

China – the Saviour of Classical Music?

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It is a misty spring day in Beijing. The wind swirls cherry blossoms through the air and lifts a flag so that the yellow stars are visible on the red background. Under the flag stands a group of 100 musicians; it is the WA Symphony Orchestra at the Great Wall of China.

Riding the wave of the WA resources boom, WASO secured sponsorship from North West Shelf Venture to tour China, the largest importer of WA gas. China's booming economy is attracting mineral exporters, financial investors, and a legion of orchestras hoping China's music market will be the saviour of classical music. In spring the list includes Penderecki, The Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, Charles Dutoit, the Helsinki Choir and the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra.

The transition from communism to capitalism has brought a strong western influence to many aspects of Chinese culture. The introduction of western phrasing and musical expression has added to the impeccable classical technique instilled by the Russians during the communist alliance. Ask anyone at the conservatoriums and they will tell you how competitive and talented the students are and how many international prizes they have won.

But all is not as it seems in the People's Republic. Underneath the shiny veneer of new concert halls and glamorous orchestras is a western capitalist focus that threatens to smother the rehabilitation of China's cultural heart. WASO's five-city tour uncovered a cultural life that is incredibly complex, teeming with people learning violin and piano, and with a controlling government whose focus is financial growth.

Nicholas Smith is a Cambridge-trained conductor who has worked in Beijing for 15 years. He stated matter of factly that there is no audience for classical music in China and that 70% of tours by international orchestras fail.

“The Berlin Philharmonic came over for the Beijing Festival but it took four years negotiating and they were paid to come. Most orchestras tour for a particular reason (trade, diplomacy) and not on Chinese money: the entire cost needs to be covered by funding usually sourced outside China.”

Smith predicted (rightly) that WASO's Beijing concert would be poorly attended and that those who came would be officials on free tickets.

“The musical life here is not going anywhere. The Chinese are fed classical music as a high-end luxury product to be consumed, to give the impression of artistic integration with the rest of the world.”

Smith also mentioned the little known fact that a licence is required in order to perform music, and programs need to be submitted to the government for approval. Anything the government doesn't like, for example religious works, are cut.

Timothy Shew is a Beijing man who was sent to a labour camp for organising an overtly religious performance of Handel's Messiah. Smith also tells the story of Qian Cheng, a promoter very active in Beijing's classical scene. A sharp business man, Chen created a paying audience and earned audience trust by the quality he presented onstage. He was

arrested in 2002 for a trumped up charge of financial irregularities and given a seven year sentence. The audience has shrunk without him.

Smith's ensemble, the Xingkongqi Orchestra, has survived, giving three sell-out shows last year. "And we sell tickets," he adds pointedly, "we don't have to give them away".

Smith says the music scene needs to be massively de-regulated in order to survive.

"Everything is here. There are the human resources, and passionate people who want to live for music. It's like America in the 1830's: lots of talent, but organising it into a clear, coherent music-making body is very difficult."

"Art exists to further the government's aims. It is in their (the Chinese government's) interest to control culture: art must serve a political end."

Smith is bitter and bleak. He also asks that I check the quotes I use with him, so he doesn't get into trouble.

But he proved to be right about many things. Keith Venning agreed WASO had an extra-musical agenda in China: not to fill the halls, but to play for the 'hierarchical people, the people that are actually in the know, the business people...so it benefits the state.'

WASO's tour was controlled by Chinese government publicists, the China Performing Arts Agency. The organisation was cagey about ticket sales and did very little promotion; WASO's concerts were 60% full.

Chief Executive Keith Venning says the agency was crucial to arranging the logistics of a tour that covered five cities. "From my point of view it wasn't an easy decision to make, but seeing the government gave us the invitation to come, I felt that it was better to use someone they suggested that we should use and that is the line that I took."

Using complicated networks only governments can create, the agency rustled up money for the orchestra's accommodation and bus fares from individual concert halls in each of the cities, who in turn took profits from tickets set at exorbitant prices.

"Tickets in Beijing were 880 yuan, (one month's average wage)" Venning says. "People in Perth wouldn't pay that! Fundamentally I can't work that out, it's a strange way of doing it. \$170 to go to a concert is just... how they rationalise that in their minds I don't know."

The Chinese government controls the media, and serious music criticism is unheard of. The Chinese media were mostly teenage journalists who at best described WASO's sponsorship and the program, and at worst asked about pianist Jean Yves Thibaudet's wardrobe. (The French pianist toured with the orchestra, and wore designer suits rather than the customary coattails). Even though they had seen the Berlin Philharmonic and Lang Lang, the local journalists preferred to publish reviews by an Australian 'expert', rather than write their own.

However as ticket prices got cheaper further from the capital, the halls began to fill with music lovers rather than officials: men who hummed along with Mahler, small children who mimicked Matthias Bamert's conducting and enthusiasts who demanded encore after encore.

