

Program Notes

Asian Silk Road

It's a cultural phenomenon – Asia; yet, it's still an exotic mystery.

An inner-continental web: the Asian Silk Road

The Asian Silk road was not just a single path. It was a series of trade routes, with multiple branches, weaving its many branches through the heart of Asia and Europe as it connected East Asia to the Mediterranean. Tracing its roots back to the Han dynasty in 206 B.C., Marco Polo, Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great all traveled the Asian Silk Road in camel caravans. Interestingly, the name “Silk Road” is relatively new, as it was coined by a nineteenth-century German scholar named von Richthofen.

Developments in art and music---as well as in mathematics and the sciences---coursed back and forth, building upon each other. The legacy of those exchanges along the Silk Road permeate both Eastern and Western worlds to this day. Instead of silk, it's now technology, and the cultures continue to influence and inspire each other. Nowhere is that more evident than in this concert.

The Abduction from the Seraglio Overture

Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* was an instant success when it premiered in Vienna on July 6, 1782, much to his delight. “My opera was given yesterday with big applause for the third time ... it really feels good to hear this kind of applause,” he wrote in a letter to his father.

“I’m a big boy now”

Mozart was twenty-five years old, having just “declared” his independence from his father by moving to Vienna from Salzburg, when he began writing this opera. His goal was to establish himself as a mature musician, an evolution from his image as a *wunderknabe* who had entertained the imperial family on previous visits with his father and sister. Opera was the one thing Mozart most wanted to write.

Virtuous women in a Turkish harem...spicing up the music

The opera is set on the coast of Turkey in the palace of the Pasha Selim. It's the crazy story of two men rescuing their lovers from the Pasha's harem. Mozart sets the tone immediately in the rambunctious overture with Turkish-sounding percussion and piccolos, evoking the military bands of Turkey. As the opera unfolded, it was clear that Mozart had indeed signaled a new maturity as an opera composer through the way he was able to blend high comedy with touching tragedy.

Emperor Joseph II, who commissioned the opera, voiced his opinion to Mozart after hearing it the first time, “Too many notes. Just cut a few and it will be perfect.” However, the public loved the opera as it was written. Throughout Mozart's lifetime, it would remain his most popular work outside of Vienna, premiering in sixteen European cities.

Hicazkar Sirto

To many, the term “folk music” is perceived as simplistic music, with minimal intrinsic value. True connoisseurs of folk music know better than that. Melodies and rhythms found in folk music from around the world are often far more complex and rich than Western music. For example, Turkish music has a wonderful tapestry of musical elements, especially with its rhythmic intricacies. Turkey has always been an extremely important trading port, and with

the influx of cultures came various artistic influences. Over many centuries, these art forms became refined to a heightened virtuosity. Tonight, we will experience a small sample of that historic treasure from Turkey, *Hicazkar Sirto*, based upon traditional Turkish repertoire.

The oud

The oud was most likely introduced to Western Europe by the Arabs who established the [Umayyad](#) Caliphate of [Al-Andalus](#) on the Iberian Peninsula beginning in the year 711 A.D. It was the royal houses of Al-Andalus that cultivated the environment which raised the level of oud playing to greater heights and boosted the popularity of the instrument. The most famous oud player of Al-Andalus was [Zyriab](#). He established the first music conservatory in Spain, enhanced playing technique and added a fifth [course](#) to the instrument. The European version of this instrument came to be known as the lute. Unlike the oud, the European lute utilized frets (usually tied gut).

Song of India from Sadko

It was nearly 30 years after his pal and fellow composer Mussorgsky recommended that he compose a tone poem based upon the eleventh century epic *The Novgorod Cycle* that Rimsky-Korsakov wrote a series of epic tableaux, known as "opera-bilina." Painfully self-critical though he was, Rimsky-Korsakov considered it among his best works, later writing, "All my operas after *Sadko* have, I think, only temporary interest."

A wandering troubadour's dilemma

Sadko is an operatic fairy tale set in seven scenes, well-known for the composer's brilliant orchestration. *Song of India* comes from Scene Four, when Sadko, the troubadour, ousted from his beloved village after he declares his desire to see other lands, wins a wager with merchants that he can produce three gold fish, previously given to him by the Sea King's daughter, the mermaid Volkhova. He proceeds to equip and man 30 ships with his new-found wealth, then asks three traders - a Viking, a Venetian and an Indian - to sing of their lands so that he may decide which to visit.

