

Percussion in the global economy

Teaching and Performing in Fuzhou, China

By Greg Beyer

This past summer I had the fortunate opportunity to spend three weeks in Fuzhou, China. In 2005 and 2006 I had performed at the Beijing Central Conservatory's Modern Music Festival, first as a member of Present Music, the Milwaukee-based new music ensemble led by Kevin Stalheim, and the following year as a solo artist. During those two trips I was afforded a fantastic introduction to Chinese culture, contemporary society, and contemporary Chinese music making,¹ but my exposure to and interaction with Chinese people was somewhat limited.

This third trip was a categorically different experience. I spent three weeks (May 27 to June 19, 2008) at Fujian Normal University (FNU) in Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian Province, located in southeastern China. This opportunity came about via the suggestion of composer and old friend Wen DeQing, and ultimately upon the invitation from Wang YaoHua, Wen's former professor and world-renowned ethnomusicologist on faculty at FNU.

As a visiting professor, my role during this trip was to prepare a recital that would combine a solo concert and a short percussion ensemble program with the percussion students at FNU, who study under Associate Professor of Percussion Li Lin. We gave this performance on June 17, after many days of hard work together.

LOST (AND FOUND) IN TRANSLATION

The June 17 printed concert program clearly reflects the bilingual experience that the students, Li Lin, and I shared. A Chinese university environment in 2008 presents a noteworthy conversational dichotomy for an English speaker.² On one hand, Chinese of my generation and older typically are unable to speak fluent English, and some had no experience trying to understand a westerner's spoken English.

On the other side of this communicational divide, the younger generation (e.g., the students at the University) has been studying English since the age of 13, and in some cases even earlier. Although English has been part of the national curriculum in Chinese schools for a

number of years and there are more people learning English in China today than there are people living in the United States,³ it was nevertheless clear that the younger people had a more immediate understanding of and capacity to communicate in English.

Therefore, spending time with my peers and spending time with my students provided radically different experiences, and I must admit that I enjoyed socializing with the students very much. Whenever I was taken out to for a meal by the faculty of the FNU Music College, I was typically left at the edge of a conversation I did not understand. I tried my best to take part and rapidly learned words and phrases pertinent to mealtime discussions, but overall I was left in the dark—an incredibly humbling experience that inspired me to work very hard on Mandarin most mornings during my short stay. At meals with the students, we had meaningful exchanges that were fun and beneficial to all of us—questions back and forth about how to say this and that in Chinese and in English, about school systems and clothing styles between America and China, and about other topics ranging from music to politics⁴ to the environment. We exchanged hilarious jokes and “literal translations” that make very little sense from one language to the other. For examples, just as in English someone might jokingly (or not!) threaten someone else to beat them “black and blue” or to give someone a “licking,” Chinese have the saying, “*gěi nǐ yánsè kàn kàn*” (give you a color see-see). My student WangZheng thought that sounded hilarious in English. “If you don't listen to me, I give you a color see-see!”

Regarding their spoken English, many students complained of having poor English teachers—older generation Chinese who had never been abroad and had never been able to adopt a proper English accent—who gave the students many assignments in translation, but little time in actual conversation.

My sense is that in due time, these problems will vanish. As China continues its rapid ascension in the world, global opportunities are becoming more readily available for young Chi-

nese. Case in point: One evening I spent some downtime outside of the Taiwanese bubble tea house, *Babu*, enjoying what became a very addictive drink, *jben jhu nǎi chá* (milk bubble tea), and writing in my journal about the day's memorable events. Before I knew it I found myself engaged in conversation by two young female students.

“What are you writing?” I heard in near-perfect English with a mild British accent.

I never learned the second student's name, although she was an art student but unable to speak English well. Ling HwanZhen, however, was a fourth-year English major with an incredibly strong grasp on English, on the precipice of graduation at the end of June.

“What are your plans after graduation?” I asked.

“I was supposed to return to my hometown to teach middle school English, but I opted instead to take two years to travel,” she replied. “I have a position with a Chinese company based in Ethiopia that works on projects to develop Ethiopia's infrastructure. I will translate for the company and I will also teach English to the company's employees.”

I told her what I was doing on the FNU campus and explained to her all the places I have been around the world—travels afforded via musical opportunities.

“You have a good life,” she commented with a warm smile.

I thought about that for a bit. “It sounds like you do, too,” I said.

IN REHEARSAL

“*Zài le yī zì, màn yī diǎn, hé hěn ròu, qǐng...yī, èr, sān, sè, wǔ, liù, qī...*”

(Again once more, a little slower and very softly, please...one, two, three, four, five, six, seven...)

