

A Happy Excursion, Concerto for Pipa, Cello, and Orchestra

Zhao Lin

Zhao Lin was born in the city of Xi'an, in the province of Shaanxi in central China (although it is officially designated as part of the Northwest China region). Shaanxi is considered one of the cradles of Chinese civilization, serving as the capital for 13 feudal dynasties through more than 1,000 years. In the First Century BCE, more or less, it became the starting point for the route known as the Northern Silk Road, which by the end of the Han Dynasty (which lasted until 220 CE) materialized into an essential trade route leading from central China west through the ancient kingdoms of Parthia, Bactria, and Persia, and from there on to Europe.

It is therefore particularly redolent that Zhao Lin should be associated with the Silkroad Ensemble, the world-music initiative overseen by cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He first collaborated with Yo-Yo Ma in 2004; since then he has composed several pieces for the Silkroad Ensemble, including *Distant Green Valley* (a collaboration with his father, Zhao Jiping, who wrote the film scores for *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Farewell My Concubine*) and two double concertos: Duo (for cello, sheng, and orchestra), which was premiered in Shanghai in 2013 and received its US premiere at the New York Philharmonic's Lunar New Year Concert of 2015; and now *A Happy Excursion* (for pipa, cello, and orchestra). *A Happy Excursion* was premiered this past October in Hangzhou; was repeated in November at the Beijing International Music Festival and now arrives at its US premiere in these performances.

Zhao Lin began piano lessons at the age of five, studied composition at the Central Conservatory in Beijing (where he graduated in 1996), and began his professional career as a composer for the National Traditional Orchestra of China, which has often focused on a common ground where traditional

Chinese instruments are combined in ways that mirror the deployment of a Western symphony orchestra. In 2000 he served as artistic director at the Song Qingling Foundation for Culture and Art Training Center.

Following in his father's footsteps, he has also produced numerous film scores, including those for *Together* (2002, directed by Chen Kaige); *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009, directed by Zhang Yimou); and *The Great Qin Dynasty 2* (2013, directed by Ding Hei). Beginning in 2001 he and his father established the studio ZHAOs, where they carry out their film-music production projects. His film scores have been honored with leading prizes, including the 24th Chinese Film Golden Rooster Award for Best Music and the 14th Wenhua Award for Wenhua Music Creation (Composing) from the Chinese Ministry of Culture. He has been a guest professor for the China Film Music Research Institute of the Beijing Film Academy, a member of the Chinese Musicians Association, and a committee member of the All-China Youth Federation.

IN SHORT

Born: 1973, in Xi'an, China

Resides: in Beijing

Work composed: 2018, on commission from the New York Philharmonic, Beijing Music Festival, and Hangzhou Philharmonic Orchestra

World premiere: October 24, 2018, in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China, by the Hangzhou Philharmonic Orchestra, Long Yu, conductor, with Wu Man (pipa) and Yo-Yo Ma (cello), soloists

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances, which mark the US Premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 25 minutes

In 2014 and 2016 he was deputy general director and music director for the CCTV (China Central Television) Spring Festival Gala. In 2017, *Red Lantern* (for pipa and string quartet), composed jointly with his father, was performed in New York by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

The Happy Excursion takes its title from a famous chapter in the *Chuang Tzu*, a fundamental book of Taoism written by the philosopher Zhuang Zhou (Zhuangzi) around 300 BCE. This contemplational essay considers various animals and how they relate to natural forces. It promotes a way of thinking that might lead a person to transcendent happiness by finding a balance among the forces of nature, an equilibrium that might make a man dependent on nothing. Even a man who could soar on

the wind, Zhuang Zhou observes, is still dependent on the wind. “But,” he writes,

suppose there is one who chariots on the normality of the universe, rides on the transformations of the six elements, and thus makes excursions into the infinite, what has he to depend on? Therefore it is said that the perfect man has no self; the spiritual man has no achievement; and the true sage has no name.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, suspended cymbals, tam-tam, xylophone, vibraphone, marimba, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo pipa and solo cello.

Listen for . . . the Pipa

Of the two solo instruments in *A Happy Excursion*, New York Philharmonic’s audiences will be very familiar with the cello, the baritone member of the string family, which is usually bowed, although it can be plucked (*pizzicato*). Symphony goers may not be as well acquainted with the pipa. It is a four-stringed, plucked instrument — a Chinese lute — with a pear-shaped body. Frets are positioned along its neck, much like a Western guitar. Earlier this year, pipa player Wu Man told WFMT’s Michael San Gabino:

It’s seen as a Chinese instrument, but it originally came from Central Asia. Over the years, the Chinese developed the way the pipa is played now: four strings plucked with the instrument held straight up and down. It is closely related to the oud in the Middle East or even the banjo in America.



In fact, Wu Man said that first-time listeners have told her the sound reminds them of the banjo. However, she said that in China the pipa is known as a classical instrument.

That means it was not meant for large, public performances. It was meant to be an intellectual instrument played in a very small setting, like in the palace in front of the emperor.

Early forms of the pipa apparently date to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). The instrument may have been introduced to China from India or Central Asia via travel along the Silk Road. It gained immense popularity during the Tang Dynasty (618–906 CE) and to this day it remains one of the most widely played Chinese traditional instruments.

Pipa dating from the Ming Dynasty, from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art