The Nutcracker: Arabian Coffee and Chinese Tea

Based on the story "The Nutcracker and the King of Mice" by E. T.A. Hoffman, choreographer Marius Petipa commissioned Tchaikovsky to write music for a ballet based on the tale in 1891. Set in a small German town on Christmas Eve, it made its way to America in the 1940s and has become a holiday tradition ever since.

The story

The plot revolves around a German girl named Clara who is celebrating Christmas Eve with her family. Clara is heartbroken when her jealous brother breaks her present, a toy nutcracker in the traditional shape of a soldier in full parade uniform. That night, however, the nutcracker is transformed into a prince and Clara and the Prince travel to the Land of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

The Sugar Plum Fairy and the people of the Land of Sweets dance for Clara and the Prince in the dances of the Arabian Coffee dancers and Chinese Tea dancers, among others.

The music

The composer made a selection of eight of the more popular numbers from the ballet before the ballet's December 1892 premiere, forming *The Nutcracker Suite*, intended for concert performance. *The Nutcracker Suite* should not be mistaken for the complete ballet.

One novelty in the original score was the use of the celesta, a new instrument that

Tchaikovsky discovered in Paris. He was very proud of the celesta's effect in depicting the character of the Sugar Plum Fairy with a "heavenly sweet sound." He wanted the music performed quickly for the public, before he could be "scooped."

Humming Chorus from Madame Butterfly

Always fascinated by the Orient, Puccini undertook an immense amount of research to ensure that his opera *Madame Butterfly* would be true to the culture. Rehearsals went well, and Puccini expected that the premiere of *Madame Butterfly* at La Scala would be a major success. It wasn't.

The audience hooted and shouted and cackled with laughter, making so much noise that the music could not be heard. After the final curtain, there was total silence and the singers did not take a curtain call. It seemed clear that Puccini's enemies had hired a clique for the demonstration. He was so upset that he took the orchestral score from the theater with him so that the opera could not be performed again.

Silencing the naysayers

A two-act revision of *Madame Butterfly* was premiered later in the year (1904), and it was a huge success. It crossed the Atlantic to the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1907. Today, the opera is enjoyed in two acts in Italy, while in America the three-act version is more popular.

Madame Butterfly is different from many operas. It is intimate, devoid of spectacle, taking place completely within a house in Nagasaki. There is one straight plot line, without subplots. Girl wins boy, girl loses boy, girl commits hara kiri. The combination of the characterizations of Butterfly and her Captain Pinkerton and the rich, luscious Puccini score results in one of the most popular operas ever.

The Humming Chorus - calming or foreboding?

The beautiful 15-year-old geisha, Cio-Cio-San (known to her friends as Butterfly), innocently believes that her arranged "marriage" to Naval Officer, Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton, is binding. She waits for three years after his tour ends for him to return, not believing that he has abandoned her. She presents her fair-haired child as proof that she is "now an American woman."

At the end of Act Two, the guns salute in the distance, announcing the arrival of Pinkerton's ship. As night falls and the child is asleep, a long orchestral passage with choral humming accompanies her all-night vigil. It is calming, yet gives a hint of foreboding, hinting at Butterfly's imminent misery. It primes the audience with unrestrained sympathy for their heroine.

Turandot Overture

The story

The story of Turandot was taken from the Persian collection of stories called *The Book of One Thousand and One Days* where the character of "Turandokht" was portrayed as a cold-hearted Chinese princess, determined to never marry, who was responsible for the deaths of several would-be suitors. In the end, though, she gives in to love and saves her prince from execution.

The music

Weber discovered a Chinese melody in Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de Musique* in 1804 that he was absolutely fascinated with, so fascinated that he composed an "Overture Chinesa" based

on that theme. In 1809, when he composed music for a performance of Friedrich Schiller's play *Turandot* (based on Gozzi's original play of the same name), he used that overture, although, as he said, "it was revised completely." To the reworked overture, Weber added six short pieces of incidental music, ending with the March, all based to some extent on the same exotic theme.

For a concert performance in 1816, Weber provided the following brief note: "Drums and pipes introduce the strange, bizarre melody, which is then taken up by the orchestra and presented in various forms."

This theme will be familiar to modern audiences as the source for Paul Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphoses on a theme of Carl Maria von Weber*.

Flying Like a Bird

Tadao Sawai, master of the Japanese koto, founder of the Sawai Koto School, prolific composer, teacher and visionary leader in the world of Japanese music, died in 1997 at the age of 59, far too young for those whose lives he touched.

Flying Like a Bird is one of Sawai's best-known works. It demonstrates his talent of creating enchanting melodies that use the koto's unique characteristics. It combines a wide variety of modern and traditional playing techniques.

