that time. In the Culture Revolution, people who were branded as 'rightist' were imprisoned in cowsheds. Chen Gang was branded as a 'rightist' for composing this piece. Though it was banned by the government, many people listened to it at night privately. In the darkest time, people were still looking forward to freedom, love and happiness (Song & Horner, 2022). Pan Yanlin, the former violinist of Shanghai Symphony orchestra, found Chen Gang in the cowshed and asked him to compose some violin pieces for him (Gao, 2011). From that point, Chen started a new compositional period. During this time, many top-level violin pieces were composed, such as Morning at Miaoling Mountain, the Golden Platform and Sunshine on Tashkurgan. These pieces become very famous in Chinese violin repertoire and are still widely performed today (Meng, 2016; Zhang, 2021). After ten chaotic years, Chen got his freedom and was sent to the United States for intercultural communication. He was so surprised to hear the recording of the Butterfly Lovers' concerto in a Taiwanese friends' home. The name of the violinist was Takako Nishizaki, a Japanese violinist who has a good relationship with this piece. She was the first student to complete the Suzuki course and win a diploma, as well as several international competitions such as the Leventritt International Competition and the Juilliard Concerto Competition, and she has numerous bestselling recordings including Butterfly Lovers' violin concerto. She has recorded Liang Zhu several times, so that she has become the most frequent foreign player for this piece. In a 2011 interview, Chen said "I'm not really satisfied with her first version of Liang Zhu. I feel the overall tempo is too slow, and also some of the slides do not sound very traditional (Gao, 2011). After receiving Chen's comments, Nishizaki invited him to her house and asked for suggestions, taking notes and recording all the requests from the composer. When she had handled all

the important points to Chen's satisfaction, her next recording was awarded the Golden Disk Award by Hong Kong IFP, selling more than three million copies. As a result, many foreign friends have started to know China since Liang Zhu. When Lu Siqing played in the Hollywood Bowl in 2019, the audience started to clap when the flute began the introductory cadenza (Gao, 2011). Liang Zhu had become a symbol to represent Chinese people and Chinese culture. After coming back from the United States, Chen Gang had a new desire to introduce Chinese music to the western world. As one of the representative composers of Chinese contemporary music, Chen Gang transcribed Liang Zhu for piano, for erhu, and for gaohu. In 1986, Nishizaki asked Chen to compose a new concerto for her. The new piece, named Wang Zhao-jun became another of Chen Gang's masterpieces; it is the sister piece of Liang Zhu, sharing the lyricism and drama of Liang Zhu (Wang) but, with greater depth and breadth of emotional expression and a deeper characterization.

5. VIOLINIST YU LINA

Professor Yu Lina is one of the most famous and influential violinists in China. She is the first violinist to interpret the Butterfly Lovers' violin concerto, the first violin of the first women's string quartet in China, the first mainland artist to perform in Taiwan after the founding of New China, and the founder of the "Yu Lina Violin Art Fund" named after herself. At the age of twelve, Yu Lina was admitted to Shanghai Conservatory of Music. She joined the experimental group of violin nationalization together with He Zhanhao and Chen Gang. In 1959, when the Liang Zhu Violin Concerto officially premiered at Shanghai Lanxin Grand Theatre when Yu Lina finished playing the last notes, the audience broke out in a long round of enthusiastic applause. They could not stop clapping until the performers played again from the beginning. The huge success of performance made Yu Lina—only eighteen years old—famous in one night. "It was not an easy thing to perform this traditional style concerto," Yu said in an interview (Sheng, 2018). "We learned national and folk music and traditional opera and then integrated these elements into the violin pieces. It was inspired from Shaoxing Opera. We needed to learn it because we were not familiar with Shaoxing Opera or other forms of Chinese opera. Fortunately, at that time we had already the film *The Butterfly Lovers* that used Shaoxing Opera. I watched Shaoxing Opera and this film, learned the singing style. I also learned erhu because that was not taught in foreign

methods. It was never taught before. I had to give expression to the Chinese style and combined it with the violin. We had to study it from the basics. That's the only way to express the right emotions and get the public to appreciate it. We started from a dream and conveyed the confidence in our culture through practice.” These conversations reveal how much efforts Yu made in order to play in the right style. Professor Yu also recorded the *Butterfly Lovers' concerto* several times. It is worth mentioning one of her recordings by China Records. Everyone knows that Yu is the first violinist to record *Liang Zhu*, but few people know that another violinist, Shen Rong, was the substitute for the premier. Shen's 1961 recording was actually the published one. Different from Yu's euphemistic and lyrical style, Shen's performance was bright with fluency. Before Takako Nishizaki's recording came out, they were the only two performers to record the *Liang Zhu*. Given that, during the Cultural Revolution, *Liang Zhu* was totally banned, this recording was the only way for many people to know and appreciate *Liang Zhu*. Therefore, many music fans had deep feelings for the recording by Yu Lina because she played with great devotion during the certain social environment. The base mood for *Liang Zhu* is sincere and touching. The orchestra also sounds in the same sad mode. Though the timbre of musical instruments was not good at that time, it was still believed to be the model for the later recordings.

