JEAN SIBELIUS (1865–1957)

Finlandia (1899)

“Finlandia” represents many things to many people. The music belongs to the symphonic poem genre where the composer seeks to represent a specific entity through sound such as a person, place, event or idea. Sibelius’s representation of the Finnish struggle for independence against Russia was written for a political demonstration in Helsinki.

The history of the work’s performance also represents a turning point in the career of its composer. Despite the highly specific political depictions, the music garnered immediate universal popularity with classical music audiences. To the surprise of Sibelius himself, the work catapulted him to fame and frustratingly overshadowed larger and more profound symphonic works throughout the rest of his career. Since Finland’s independence was achieved in 1920, the work has come to represent victory and patriotism among the Finnish people.

The effectiveness of the work lies in its representation of struggle through strong, bombastic and martial musical styling contrasted with a simple, tuneful and uplifting invocation of peace. The most famous theme in the piece emerges out of the struggling bombast toward the end and catches the listener by surprise. To many, this theme represents a famous hymn tune used in churches throughout the world. For the Finnish people, the tune represents one of the most important national songs.

The tune was eventually represented in words by Veikko Antero Koskenniemi in Finnish, translated as follows:

Finland, behold, thy daylight now is dawning, the threat of night has now been driven away. The skylark calls across the light of morning, the blue of heaven lets it have its way; and now the day the powers of night is scorning; thy daylight dawns, O Finland of ours!

Finland, arise, and raise towards the highest thy head now crowned with mighty memory. Finland, arise, for to the world thou criest that thou hast thrown off thy slavery, beneath oppression’s yoke thou shalt never lie.
ABOUT THE ARTISTS

RENOWNED FOR ITS PASSIONATE MUSICALITY, IMPRESSIVE TECHNIQUE AND MULTICULTURAL INNOVATIONS, THE SHANGHAI QUARTET has become one of the world’s foremost chamber ensembles. Its elegant style melds the delicacy of Eastern music with the emotional breadth of Western repertoire, allowing it to traverse musical genres including traditional Chinese folk music, masterpieces of Western music and cutting-edge contemporary works.

Formed at the Shanghai Conservatory in 1983, the Quartet has worked with the world’s most distinguished artists and regularly tours the major music centers of Europe, North America and Asia. Recent festival performances range from the International Music Festivals of Seoul and Beijing to the Festival Pablo Casals in France, Beethoven Festival in Poland, Yerevan Festival in Armenia and Cartagena International Music Festival in Colombia, as well as numerous concerts in all regions of North America. The Quartet has appeared at Carnegie Hall in chamber performances and with orchestra; in 2006 they gave the premiere of Takuma Itoh’s Concerto for Quartet and Orchestra in Carnegie Hall’s Isaac Stern Auditorium. Among innumerable collaborations with noted artists, they have performed with the Tokyo, Juilliard and Guarneri quartets, cellists Yo-Yo Ma and Lynn Harrell, pianists Menahem Pressler, Peter Serkin and Jean-Yves Thibaudet, pipa virtuosa Wu Man and the male vocal ensemble Chanticleer. The Shanghai Quartet have been regular performers at many of North America’s leading chamber music festivals, including the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival and Ottawa Chamberfest.

The Quartet has a long history of championing new music and juxtaposing traditions of Eastern and Western music. Their 25th Anniversary season featured premieres from the three continents that comprise its artistic and cultural worlds: Penderecki’s String Quartet No.3: Leaves From an Unwritten Diary, Chen Yi’s From the Path of Beauty, String Quartet No.2 by Vivian Fung and jazz pianist Dick Hyman’s String Quartet. The Penderecki was performed on the composer’s 75th birthday in Poland. U.S. premieres were at Peak Performances, Montclair State University and the Modlin Center, University of Richmond followed by numerous performances worldwide. String Quartet No. 3 will be featured in Poland for the composer’s 80th birthday celebration in November 2013. Chen Yi’s From the Path of Beauty, commissioned with Chanticleer, was premiered in San Francisco, followed by performances at Tanglewood and Ravinia, Beijing and Shanghai. Other important commissions and premieres include works by Lowell Lieberman, Sebastian Currier, Marc Neikrug, Lei Liang, Zhou Long and Bright Sheng. Sheng’s Dance Capriccio premiered in spring 2012 with pianist Peter Serkin. Later that year, Sweet Suite, a piano quintet by Stephen Prutsman, had its premiere with the composer at the piano. Dan Welche’s Musica Potemkin for double quartet premiered in September 2012 with the Miro Quartet at the University of Texas at Austin. For the Quartet’s 30th Anniversary season in 2013, the La Jolla SummerFest has commissioned a sextet for piano, string quartet and bass from David Del Tredici, and Korean composer Jeajoon Ryu has composed a concerto for string quartet and symphony orchestra.

