
Interview: Jin Xiang

'Classical music is a gem from the treasure of human culture'

by Michael O. Billington

The Washington Opera presented an opera this past season in the U.S. capital, composed by one of the leading composers from the People's Republic of China, Mr. Jin Xiang. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to meet with Jin Xiang and his wife, Li Dao-chuan, at their temporary residence in Washington, D.C. where the following discussion took place. Participating in the discussion was Ray Wei, a Chinese member of the Schiller Institute, who also served as interpreter. I had previously had the opportunity to see Jin Xiang's opera at the Kennedy Center, performed by an excellent cast of young Chinese professionals, all now working with leading opera companies in the United States. They had all been trained in China, demonstrating that despite the total collapse of classical music in China during the nightmare of the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, the love of classical music and the teaching of the bel canto method of singing have survived.

Composer Jin Xiang, 56 years old, graduated with honors from the leading Chinese conservatory in 1959, but was labeled a "rightist" following one of Mao's fanatical campaigns against culture and reason, and spent the next 20 years in the desolate western province of Xinjiang, without any access to classical music. Since his rehabilitation in 1979, he has directed the Beijing Symphony, taught, and composed extensively.

The opera, entitled "Savage Land," is set in the 1920s. Its subject is the tyranny of life in pre-republican China, thus avoiding the question of "political correctness" over the issue of communism. The music is a mix of styles, from both East and West. Jin professes to be influenced by many composers, both classical and modern. The opera suffers from the romantic and modern misconception that emotions should be portrayed by impressionistic walls of sound. Scenes of agony and delirium are accompanied by discordant noise of a Stravinsky (or worse) style, and the orchestration tends in that direction throughout. But he develops several arias in a lyric style which are very effective, drawing on both western and Chinese thematic material.

As I told Jin Xiang when we met, I despise most modern music and fully expected to hate his opera. I was thus pleased

to find that despite my disagreements, the music demonstrated great skill in providing the singers the opportunity to express the beauty of the voice—and this excellent cast had much to express. Jin's wife, Li Dao-chuan, I learned, was the director of the National Opera in Beijing, which has performed operas such as "Carmen" and "Rigoletto," and is herself a professionally trained bel canto soprano.

The first part of our meeting was a discussion of the work of the Schiller Institute and *EIR*, including the campaign to lower the standard pitch used in performance back down to the "scientific" pitch—sometimes called the "Verdi" pitch—of C=256 hertz. He and his wife expressed great interest in this effort, which was totally new to them, and were anxious to study the issue further.

Jin Xiang survived persecution that drove thousands of others in similar circumstances to suicide. He survived with a deep moral conviction to dedicate his life to uplifting his nation—and the world—through his creative contributions to musical culture.

Billington: You were sent to Xinjiang for 20 years as a "rightist." Why? Because of your family, or because of your political beliefs?

Jin Xiang: Because of your strong interest in politics, I want to make it clear that I will not be involved in politics, neither in China nor here. This does not mean I am not concerned with politics, but because I lost 20 years, my time is very limited, and my capabilities are also very limited. I want to dedicate my whole work to music, so that I can do something for the human race. On the tuning issue, and your effort to fight against the drugs and rock and roll counterculture: This is very good, I like this. Since 1979, when I got back to the music profession, I have written some articles. I attacked so-called modern music, rock music, as just noise. In my book of articles, you will find my criticisms on this and on other musicians. For myself, I compose and I think, I don't simply follow the current wave. By reading my articles, you can summarize my musical practice, you can understand it as complementary, rather than just listening to my music.

Simply put, when I was young, I loved music, and I loved

to think. At that time, I felt I was fighting in a situation in which I was confused. There were things that the Communist Party did that were not reasonable. At that time I believed in communism, and I thought their idea of eliminating slave labor and such ideas were good. But I found that there were problems in implementing them, so I gave some reasonable advice, some suggestions. That's why I ended up condemned as a rightist.