6. VIOLINIST GIL SHAHAM

Conductor Shui Lan and Singapore Symphony Orchestra has several rehearsals with Shaham for *Liang Zhu* before they made the recording in 2004. Lan had a special comment on him: "Shaham often discusses this work with the musicians in orchestra. He is familiar with the story behind each part of the music and has a deeper understanding of *Liang Zhu* than many of us." A member of the Singapore Symphony also commented, "He played completely following the score. Together with orchestra, he dug up many details that we usually ignored. The speed was not very fast, not impatient, and the glide was short and in place. It seems that he must have made great efforts in this piece. Shaham gave a good model in studying any piece we do not know. Except for listening to other's recording, it is necessary to research to the background of the piece such as the composer's biography, the social and political background, and the performance practice. To my view, his recording is better than many of the

native Chinese violinists, and that is definitely not an easy job. His performance not only touched the Chinese audience, but also touched me.” In fact, Shaham and Chinese culture have a strong connection: his father lived in China for a period of time in 1970s, and his father’s enthusiasm for China also influenced Shaham giving him have a strong interest in China. In his mind, the feeling in Liang Zhu is pure and sensitive, and the ancient Chinese story is also very touching. “I first heard about Liang Zhu in fifteen years ago. One of my violinist friends was a Hong Kong native. He suggested me to listen to this music. Later, I cried when we listened to the CD (Stories, 2020).” As a foreign player, the most difficult job is to handle the eastern musical feeling and traditional techniques. Like other Chinese violinists, Shaham read books and biography, watched original films, and heard previous recordings as well as those of traditional Chinese opera. Besides these studies, he also talked to local players for their special interpretations. Overall, his fondness for Chinese culture and his deep study of the piece contributed to his success in this recording. Violin Competitions: This piece is required for playing in some international violin competitions. In the 2016 Shanghai Isaac Stern International Violin competition, Butterfly Lovers’ Violin Concerto was chosen as the mandatory piece for all the candidates—and every performance had to be a complete concerto with all movements. Violinist Ji-won Song is one of eighteen semi-finalists. She said, “When I knew I was going to play Liang Zhu, I immediately began to read this Chinese folk story repeatedly, trying to dig out the emotion and beauty in it. I tried to study glide because it is a major character of the Chinese music. I also tried to understand the whole story of Liang Zhu, imagine the storyline corresponding to each movement, and then integrate into my own style (Net, 2020).”

7. CONCLUSION

The Butterfly Lovers’ violin concerto is one the most famous and important violin pieces in Chinese history. Together with the Yellow River piano concerto, they have become the top two representative instrumental pieces among all the traditional Chinese musical piece. This piece does not belong to specific composers or violinists. It is the crystallization of all the Chinese people. All the main themes from Yue opera or other Chinese folk tunes ultimately came from collected folk songs or rhymes. This is the reason why this piece is so popular in China. Many important violinists such as Yu Lina, Shen Rong, Lu Siqing, Takako Nishizaki and Gil Shaham

have recorded this piece. In these historical performances, every artist gives a unique taste to allow the audience to explore more musical layers. Yu and Shen gave the premier and milestone recording to function as a model for the later performers. Yu's 1985 recording is the perfect version in every aspect compared to 1959 one. In this recording, she handles the piece as a whole unit but with full of small feelings in a more professional way. Younger generation performers like Lu Siqing, Sheng Zhongguo, Kong Zhaohui, and Li Chuanyun all recorded their own version and performed this concerto in different countries. They brought this piece outside of China to encourage the western musical world to listen and understand Chinese cultures. In Lu's 1997 recording, the audience experience a male version "Liang Zhu", contains both strong and tender feelings. Takako Nishizaki is the first violinist to record the concerto, also she is the one with the most of the recordings. Her connection to Chinese art makes her recording barely sounds like that of a foreign violinist. Aside from Nishizaki, Gil Shaham did the most research in Chinese music styles and backgrounds. He is the foremost foreign violinist to play this piece and regarded the best foreign Zhu Yingtai. These historical performances give a good model to listen and study. Though the Butterfly Lovers' violin concerto is not very old, we still need do deep research and read relevant materials for background support even if we play it as a native violinist.

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