

Western Musicology in China: A Personal Perspective

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The positive interaction between Chinese and American scholars of Western art music is a not-entirely-unexpected byproduct of the extraordinary rise of China as a world economic power. However, the series of events that led to the first “China session” in the history of annual meetings of the American Musicological Society goes back to the fall of 1998, when Professor Yu Zhigang came from the Central Conservatory to study early music with me at Yale. Being totally inexperienced in such matters, I did not know what to make of this initiative. Professor Yu, it turned out, was already an established scholar having published books in Chinese on the music of J. S. Bach and Telemann. Yet here he was at Yale, learning about the rules of dissonance treatment in the theory of Tinctoris and the intricacies of twelfth-century modal notation from Willi Apel’s book. (Today Professor Yu still teaches the history of Western musical notation from Apel, a task not for the faint of heart, regardless of a person’s native language). One thing was certain with regard to Professor Yu: to leave one’s family and friends and come to America with little command of English required a person of great courage, one entirely devoted to the discipline of musicology.

About this same time two of Professor Yu’s students also came to the United States to study: Yang Yandi and Li Xiujun. Yang Yandi, now Vice President of the Shanghai Conservatory, took up residence mainly at Columbia, but also visited Harvard and Berkeley. Li Xiujun, now Professor of Musicology and Director of the Arts Management Program at the China Conservatory in Beijing, came to Yale. Indeed, Professor Li remained here for three years, where he assiduously attended almost every music course in the undergraduate and graduate curriculum, and even enrolled in some at the Divinity School. My most cherished personal moment occurred during a music history class in which, in order to demonstrate typical Renaissance choreography, Professor Li and I danced a pavane together, hands tightly clasped. Needless to say, the cameras on the students’ iPhones were busy as we paraded back and forth.

Having experienced music education in Western universities, these three courageous Chinese scholars returned home where they did two things, among others: instituted courses Western musicology based primarily on an American model, and invited their American teachers to visit their own institutions. The first to enjoy the hospitality of Chinese was my long-time colleague at Yale, Leon Plantinga, who visited and lectured at the conservatories in Beijing and Shanghai on more than one occasion during the first decade of this century. I myself visited for the first time only this past year (2011). It is anticipated that other American scholars will have the honor of lecturing at one or more of the Chinese conservatories in the coming years.

To understand how and where Western art music is taught in China, it may be helpful to consider the following. Most of the teaching of Western art music as part of higher education in China—and the majority of the major scholars in the field—is associated with music conservatories, the Chinese equivalents of our Curtis, Juilliard, and Eastman, for example. Today there are nine major conservatories in China: Central and China (both in Beijing), Shanghai, Tianjing, Shenyang, Wuhan, Xian, Sichuan, and Xinghai (Guangzhou). An exception to this conservatory basis for teaching music is the University of Hong Kong, which has within it a long-standing department of music built on an Anglo-American model and with instruction mainly in English. In addition, in recent times other schools of music and departments of music have begun to appear within universities and colleges in China. Judging from personal observation and reports of my colleagues, the strongest programs at the moment are those in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong.

But whether in the more established conservatories or in the newer schools and departments of music, a course in the history of Western music is an important requirement of all music students. For those who major in musicology, a two-year cycle of music history courses is required. In addition, other courses in nineteenth and twentieth-century music and “special topics” courses supplement the undergraduate curriculum. At the graduate level, courses in Western music are more varied, and include, for example, surveys of opera, of the symphony, of the quartets of Beethoven, and analytical methods. But these curricula and the textbooks used within them are best explained by our distinguished colleagues from China through the papers that follow.