Billington: During the 100 Flowers Campaign?

Jin Xiang: Right. For this matter, as we review it today, it is proved that I was right on these issues and the communists were wrong. I was right and they were wrong, but I was charged as a rightist. What I found, is that the communist system was still somewhat feudalist. I tried to solve the problem, I tried to save the nation. But all I can do is to uplift the people, through culture, rather than to be concerned with the political issues. If everyone is uplifted by a great culture, by doing that, we can save China.

So the problem is not simply to overthrow the communist regime. The problem is—and this is a problem that the Communist Party also did not understand—we have to educate the great mass of the public. Then you can have development. If not, if you just throw out one party and you get another party, they may have the same problem, because the masses are not educated. I thought about this during those 20 years when I was in Xinjiang. I believe that the solution is not simple. I feel that I should use my music to exchange between Chinese and the western cultures, and to promote oriental culture as well. As the national culture is uplifted . . . well, it may work under the name of the communist system.

Every society must have change. Why is there no change? To change is a natural thing. I think that the idea that there should be no change does not even agree with the philosophy of dialectical materialism! (laughs) So I think there must be change. How to change it? You make it better by improving the cultural characteristics.

My major task, and my belief, is reflected in my opera "Savage Land." The theme of the opera, is that there is a debt between the fathers, and then the son takes on the son, takes revenge upon the sons. This is a feudal idea. It happens again and again. In the opera, he takes revenge [by killing the son of his father's enemy], but although he breaks the chains [on his arms and legs], and physically he is free, yet his mind is not. Then it becomes tragic. This is what I try to say to the audience. This is what I believe, that we have to break up this feudal system, which cannot solve any problems. In the opera, the heroine is to have a child, who is supposed to carry on this revenge. My opera is a fight against this feudal system of old China.

As to the Communist Party, I don't just demand, like other people, "down with the Communist Party." I believe, if the Communist Party can do something good, it's O.K.—basically, it has to do the right thing.

Billington: I found it very interesting that the *Washington Post* criticized the last act of your opera—they would have preferred the opera to end after the hero killed the wife and son of his father's enemy, before he goes crazy from guilt. What you said, I believe, is the most important part—that the hero went crazy because what he did was evil.

Jin Xiang: I don't care what they say. That is just their opinion. A composer, I think, has to follow the lead of what he has thought seriously. I just do what I think is the right thing to do. They only represent their own opinion. The *Washington Times* even has this accusation that I am a model of the Communist Party! One thing that I believe is that I listen to everybody. I don't lock myself in. After I came back in 1979, I listened to all kinds of music, including rock and roll, and learned all the contemporary techniques. But what I want to do is another issue. After I listened to all these kinds of music, I still do what I think is right. This is different, different from locking up my mind. This is also true for art critics.

Billington: Were you persecuted as a rightist in part *because* of your love for classical music?

Jin Xiang: No. In the 1950s, classical music was O.K. Classical music was only forbidden during the Cultural Revolution.

Billington: Were you forbidden to play or listen to classical music during the Cultural Revolution?

Jin Xiang: During the Cultural Revolution, I was already in Xinjiang. At the place where I was, we didn't have any classical music.

Billington: Did you have to do physical labor during those years, or were you allowed to do something related to music?

Jin Xiang: Being a rightist is something very complicated. It's not like being a prisoner in a prison, but you're not a free man either. So, you are something in between, because of your political beliefs. But physically, you can have a job. My work did have something to do with music, but at a lower level. I composed, conducted, organized an orchestra, or rather a local band. Sometimes they would call you out, and say, "Hey, you go out to the farm in the village," and then you had to do that work. Sometimes they sent everyone to the farms, where nothing was related to the music. This happened just before the Cultural Revolution, 1964-65.

At that time, we all went to the farms. I was there until 1973. After 1973, I worked in the regional orchestra as a conductor in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. Primarily, this was the folk music of the minorities. I was there for six years. In 1979 I came back to Beijing.