Nothing the cynics say can dispute the fact that the enormous number of students in China learning piano and violin is only getting bigger. The dingy commercial city of Shenzhen in Guangdong province has tried to lift its 'cultural desert' reputation by encouraging students to learn piano. There are now more people learning piano in Guangdong than any other province

in China. In Shenzhen 100 000 homes own their own piano, about 10% of the city's population.

The Shenzhen concert was the fullest house WASO saw, packed with teenagers and music lovers clapping along to the national anthem and filming Jean Yves Thibaudet with their mobile phones. Six TV cameramen roamed through the audience using a spotlight to film audience reactions. The audience were attentive, informed listeners: the lady next to me was familiar with Liszt's concertos and owned a Thibaudet CD; across the aisle was a 14 year old student in a tracksuit who plays piano 'but only for one hour every day' because she has so much study to do.

Two hours up the road in Guangzhou is the Pearl River Piano group, the largest piano manufacturer in China. It is a big player in the booming instrument factory industry, and has begun to produce stringed instruments. Long March Violin Factory is a Pearl River subsidiary which now produces 60 000 stringed instruments a year, priced \$30-\$3500AUD.

According to Kevin McKeough in Strad magazine, China has outstripped the Japanese and European violin market:

"By some estimates, Chinese instruments now hold between 50 and 80 percent of the market ... largely at the expense of European violin manufacturers, whose labor costs prevent them from competing with Chinese instruments on price and whose reliance on machine manufacturing now sometimes leaves them behind in quality as well."

What China can't produce it is happy to buy: the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra's international artist program would be the envy of the world. While WASO were in Shanghai the SSO were performing with Penderecki, the previous month featured Charles Dutoit and Eric Lederhandler. SSO General Manager Chen Guang Xian head hunts players from overseas to boost the orchestra's weak brass section, coaxing them with a monthly salary of \$2000US. China's government-funded orchestras have been playing catch up to their western colleagues, but not for much longer.

It's clear the Chinese government are happy to throw money at classical music, a policy Keith Venning says is very different to Australia where organisations are always clamouring for new arts buildings.

"My view," Venning says, "is that they've built these fantastic concert halls and they're now saying to the people 'we've built these halls, now come and use them'."

Some of the halls WASO played in were so new the paint smells were a noxious concern. The architecture was modern and dazzling – Hangzhou Arts Centre is shaped like a lotus flower with five huge glass petals inlaid with brick-size smooth pebbles. The acoustics were excellent.

But it's not all roses: the Poly Theatre where WASO performed for the Meet in Beijing Festival is financed by an organisation who makes money from black market firearms trade. Further south a sparkling new concert hall at the Xinghai Conservatory of Music in Guangzhou will stay locked most of the year because the conservatorium can't afford the fees to use it.

"It is only for famous people," says Mr Chin, Xinghai's Director of Teaching. "It is a political achievement to build big halls, but most of the time it will be closed: it costs too much to operate."

Chin's reports are strikingly similar to Smith's, but from the other side of the country. He says there are lots of students learning western classical music, but not many listening to it. Ticket prices are the major inhibitor.

"Students and professors here don't go to music concerts as often as people with money, he says. "The (government) agency doesn't care about a music audience; they just want to make a profit. The government only cares about money. Culture you have to have to exist, but it doesn't produce economic growth."

It sounds like the grumbling of musicians all over the world, bemoaning the lack of government support for the arts. But in China it is more complex. Mr Chin says there is another reason his students lack performance opportunities: "In the US and Australia you have the church – it is a good opportunity to perform," Mr Chin says. "It's hard for China because we don't have a church."

It's difficult to draw conclusions in a country as complex as China. People in the industry say the government is only superficially supportive and China needs a younger leader who will relax control, bring down ticket prices and allow more creative freedom.

Keith Venning says you can't change the world overnight. "The cultural revolution, if you want to call it that again, is happening, but it's going to take some time. Anything that happens in China, apart from building buildings which seems to happen very quickly, takes a long time to change. And we (WASO) are a part of that cultural change."

But it could also be argued that the western touring orchestras, with their swag of business sponsors in tow, are contributing towards building China's capitalist ego rather than its cultural heart.

It is certainly clear that the government is making expensive attempts at encouraging the development of a classical scene in China to rival concert halls in Europe. And there definitely is an audience of people who know and play classical music, if you can get them to your concert.

In an ironic twist Mr Chin says even if his students could afford tickets, they aren't interested in hearing WASO play Mahler because they have heard it before.

"The students think the concert pieces are too popular and easy," he says. "The professional audience wants something new: Stravinsky and Schoenberg".

Classical music is not a museum culture in China, and that is one of the greatest distinctions between this audience and the western classical fan base. This is an audience bred on a capitalist diet of black-market classical CD's, world class performers and a constant demand for the new. If they juggle it right, capitalist China could yet become the engine of classical music.

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