

## China's private music

By Sharon Smullen, Special to the Eagle, Berkshire Eagle

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On Saturday, beauty will enchant the ear, when Liu Fang, "Empress of the Pipa" -- a traditional Chinese lute -- graces the Mahaiwe stage with her transcendent music in "Trade Winds: From China With Love," part of cellist Yehuda Hanani's Close Encounters With Music concert series now celebrating its 20th Berkshire season.

She is well-known for her European performances, but this is Liu's first visit to Massachusetts. In a recent telephone conversation, Hanani recounted how he met Liu on a trip to China.

"She's a fabulous artist, a very spiritual being -- she really transports you when she plays the instrument," he said. "I asked her to come and join us and constructed a concert around her."

The Chinese have such reverence for tradition that they constantly refer to the past, he explained. "This music is going to evoke tremendously old feelings."

Having just returned from a spring walk in Montreal, her adopted home of 15 years, Liu spoke by phone along with her husband and manager, Wang Risheng.

She described growing up in China's southern Yunnan province in Kunming, called the "City of Eternal Spring" due to its high altitude and mild climate.

"My mother was a Chinese opera singer," said Liu. "When I was 6 years old, I started to learn the pipa because the instrument often accompanies opera singers."

The classical pipa repertoire was originally played privately by scholars, not by performers in tea houses, said Wang.

"It's not really for entertaining," he said, "and was never played in public."

It emphasizes spiritual connection rather than technical virtuosity, and musicians always played solo for the purposes of meditation, he said. Even today, the music is not popularly played in China, but has proven very appealing to lovers of western classical music.

Liu said her playing reflects her great love of nature. The couple spends as much time as possible outdoors, camping during the summer or walking in parks whenever they travel, visiting seashores and mountains.

Nature is also the theme of "Green" by Pulitzer-winning composer Zhou Long -- contemporary music that draws on very ancient traditions, said Hanani, who will premier the piece with Liu.

Originally for bamboo flute and pipa, Zhou adapted it for pipa and cello at Hanani's request when the two met at the Great Lakes festival.

As Zhou wrote of the work, "Heaven is blue, Earth yellow, and green all the plants they nurture. 'Green' symbolizes the spirit of life. The music is exquisitely provocative, and its sound filling the distant space evokes the communion between man and nature."

Liu and Hanani will also perform the world premiere of "From Ahmad to Liu Fang" -- a French love song, said Hanani, written for cello and pipa by Kuwaiti violinist, composer and conductor Ahmad Hamdan, who met Liu at a UNESCO concert in Paris.

Inspired by her playing, Ham dan asked her what instrument she would like to play and composed the short piece in one evening.

When he gave her the score the next day, Wang said, "he said, 'this is the first movement; I'm still thinking about the second and third' -- but we are still waiting. It's already almost 10 years!"

For centuries, cultures around the world have looked outside themselves for artistic influences, Hanani explained. In Europe at the turn of the 20th century, Debussy and Ravel were trying to rebel against the hegemony of German music, and they turned to the Chinese pentatonic scale -- which he demonstrated on his piano using just the black keys.

Ravel wrote his "Mother Goose" piano suite for a friend's children, Hanani said. The third movement, "Little Ugly Girl, Empress of the Pagodas," is written entirely on the black keys. Bulgarian pianist Emma Tahmizian will play the orchestral version which, according to Hanani, has "many more colors and a much richer palette."

She will also play Fritz Kreisler's "Tambourin Chinois," and "A la Chinoise" by Leo Ornstein, an American avant-garde composer and pianist who lived to the ripe age of 109, Hanani said, recalling a letter he received from Ornstein at age 105 after recording his cello sonata.

Renowned Israeli violinist Hagai Shaham will play Debussy's Violin Sonata -- a piece "full of Chinese flavor," said Hanani -- and Joseph Achron's haunting "Hebrew Melody," for a taste of another ancient musical tradition.

And Hanani will continue his own musical tradition of interspersing the evening with informative, accessible commentary -- a signature style that, he said, "breaks the barrier between the performer and the audience" -- just as the concert will flow between East and West.

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**What:** 'Trade Winds: From China With Love'

**When:** Saturday at 6 p.m.

**Where:** Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center, 14 Castle St., Great Barrington

**Admission:** \$40 / \$30 includes post-concert onstage reception

**Information:** (413) 528-0100, [www.cewm.org](http://www.cewm.org)