Billington: What role do you think classical music played in reviving China from the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution?

Jin Xiang: There are two parts. As to classical music itself, it is technically rigorous, it falls in the order of the hierarchy of the universe. It gives people discipline and harmony, in the technical aspects. On the other side, is the spirit; the feeling of classical music uplifts the people, so they would go to a higher phase of reality. I want to emphasize that it was not just classical music [that brought people out of the Cultural Revolution]. It depended also on the government, what the government would do to improve people's lives. But in certain aspects, to a certain degree, classical music does contribute to uplift people and to educate the people in China.

Billington: Who do you think were the most important leaders who supported you and supported classical music?

Jin Xiang: First I'd like to make it clear that I don't quite agree that only classical music, in the sense of *western* classical music, is the only solution that can uplift the people in China. I don't emphasize this just because I happen to work in the music field. In Chinese musical life, there is both western classical music and Chinese classical music and contemporary style, like some light music as well. These can all uplift people. So I would not exaggerate the function of western classical music, as the only solution to the problem. Classical music represents a period of history. I am not the sort of person to emphasize only classical music—I think that is a difference between you and me.

Billington: Do you consider your opera to be western-style classical music?

Jin Xiang: I don't think so. Does your definition of western classical music include romanticism and impressionism?

Billington: They are sometimes called "classical," but they are not what is properly known as classical in their nature, and I have strong disagreements with them, which go beyond the question of music per se, embracing the areas of culture, politics, art, and science, where I think the same division exists. The collapse of our civilization is due to the romantic, impressionist influence, and the loss of the classical love of truth and beauty.

Jin Xiang: Do you believe that the degeneration of contemporary civilization relates to the romantic period of music, including Debussy and so forth?

Billington: Yes.

Jin Xiang: What is the relation?

Billington: Perhaps it is better to go back a bit. The classical period, with perhaps Beethoven as the highest expression, was committed to the idea that art, both music and the physical arts, was a medium through which to express the creative ideas of the mind, in a way which would be intelligible to the viewer or the listener. The audience would be brought to

use the creative powers of his own mind in hearing or seeing such an artistic work, and would therefore be uplifted to a higher order of truth and beauty. They found beauty to be located in the process of solving a problem in a piece of music, which was the same mental process as that required for the solving of a problem in the physical sciences, or economics, or any scientific field—that the same process of creative mentation was involved.

Beginning with the romantics, you begin to see a breakdown in the commitment to scientific discovery, and art became transformed into romanticism and impressionism, which was the expression of the *feelings* of the composer, which in turn were meant to evoke a *feeling* in the listener, but not necessarily to provoke a mental crisis or a mental problem which had to be solved. This is very clear in the case of Wagner. It is not an accident—it is lawful—that Wagner was a fascist, and a racist. If I may take the liberty, I found that the best parts of your opera came when you were trying to express a higher emotion—love or duty. But when you were trying to create an impression of insanity, you used techniques that were basically unintelligible. It definitely

The tragedy of the Cultural Revolution

Violinist Isaac Stern spent three weeks in China in the summer of 1979 as the guest of the Chinese government, accompanied by his family and pianist David Golub. That was the year of the Democracy Wall movement in China, the first breath of hope since the hell of the Cultural Revolution.

The following is an excerpt from the 84-minute videotape on the trip, "From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China" (©Hopewell Foundation, 1980). The videotape features Stern's master classes with students of all ages from Beijing and Shanghai conservatories, and a rehearsal with the Beijing Philharmonic Orchestra.

The following passage captures a particularly poignant moment during a discussion among Stern, Golub, and officials of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, in which the deputy director of the Conservatory, Tan Shuzhen, relates his personal tragedy during the Cultural Revolution.