I could hardly believe it myself, but phrases such as these were steadily pouring out of my mouth by the end of two weeks of daily morning Mandarin study combined with afternoon rehearsals with my percussion students at FNU, and I still had one more week to grow and to

THE CONCERT

When the hour of the concert neared, I got cleaned up and headed across campus. I had intended to stop at Babu along the way for a cold-shaken *mó shàng lǜ chá* (jasmine green tea) but decided against it as I was running too close to schedule to make the stop. It was an evening that threatened rain and was already coming down in a soft mist, so I found the closest campus transport, the *xiǎo lǜ chē* (little green car) and climbed on board. I was instantly greeted by one of my students, XiaYang.

She held out a bag to me and said, "I got for you a *mó shàng lǜ chá*!"

It was going to be a good concert.

Professor Li Lin gave a fairly lengthy introduction for my entrance on stage, and when he finally ended and I began my ascent, I was greeted by some of the most enthusiastic, loudest applause I think I have ever been given.

Before playing, I headed to the front of the stage: "*Xiānshēngmen jí nǚshēngmen, ni hǎo.*" (Ladies and gentlemen, good evening.)

I didn't think it was possible, but the applause got even louder and more energetic.

"*Wǒ hěn kuàilè kàn nimen hé wǒmen jīntiān wǎnshàng.*" (I am very happy to see all of you with us this evening.)

Even louder...

"*Wǒ, Li Lin jiào shòu, jí wǒmen de xué shēng zhūnbèi zhenme duō shou de yīn yuè. Tāmen hěn cōngmíng hé yǒu cǎinéng. Wǒ fēi cháng kuàilè shì zài. Xiè xie.*" (Professor Li Lin, our students and I have prepared many musical pieces. They

are very intelligent and talented. I am extremely happy to be here. Thank you.")

The crowd virtually erupted, and then I began play.

The concert was incredibly successful. At the intermission people were already approaching me with comments and compliments. By the end of the evening, topped off by a joyous performance of Steve Reich's "Music for Pieces of Wood" by five of the FNU students, I think the students and I posed for at least 50 to 100 photos.

In addition to the photos accompanying this article, others can be seen at: www.gregbeyer.com/china_trip_photos.html

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Late that evening, after the concert, Professor Li Lin, the students, and I went to an on-campus restaurant to celebrate our success. At one point in the midst of many conversations, WangZheng began singing an excerpt from Wen Deqing's "Complainte," a work that he had performed last year with two other students. It is a piece I know very well. It is, in fact, probably the single-most important reason I have had so many opportunities to travel to China. In 1998, I met Wen Deqing at the Darmstadt Fereinkurse für Neue Musik in Germany, where I conducted a performance of this very piece. More recently, I had three of my students perform it with Wen in 2006, when I arranged an evening concert of Wen's music at the Northern Illinois University School of Music. I began to sing along with WangZheng.

He looked at me with some surprise. "How do you know this piece?"

I explained everything, and in that moment, I could tell that this explanation hit home very strongly with everyone at that table. The various conversations grew quiet. The students realized then that someone in their very shoes, perhaps 20 years ago, was able to leave China, study abroad, meet people from around the world, establish personal and professional ties, and return home able to offer all of this rich experience back to his home country. Such is Wen DeQing's story.

Li Lin's cell phone rang. "Wei?" (Hello?)

It was Wen, on the line from Shanghai. At that very moment he called to check in, to see how the concert went, to express his happiness and his solidarity with all of us at that table. He and I spoke at length. I had never been able to speak to him in his own language before. He spoke to the very students who had performed "Complainte."

Many hugs and tears later, we all said good-bye and went home.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Over the three-week stay, I had created very strong relationships with about half of the students with whom I came into contact—not a bad ratio, all things considered. I am convinced that this is not the last I will see or hear from them. In fact, I think it is safe to predict that at least one or two of them will eventually find their way to the United States to study percussion. For that I am exceedingly happy.

On my last full day in China, Li Lin took me to Quanzhou, a beautiful city further south on China's coast, in the lower third of Fujian province. It was a day full of wonderful experiences that could easily be the subject for an altogether different story. On the ride home, my cell phone rang. It was three of the students from FNU, wanting to meet with me. Unfortunately I would not make it back to the campus until after their 11:00 p.m. dormitory curfew. They left gifts for me at the hotel desk, but WangZheng needed to explain his gift to me, via YiChen, whose spoken English was much stronger than his own:

"WangZheng wanted to explain this to you face to face. Such a pity you won't be back in time for that. He wants you to know that he made this for you; he made it with his heart. It is a brush writing, traditional Chinese calligraphy, with a very special saying. We Chinese hang these at the doors of our homes, to give good energy to the home and to everyone inside. We call this *shō fā*. I can try to paraphrase it for you. It means this: Shepherd boy, take your flute and play it / And go home, without a care in your heart."

I was, at that moment and even now as I write this, incredibly moved by the well-thought out, deep personal meaning hidden just beneath the surface of this phrase. It has given me the ability, the insight, to receive the many blessings I have received in this life and to be happy—truly and honestly happy.

Li Lin asked me on the day of my departure from China, "What is your favorite thing about China?"

