

# Chinese Composers: Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Jonathan Liu, conductor

December 16, 2023

Ingram Hall, 5 p.m.

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## PROGRAM

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Symphony 'Humen 1839'

2009

Zhou Long, Chen Yi

born 1953, born 1953

Shanghai Overture

2007

Bright Sheng

born 1955

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## INTERMISSION

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Passacaglia: Secret of Wind and Birds

2015

Tan Dun

born 1957

## Program Notes

When tasked with curating a program featuring composers of the 21st century, I faced a multitude of choices in navigating the vast landscape of contemporary music. The era we live in is full of innovation, and we are constantly driven by the ambition to make something new. But what is the scope of this supposed limitless creativity? At what point do we look so far ahead that we forget what precedes us? This collection serves as an homage to my Chinese heritage, showcasing compositions that seamlessly meld modern inventiveness with ancient, traditional inspirations.

As our society progresses forward, we must remember not to forsake our past. The foundation of civilization lies in our history, a reservoir of potential for future growth. Tonight you will hear history through the frames of war, greatness, and mankind's desire to make sense of our world. As you listen, I urge you to critically reflect on this world. Think of present-day events and issues. Deliberate their histories. Evaluate your morals. As Leo Tolstoy once said, "War is so unjust and ugly that all who wage it must try to stifle the voice of conscience within themselves."

With kindness,  
Jonathan Liu

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jonathan Liu". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of each name being significantly larger and more stylized than the others.

Commissioned by the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra and completed in 2009, *Symphony “Humen 1839”* is a four-movement collaborative work by composers Zhou Long and Chen Yi. The symphony commemorates the public burning of more than 1,000 tons of opium in Humen, Guangdong—an attempt by the Qing Dynasty in June of 1839 to ban the British from illegal trading of opium, which devastated its people.

That same year, the conflict erupted into the First Opium War. Chinese cities, including Guangzhou and Nanjing, faced bombardment and occupation by the British, leading to massive civilian casualties and destruction of homes and infrastructure. The Treaty of Nanjing, signed in 1842, marked the end of the war but imposed harsh terms on China. It compelled China to cede Hong Kong to the British, open up additional ports for trade, and pay large financial burdens. This turnout resulted in economic hardship, loss of sovereignty, and a sense of national humiliation for the Chinese people, contributing to a turbulent period in China’s history<sup>1</sup>.

Born in Guangzhou, Chen Yi drew from her heritage to craft the first movement, “Andante luminoso,” by incorporating musical elements inspired by three well-known Guangdong melodies: “Thunder in a Drought,” “Dragon Boat Race,” and “Hungry Horse Rattles.” The second movement, “Allegro feroce,” employs robust rhythms and sharp intervals to symbolize Lin Zexu, a national hero who contributed to destroying a significant amount of opium—so successfully that the British ravaged large portions of China in retaliation. The third movement, “Adagio tragico,” employs sorrowful melodies to convey the pain endured by the Chinese population during the First Opium War. Finally, the fourth movement, “Allegro trascinate,” embodies the nation’s resilience and the preservation of its national pride<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Don K Nakayama, “The Opium Wars of China in the Nineteenth Century and America in the Twenty-First,” *The American Surgeon* (New York: SAGE Publications, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Darrell Ang and Long Zhou, *Symphony “Humen 1839” / Zhou Long* (Tennessee: Naxos, 2015).

Born in Shanghai on December 6, 1955, Bright Sheng began studying the piano with his mother at the age of four. In the midst of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, he was sent to a province bordering Tibet at the age of 15. There, he performed as a pianist and percussionist in the provincial music and dance theater and studied folk music of the region, which would later become one of his inspirations as a composer. When China's universities reopened in 1978, Sheng was one of the first students admitted to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where he studied composition for four years from 1978<sup>3</sup>.

Sheng's "Shanghai Overture" was commissioned by his alma mater in celebration of its 80th anniversary. The piece celebrates Shanghai by paying homage to two well-known traditional pieces: "General's Degree" and "Purple Bamboo." While they come from the same region near Shanghai, the two pieces differ greatly in character—one grand and powerful, the other light and elegant.

Drawing inspiration from composer Igor Stravinsky, Sheng applied similar techniques of the neoclassical style to these two traditional Chinese folk pieces, but using his own flair. Although he employs instruments from the Western fold, Sheng still produces a Chinese classical sound through the use of Peking Opera cymbals, Peking Opera gong, small Chinese tom-tom, and wind gong. Additionally, stylistic instructions including the playing of large glisses by brass instruments help contribute to the Chinese spirit. Masterfully interleaving thunderous percussive textures with bright woodwinds and grand brass instruments, Sheng achieves a balanced and charming musical aesthetic, true to the city of his musical upbringing.

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<sup>3</sup> Bright Sheng, "Shanghai Overture," *Bright Sheng* (Michigan: University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 2008).

Carnegie Hall commissioned Tan Dun in 2015 to write a new piece for the National Youth Orchestra of the USA's tour across China. Discovering a wealth of early Chinese compositions imitating the sounds of nature—specifically, birds—the composer sought to create a piece that combined this ancient inspiration with modern musical techniques<sup>4</sup>. As a musician in the United States, I had experienced little to no repertoire of the Chinese variety until the age of 16. This piece was my first musical introduction to Chinese composers, when my youth orchestra began rehearsing it for its Lunar New Year concert. It opened my eyes to a wide berth of East Asian music, part of which I am inviting you to sample today.

“Passacaglia: Secret of Wind and Birds” features recordings of bird songs on traditional Chinese instruments—guzheng, suona, erhu, pipa, dizi, and sheng—played back on the cell phones of musicians and audience members alike. According to Dun, instrumentalizing modern devices would create a “poetic forest of digital birds,” honoring mankind’s desires to communicate with nature in a new age<sup>5</sup>.

To Dun, a passacaglia comprises complex variations and hidden repetitions, so he plays with structure, color, harmony, melody, and texture through orchestration. Audience members can listen for chanting, finger snapping, whistling, and foot stomping, all of which contribute to a soundscape encapsulating birds, the wind, and the ocean. For tonight’s last piece, I encourage you to interact with the music. Act and move along with the musicians on stage. When prompted, play the sound recordings linked in the QR codes that our concert ushers have given you. Immerse yourself in the soundscape that we are creating, together.

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<sup>4</sup> NYO-USA / NYO2 / NYO Jazz, “NYO-USA: A New Sound from Tan Dun” (New York: YouTube, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> “Passacaglia: Secret of Wind and Birds: Tan Dun,” *Wise Music Classical* (London: Wise Music Group, 2015).

# Bibliography

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