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## Princeton Symphony Orchestra Collaborates with Art Museum for Program of Music from China

*By Nancy Plum*

Princeton Symphony Orchestra combined two of its outreach missions in one concert last week with a presentation at the Princeton University Art Museum of the New York-based chamber ensemble Music From China. Princeton Symphony has a long history of partnering with the University Art Museum, and last Wednesday's concerts continued this tradition of pairing music with the art in the exhibits. Presented in conjunction with the exhibition "The Eternal Feast: Banqueting in Chinese Art from the 10th to the 14th Century," Wednesday's concerts provided Music From China with the opportunity to introduce the audience to traditional Chinese instruments and repertoire stretching back centuries.

Wednesday afternoon's concert (the performance was repeated that evening) featured three musicians playing the Chinese erhu, pipa, and zheng. The erhu, a spike fiddle with two silk strings and a small hexagonal sound box covered with snakeskin, is played with a bow threaded between the strings as the player stops the strings with finger pressure to change the pitch. Music From China Artistic Director Wang Guowei has made a career performing on this instrument worldwide and currently conducts the Westminster Choir College Chinese Music Ensemble. The pipa, a pear-shaped fretted lute, has four strings and up to 24 frets, and is plucked or strummed with fingernails to produce a variety of musical effects. Player Sun Li studied the pipa at the Shenyang Music Conservatory and has appeared with U.S. orchestras nationwide. The foundation of the Music From China ensemble sound was the zheng, a zither with 16 metal strings tuned to three pentatonic octaves. Wang Junling learned the instrument in her family, subsequently founding a Zheng Music School in Flushing, New York, to carry on its tradition.

Music From China played a number of extended pieces featuring the instruments as soloists and in varied combinations. Music of the music was rooted in China's past, telling stories from poetry, of

great battles or of love. In each piece, the musicians demonstrated the unique qualities of each instrument, as well as unusual musical effects, such as bending pitches, string twisting, and tremolos. Although Wang Guowei's erhu was similar to a violin in design, the sound more resembled a viola. The two strings of the erhu were placed far off the neck of the instrument, enabling Wang to create wide vibrato. Within the pieces performed, he provided sweet folk melodies and long lines, occasionally sliding on a string to create a glissando. In a set of variations on a Yangguan melody, the sound of the erhu was not unlike an American steel guitar in the upper register.

Sun Li was able to play the pipa with a variety of pressures, sounding like a muffled banjo at one instance and replicating a fierce call to battle in another selection. Her solo *Ambush on Ten Sides* effectively told the story of a third-century battle between two feuding faiths, capturing a call to battle, clashing swords, and the cries of soldiers and horses. Sun depicted the battle atmosphere through strumming and plucking the pipa while occasionally knocking a fingernail on the wooden body of the instrument for percussive effect.

As played by Wang Junling, the zheng provided a solid foundation to the ensemble sound. She performed the solo *Lofty Mountains and Cascading Waters* with glissandi and lilting melodies, bending pitches by pushing down on the strings. She also provided solid harmonic support to the other two instruments and was also able to bend pitches by pressing on strings in a certain way. The audience at the Princeton Art Museum may have been limited by space, but was attentive and appreciative of this innovative educational experience. More than 30 years old, Music From China provided both a solid performance and introduction to the rich musical history of China during this concert, and fit in well with Princeton Symphony Orchestra's mission to serve as a "gateway to the exploration of new music and performance practice."

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