Without hesitation I replied, "*Wǒmen de xué shāng...our students.*"

China has touched me deeply, not through any magical or mystical force, but via the simple purity of its young people, who have the world at their fingertips and a wealth of knowledge to give to the world.

Furthermore, this experience has convinced me that musicians are perfectly poised to be ambassadors of their own culture and scholars of the culture of others. I am proud to be an American percussionist—someone with the ability to teach from broad and deep experience and simultaneously to place myself in a position of learning via a sincere respect for the culture and place of others. I hope what I have learned will



Professor Li Lin playing his yanqin (hammered dulcimer) and I.



Post concert success story.

play a strong part in helping my own students in the United States develop their perspective as citizens of this country and citizens of the world. In the 21st century, the development of a global perspective on life is an essential step toward understanding the interconnectivity of human existence on this planet.

At PASIC 2009 in Indianapolis, I will play host to the Wednesday Focus Day, "The Global Economy." I look forward to a day full of performances through which percussionists from around the world give credence to these sentiments.

ENDNOTES

1. At the 4th Beijing Modern Music Festival in 2006, I witnessed many incredible works and performances of percussion music. My solo concert was one of four full-length programs of percussion music on a "Percussion Marathon" concert that ran for over eight hours. Notable composers and their compositions include Wen DeQing's "Gong Fu" and "Complainte," Guo WenJing's "Parade," Zhou Long's "Tales from the Cave" and Qu Xiaosong's "Mirage."
2. This is a generalization to be sure; there were a few older people with whom I was able to speak a bit of English, just as there were a handful of students who very clearly did not understand my spoken English. By and large, however, this generalization rang true in my experience.
3. <http://www.englishfirst.com/trt/teaching-english-in-china.html>
4. All students at FNU are obliged to study the political theories of Karl Marx, just as they are required to study English. This provided a fascinating point of departure for discussion.
5. "*Shǒu jiǎo bìng yòng*" literally means "hand foot together using," but it is a common musical idiom that my colleague, Dr. Wang Jui-Ching, taught to me early on during our stay at FNU. This proved to be a very useful expression, as I did this kind of exercise with the students almost daily to try to get the students with weaker rhythmic sense on the same level of comfort and execution with the rest of the group.

Greg Beyer was second-prize winner of the 2002 Geneva International Solo Percussion Competition and he has given solo performances and master classes throughout the United States, Europe, South America, and China. Of primary importance to him is his project Arcomusical, dedicated to the advancement of the berimbau in contemporary music. Beyer is a founding member of the flute/percussion duo Due East, which took first place in the 2008 National Flute Association Chamber Music Competition. Beyer teaches at Northern Illinois University, where he is an Assistant Professor of Percussion in the School of Music. PN

CALL FOR PROPOSALS PASIC 2009 FOCUS DAY

"The Global Economy" Percussion as Medium for Discovery, Exchange and Transformation

The PAS New Music/Research Committee is pleased to announce a call for proposals for presentation/performance at PASIC 2009 Focus Day, Wednesday, November 11th, 2009, in Indianapolis, Indiana. The theme for the day is "The Global Economy: Percussion as Medium for Discovery, Exchange and Transformation."

There is clearly a trend, aided undoubtedly via the Internet and all that it entails, for the connected world to come ever closer together. The banality and the beauty of humanity sit side by side - simultaneously terrifying and electrifying. Today, the degrees of separation are reduced to the clicks of a mouse. Concurrently, contemporary musical research is making great strides in the development of new approaches and new voices through the melding of multiple cultural influences. This research, reflected in the projects of individuals and communities, is founded upon the assumption that music can and should effectively undermine fear, mistrust, and failure to understand "the other."

This call for proposals seeks ideas for musical performances, sound installations, and lecture/presentations that deal with percussion as a medium for the synthesis of diverse musical cultures. This call is not meant to showcase traditional musics, but rather is looking for voices from around the planet that are creating unique percussive statements from diverse influences. This call seeks musical expressions that promote deep synthesis and understanding of multiple lines of influence. Please avoid submissions that reflect a superficial use of traditional instrumentation within an otherwise standard context. Solo and ensemble artists whose work clearly reflects multiple percussive influences are strongly encouraged to apply. Of particular interest to the committee are proposals that offer the use of interactive technology to underscore the immediacy of possibility of global exchange, projects that undermine the notion of locale as a defining cultural boundary.

The committee seeks the interest and participation of both emerging and established composers, scholars and performers. All proposals that qualify for inclusion on the 2009 PASIC Focus Day will be given complete and careful consideration. Please note: expenses and the securing of instruments and funding sources will be the sole responsibility of the artist(s). This includes the logistical and financial considerations involved with additional performers. Please prepare and submit your proposal with this consideration.

Any person's wishing to submit a proposal for review must complete the PASIC 2009 Artist Application at <http://www.pasic.org/ArtistApps/>

You may be contacted at a later date to provide additional materials (CD, DVD, etc) to support your proposal.

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DEADLINE: DECEMBER 15, 2008