PROGRAM

SHANGHAI QUARTET

Weigang Li, violin
Yi-Wen Jiang, violin
Honggang Li, viola
Nicholas Tzavaras, cello

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797–1828)
String Quartet in C Minor, D. 703 “Quartettsatz”
Allegro assai

YI-WEN JIANG (b. 1963)
China Song
Yao Dance
Shepherd’s Song
Harvest Celebration

BELA BARTOK (1881–1945)
String Quartet No. 4 (1927)
Allegro
Prestissimo, con sordino
Non troppo lento
Allegretto pizzicato
Allegro molto

INTERMISSION

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1820)
String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132
Allegro
Allegro ma non tanto
Molto Adagio; Andante
Alla amarcia, assai vivace
Allegro appassionato; Presto

APPROXIMATE RUNNING TIME: ONE HOUR AND 45 MINUTES WITH ONE 15-MINUTE INTERMISSION.
The Shanghai Quartet has an extensive discography of more than 30 recordings, ranging from the Schumann and Dvořák piano quintets with Rudolf Buchbinder to Zhou Long’s Poems from Tang for string quartet and orchestra with the Singapore Symphony (BIS). Delos released the Quartet’s most popular disc, China Song, in 2003: a collection of Chinese folk songs arranged by Yi-Wen Jiang reflecting on his childhood memories of the Cultural Revolution in China. In 2009 Camerata released the Quartet’s recording of the complete Beethoven string quartets, a seven-disc project.

A diverse and interesting array of media projects includes a cameo appearance playing Bartók’s String Quartet No. 4 in Woody Allen’s film Melinda and Melinda and PBS television’s Great Performances series. Violinist Weigang Li was in the documentary From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China, and the family of cellist Nicholas Tzavaras was the subject of the 1999 film Music of the Heart, starring Meryl Streep.

The Shanghai Quartet currently serves as Quartet-in-Residence at Montclair State University in New Jersey, Ensemble-in-Residence with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and visiting guest professors of the Shanghai Conservatory and the Central Conservatory in Beijing.

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**China Song**

Some years ago I decided to arrange a few Chinese folk songs along with popular music by Chinese composers. I grew up with many of these pieces, and played some as solo works for violin and piano during the difficult days of the Cultural Revolution. The works are short and diverse. The musical style is not structured or sophisticated; the themes are expressive, direct and easily absorbed and understood. I arranged them for string quartet, so that I can again play beautiful Chinese music and also bring it to a wider audience with the Shanghai Quartet.

Some folk songs are performed by a singer, violin or piano; or by Chinese traditional instruments such as the pipa, erhu or suona and bamboo flute. I tried to make the harmony and the structure closer to traditional Western styles, so that Chinese music can be played on Western instruments and be enjoyed internationally.

“Yao Dance” is based on a folk song of Yao, a mountain village in southwest China. The work has three large sections, with two themes in each section. In the opening, the viola and cello soft pizzicato hint at the arrival of nightfall, while dancers gather in the moonlight. The second violin’s simple, expressive melody is a young girl dancing, soon joined by the other dancers. The theme suddenly takes on an ardent and rough character, suggesting a group of young men dashing into the young girls. The strong musical contrast depicts the striking personalities of the Yao people. The middle section is in 3/4 time, its melody moving between a singing quality and a rhythmic dancing figure — two young lovers expressing adoration for each other. In the recapitulation the viola starts the first theme before being joined by the other strings. The second theme is more vivid and passionate, with each voice alternating its entrance until the whole quartet comes together in a loud and fast coda, the climax of the evening celebration.

“Shepherd’s Song” is a popular folk song from Inner Mongolia, often played on a traditional two-stringed Mongolian instrument called a “Horse-Head Qin.” As the shepherd puts his cattle out to graze, the surroundings inspire him to express his love of nature and nostalgia for his homeland. He sings a lyrical melody with deep emotion: “White clouds are floating in the blue sky. Under the clouds there is a flock of snow white sheep.” The free rhythm and Dvořákian harmony in the lower strings’ arpeggio figures create a quiet, misty atmosphere, suggesting patches of soft clouds floating over meadows. The music reaches a passionate climax before subsiding again into tranquility and peace.

“Harvest Celebration” is an original piece with piano accompaniment by violinist and composer Jing-Ping Zhang. For centuries the harvest celebration, coming after a year of hard plowing and weeding, has been one of the great events in China. Based on four short phrases, the violin imitates the suona, a double-reed wind instrument with a loud and high pitch, while drums, cymbals and gongs are beaten boisterously. The rapid switches of meter and rhythm suggest the competitive improvisations typical of traditional Chinese celebrations. The music evokes images of the peasants singing and dancing with boundless joy.

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—Yi-Wen Jiang, ©2002