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‘Diplomat’ musicians must ensure Chinese works are modern to appeal to the people

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IF music is a universal language, then musicians are perhaps the best diplomats in the world. Recently I had the pleasure of meeting Dai Xiaolian and Chen Gang, two renowned Chinese musicians who double as “diplomats” for enhancing China’s soft power across the world.

As a professor teaching *gu qin*, or seven-string zither, Dai has witnessed *gu qin*’s metamorphosis from an obscure instrument into a cherished symbol of Chinese music abroad.

As early as the 1970s and 1980s, when Dai was a student of *gu qin* herself, the instrument was little known outside the circles of folk musicians. She remembers the people most drawn to the instrument were a small group of foreign students studying at Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Their first choice of Chinese instrument to learn was invariably *gu qin*, which few Chinese peers were aware of or even cared to know about.

Reflecting on the *gu qin*-mania in recent years, Dai noted that “they had a keen eye for what was so good and unique about Chinese music — much keener than ours.”

After returning home, these foreigners went on to become the authority and leading advocates of *gu qin* music and Chinese music as a whole, she told a forum held recently at Fudan University.

Dai joined their ranks with trips abroad as an *gu qin* artist. After her first trip in 1987, she spent several months in 1991 as a visiting fellow at Leiden University, where she pored over classics by acclaimed Dutch sinologist Robert van Gulik, who happened to be an expert on *gu qin*.

From then on she would travel to Europe, almost once a year, to continue the enterprise she had started off in Holland — spreading the love of Chinese music among European audience.

“Europeans are not just fond of Chinese music; they know how to appreciate its beauty,” Dai said.

In Europe, she often finds herself performing for both connoisseurs and people newly introduced to Oriental music. Their reactions are a sign of how music can bridge the gap in language, culture and age.

Spiritually deep

She once performed with a local violinist in a community center for the elderly in France. When the show was over, several members of the audience came up and thanked Dai for taking them on a journey of artistic enjoyment so profound and “spiritually deep” that some were even moved to tears.

The most commonly played song from her repertoire wherever she goes is “Flowing Water,” a favorite of Dai’s many

foreign fans. The reason cited is that no Western or Chinese instrument can outdo *gu qin* in its nuanced imitation of the natural sound of bubbling water.

The interactions and marriage of Chinese and foreign cultures sometimes even lead to seemingly outlandish observations. She once came across a review by a Western critic saying that parallels can be drawn between Dai Xiaolian’s music and that of the Rock ‘n’ Roll legend Jimi Hendrix.

Dai found that to be a bit surprising, because what is basically an antiquated musical form in China can be seen as something avant-garde by a few Westerners. “This suggests that Chinese music still has lots of undiscovered charms waiting to reveal themselves to an amazed foreign audience,” she said.

She also noted a trend in the past five or six years where Western composers came to China to study local music with the aim of combining the best of both worlds in their works.

When it comes to Chinese music diplomacy, or *zou chu qu* (“Going Global” strategy of Chinese music), Chen Gang has a lot to say. At 81, he is still full of vigor, passion and memories.

Chen said although he and Dai are of one mind vis-a-vis the merits of promoting Chinese music overseas, he does not approve of Chinese musicians trying to ingratiate themselves with foreign critics and audience by playing Chinese tunes on Western instruments or vice versa. This type of so-called cultural fusion, quite in vogue these days, is not necessarily conducive to expanding the outreach of Chinese music, according to Chen.

Truly Chinese

The celebrated composer, who is also a professor at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, is adamant that a musical fare intended for foreign audience must be authentic and original, or in his words, “true icons of Chinese culture.”

According to him, right now there is a severe shortage of works that appeal musically and display the Zeitgeist of contemporary China.

By contrast, some old melodies are timeless, such as “The Butterfly Lovers,” a symphony Chen composed together with He Zhanhao, or the household pop song, “Rose Rose I Love You,” originally written by Chen’s father Chen Gexin in 1940. The latter song made its way into American households and dance halls, thanks to the GIs who were stationed in Shanghai toward the end of WWII. It was given English lyrics and recorded by Frankie Laine. “Rose Rose I Love You” became an instant sensation in the States, topping American billboards for weeks and filling its composer with



Chen Gang (top) and Dai Xiaolian (above) — Photos courtesy of Fudan University

pride after he learned of its popularity in the Western Hemisphere.

Pride soon gave way to anxiety when the senior Chen heard that an amount of money was set aside to reward the composer. All that was known about the anonymous composer was that he or she might well be a resident in “Red China.” Chen wanted to go to the US to collect the money, but the timing could not be worse. It was 1951, at the height of the Korean War.

To lend legitimacy to his claims, Chen promised that once he had the money, he would donate it to the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army to help fight the American troops. Whether his father got the money or not Chen Gang couldn’t tell. But he did say that the song serves as an umbilical cord, linking the Chinese diaspora to their native country.

At a concert in New York City in 2001, Chen was introduced to the oldest member of the audience, a 103-year-old ethnic Chinese who originally hailed

from Shanghai. He attended the concert with his entire family.

For the centenarian, “this concert was not a mere concert, it was an emotional gathering. He was searching for his roots and piecing together the images of Shanghai in his memory, all through music.”

Chen said that since music knows no borders and speaks for itself, the most important lesson to be drawn for those involved in Chinese music diplomacy is to present works quintessentially Chinese and sufficiently modern to appeal to people.

He was once invited to the elite Eton College in Britain to oversee its student orchestra’s rendering of “The Butterfly Lovers.” Nobody heard of it before the concert. The closest Western equivalent was the opera “Romeo and Juliet.” Once the show was over, however, Chen and the student band received a lengthy standing ovation.

“Music needs no translation, it flows directly into your heart,” said Chen.