Stern: You have an extraordinary power in China available to you in your young people. But both Mr. Golub and I have reached the same conclusion, all the way through, from everything we've heard, that the young people—8, 9, 10, 11—remarkable. But 17, 18, 19, 20,

does create a feeling, a mood in the audience, and your reviewers liked that part very much!

Jin Xiang: I do not understand what is the difference between getting the feeling and mood of pain over to the audience, but that the idea didn't get across.

Billington: My wife and I both, after the opera, wished that you had used the same methods of composition which you used in the expression of love and duty, when you attempted to express the battle in the mind of a man going insane, instead of the [howling noises].

Jin Xiang: Now I understand. But one question I want to ask, what's your opinion of Puccini? Is he classic or romantic?

Billington: Puccini was able to write so as to bring out the voice, so many of his operas have passages which allow a beautiful voice to come forward, but he is romantic. He is looking only for musical effect.

Jin Xiang: I agree with some of your points of view, to look to music to educate and uplift people. But on the other side,

what I believe, is that sometimes those composers like Puccini and Wagner just cannot be classified as classicist or romanticist. It is not extremely necessary to do so. Because I believe that even in one single composer, there exist both characteristics of classic and romantic. Just as you and I agree on the method I used for love and duty, but not on the other part, as you commented that I take measurements from both sides. So I personally think that it is not that necessary to differentiate them. But your opinion is reasonably good.

Let's go back to the question about the influence of classical music in China. Well, classic music is a gem from the treasure of human culture. It is supported by many people in China. For instance, the Central Orchestra of China performed only classical music in the early days, although they also play some modern music nowadays. The conductor of the orchestra, Mr. Li Delung, loves and advocates classical music strongly. The government basically criticizes rock and roll, but not Stravinsky or modern classical music.

Billington: Since Tiananmen Square, there has been much more repression of intellectual movements. Has this also

21—something happens to them. What happened in between?

Official: Well, originally, you know, the graduates of the conservatory were all taken from the graduates of the primary and middle schools attached to the conservatory. For instance, Ms. Tan-yuen, she was a graduate of the primary school of this conservatory before, but when she reached the age of 18 or 19, there came to be the Cultural Revolution, and these activities, these teachings were stopped. You could see that many of the young people of 18 or 19 years old, they have gone through this period and during that period, nothing was taught and it was quite difficult for them to continue their studies, so the level—

Stern: They couldn't even play.

Official: To play was a crime. Even to listen to a record of classical music was actually a crime. . . .

Tan Shu-zhen: The Cultural Revolution started during the spring of 1966. All of a sudden in May, the storm broke out. I taught Beethoven, Mozart, western music. I taught people to make violins. Those are the instruments belonging to the imperialists, belonging to the foreign devils, belonging to the westerners. It was like a bad dream, like a nightmare.

I was confined to a small room—that's not a room, it's a closet in the basement of the library, just under the stairs. A small closet without window, without light, without ventilation, and there is a septic tank under the

floor and a big pipe. The refuse comes from the toilets through that pipe into the septic tank, and smells very badly. I had to stay there for 14 months. And because of lack of oxygen, lack of air, my legs were swollen.

I think the chief reason they did that to all the old professors and teachers is just to get rid of us because they want to get power, to get control of the conservatory, to get control of the music.

But during that period, I was not allowed to come out. I had to stay in the dark room all the time. Somebody would send me something to eat, I was allowed to come out for a few minutes every day to get a little water, to go to the toilet. And once, when my daughter came from Beijing she wanted to see me, and the Red Guard told me, "Your daughter wants to see you, but I will allow you only five minutes to talk with her." And with his presence.

So, it was in the evening, she led me to a corner of the wall and I saw my daughter in the dark, with my granddaughter of seven years. When I saw my granddaughter, my granddaughter called me grandfather. I couldn't restrain my tears, because I was treated as a criminal, sometimes we were treated as animals.