A visionary who made a difference

Elizabeth Falconer wrote in the April 11, 1997, edition of The Japan Times, "Soft-spoken and serene, Sawai held himself at all times with a quiet elegance, as if he were wearing a kimono. He was a genius when it came to combining soft harmonics and pizzicato with percussive hitting of the strings and tremolos that move across the strings...it pulls the listener in."

Perhaps his most significant contribution was a technical one: he brought Western levels of precision to tuning and rhythm and popularized a range of innovative techniques which increased significantly the tonal possibilities of the koto, and his influence is being felt today across four continents.

Since his untimely death, his wife Kazue Sawai has passionately carried on her husband's works, teaching his students, performing in his place and popularizing his large body of works.

"If I could fly like a bird in the big, open sky ... Everyone has had a dream like this. Usually we only have this dream when we are deep asleep and are not conscious of our thoughts. But sometimes something breaks through and we open our eyes: when we aspire to something, when we are happy, dreams fill our hearts and we float in the sky, like a bird" Sawai Tadao, composer of *Flying Like a Bird*, 1985.

The koto

The koto is a six-foot long instrument made of polonia wood, with 13 strings set on movable bridges. The bass koto, with 17 strings, has become more prominent in recent years. The koto is played with ivory picks. It originated in China and entered Japan about the eighth century.

Eternal Vow from Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

To create the haunting original score for director Ang Lee's acclaimed martial-arts adventure *Crouching tiger, Hidden Dragon*, composer Tan Dun called upon the vast creative techniques

that have made him one of the most distinctive concert and operatic composers today. The music has the sweep of a romantic film score while reflecting the action and atmosphere of the film through the mesmerizing, often delicate, sounds of traditional Chinese music.

“The vibrant presence of both East and West within him has created a unique sound world, always personal, always authentic. Every part of Tan Dun’s music is as violent as a burst of human blood, yet full of grace, a voice of the soul. I believe he is one of the most outstanding composers today,” said the late Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu.

Composer and conductor Tan Dun began his career in his native China in the Peking Opera after planting rice for two years during the Cultural Revolution. A graduate of Beijing’s Central Conservatory and Columbia University in New York, his music reaches large audiences throughout the world in performances by leading orchestras and ensembles.

Ping Pong (Concerto for Pipa)

Sometimes called the Chinese lute, the pipa has been played for nearly two thousand years in China, and belongs to the plucked category of instruments. The strings were originally played during the Tang dynasty using a large plectrum, which was gradually replaced by the fingernails of the right hand. Since the revolutions in Chinese instrument making during the twentieth century, the softer twisted silk strings of earlier times have been exchanged for nylon-wound steel strings, which are far too strong for human fingernails. False nails are now used, constructed of plastic or tortoise-shell, and affixed to the fingertips with the player’s choice of elastic tape.

Anthony De Ritis’ work with the pipa soloist, Min Xiao-Fen, has led to a series of compositions for the traditional Chinese instrument. *Ping Pong* was premiered in 2004 by the Taipei Chinese Orchestra in Taiwan, with Min Xiao-Fen as soloist.

Composer Anthony De Ritis – as contemporary as they come

Music technologist and composer Anthony De Ritis has been called “cutting-edge,” “revolutionary,” “ultra-exotic” and “groundbreaking and earth-shattering.” Currently the Chair of the Music Department and Director of the Multimedia Studies Program at Boston’s Northeastern University, De Ritis is perhaps best known for his work, *Devolution*, a Concerto for DJ and Symphony Orchestra, which has received significant press on both coasts, including a segment by Tech TV.

***Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas* (from *Mother Goose Suite*)**

Although he never married or had children of his own, Maurice Ravel, a leading composer of his generation and one of the two main figures (with Claude Debussy) in the musical Impressionism movement, loved children. When he met artist Cyprian Godebski in 1904, he quickly befriended Godebski’s two young children, Mimie and Jean, for whom he wrote a set of five simple pieces for the piano, based on several of their favorite fairy tales, including some from Charles Perrault’s collection of *Mother Goose* stories. Originally written as a piano duet for the children, *Mother Goose* was soon developed by Ravel into a colorful orchestral suite which was, in turn, expanded into a popular ballet.

A haunting, beautiful tune begins the fairy tale *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*, in which a wicked witch has turned a princess into an ugly little girl. The girl meets a serpent, and they travel to the country of the Pagodas, where tiny people with bodies made of jewels live. Tuned percussion evokes the Oriental setting as the Pagodas play for the girl on

instruments made of nutshells. Ultimately, the serpent transforms into his original form as King of the Pagodas, the girl becomes a princess again, and the two marry.