Ten of our teachers died by suicide, because they couldn't stand the humiliation and torture, especially the torture of the mind and the humiliation. Of course we were beaten, we were kicked and beaten in many ways, but, I think, that's all right compared with the humiliation. We were treated as criminals because we taught them western music.

Classical music uplifts people, so they would go to a higher phase of reality. . . . If everyone is uplifted by a great culture, by doing that, we can save China.

badly affected the work in music?

Jin Xiang: After June 4, I personally decided to leave, although I was not involved in any political activities. Because of my language problems, I had to go to the Foreign Language Institute to study. It took me about six months to learn English right after June 4. Then I took a trip to Germany, to a conference in Munich. After I came back, while preparing to tour the U.S., I also composed a light opera, called "Sunrise." So I was not aware of any suppression of music work at that time. In 1990, around July, I left for the States.

Billington: You're planning to go back, are you not?

Jin Xiang: I'll go back. My idea is that to contribute as a composer myself, I have to study the national Chinese music as a foundation, in order to make a contribution also to the whole human race. That's why after 1979, although I had many chances to study abroad, I decided to work in China for a while. On the other hand, I would not stay in China all the time. Since only through a solid understanding of our own national music, and through exchange with the entire outside world, can someone write good music. So after 1988, I started to exchange with the outside, but my idea was still to stand on the land in China. I wanted to spend just a few years abroad for musical exchange. After these years, I will go back. This is my story.

My belief is I will go back to China to help the country to revive the culture. Many people ask if I want to stay. I say that as a composer, I should stay where the necessity is, but of course the root is still in China. I think the problem in China is more complicated than whether there is the Communist Party or not. There are several thousand years of history—a beautiful land and the good Chinese people. Any party would have to administrate the same sort of people on the same land. Now, I try to view the problem from the worldwide standpoint. I should face the whole world. So when people ask me if I would like to go back, I reply that, "I'll go back and I'll come out. If I come out, I should not stay in one place such as the U.S.; I should also see, for instance, Europe and Russia, etc."

Interpreter: We heard that some of your singers had left. Where did they go?

Li Dao-chuan: America.

Billington: I heard about this, the musical brain drain. So the best singers are leaving?

Li Dao-chuan: The best singers in the country are all leav-

ing. We had eight Carmens! They all left. Now we don't have Carmen in China any more.

Billington: Is that because there is no future for them in China?

Li Dao-chuan: There are two reasons. First, they have made achievements in music. Then they search for something better; a better living standard in the West, for instance. Also, they have more chances to perform, because in China, the company only performs two operas per year. They have much less opportunity to perform. There are many companies, but it is very difficult to move around.

Billington: Is there a brain drain among the musicians as well as the best singers?

Jin Xiang: Yes, yes. Very few come back. People like me who make something big in the West are few. But I am not looking to stay or buy a house. After these years, I now don't think about these very personal things. So when you ask me whether I would stay, I would say: I can go back and come out, just to create art in the whole world. My idea is that I should come to the outside world, to meet people like you, to discuss things. For example, if I hadn't come, then I would not have seen you! You have some fresh new ideas for me that I must learn. Exchange means two brains have a storm and confront each other.

Billington: Are you concerned that you might be attacked for supporting western-style music? In the Cultural Revolution, simply supporting this kind of music was condemned as promoting "peaceful evolution."

Jin Xiang: Not only did they criticize classical music as enemies—they labeled Beethoven as bourgeois, and criticized Mozart in the same way!

Li Dao-chuan: They even attacked Confucius!

Jin Xiang: The Cultural Revolution became extreme at that time. The attack on Confucius was for political purposes.

Billington: You're not concerned that this is going to come back?

Jin Xiang: I don't think so. It was too childish. The basic problem that is now debated in China is not whether we support classical music or not. What they discuss now is "melodyism" and "nationalism" in music. After June 4, the government put more emphasis on nationalist music. This is not bad, but if it goes to extremes on this, it can be a problem. Anything that goes to extremes would cause a problem.