

BRIDGE BUILDERS

The 35-year old Shanghai Quartet travels as seamlessly between hemispheres as it does between traditional and new music.

BY Claire Sykes

It was the last thing they ever expected. When the foursome first teamed up more than 35 years ago, they didn't think their string quartet would continue for long, let alone become one of the most successful in the world.

Named after the city where it originated in 1983, two years later permanently based in the US, the Shanghai Quartet is also the first string quartet to emerge from post-Cultural Revolution China. With its Chinese musical roots and Western classical training, the group is known not only for its performances of the core Western repertoire, but also for its international commissioned works, many from China and featuring non-Western instruments. The quartet has played nearly 3,000 concerts in thirty countries, with travel to China forming a central component of its touring schedule

The Shanghai Quartet.
Left to right: Weigang Li, violin; Honggang Li, viola; Nicholas Tzavaras, cello; and Yi-Wen Jiang, violin.



and mission; in 2018 alone, the quartet traveled to China eleven times. So far, it's recorded thirty-five CDs.

"We're a bridge between the East and the West. We want to bring to people the mission of what this music is all about," says second violinist Yi-Wen Jiang. He's joined in the quartet by first violinist Weigang Li, Weigang's violist brother Honggang Li—the siblings the quartet's founding members—and cellist Nicholas Tzavaras, together as such since 2000.

The group has been the quartet-in-residence at Montclair State University's John J. Cali School of Music, in New Jersey, since 2002; and for that long on the faculty at Bard College Conservatory of Music, in New York. The four are also visiting guest professors of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing.

The quartet's remarkable tale is told in the roughly hour-long documentary, *Behind the Strings*, due for independent release soon and aimed for PBS Broadcasting. For nearly five years, Michael Peroff, executive producer, and Hal Rifkin, director and cinematographer, traveled to China, France, Mexico, and fifteen US cities collecting almost 175 hours of footage for the documentary.

From the opening scene's roar of a jet arriving at the Newark Airport to the group's soaring performance of Beethoven's "Serioso" at the film's close, the camera follows the Shanghai Quartet onto concert-hall stages and into their living rooms, inside a chicken coop and from a hospital bed, in rehearsal rooms arguing it out and in classrooms encouraging their students. And telling it like it is.

The documentary begins with the ten-year Chinese Cultural Revolution, when only patriotic and revolutionary musics were allowed. Along with the quartet members, we hear from the original Shanghai Quartet's first coach in China, Professor Ding Zhinuo; violinists Arnold Steinhardt and Shmuel Ashkenasi; composer Tan Dun; pianist Wu Han, flutist Eugenia Zuckerman and *pipa* player Wu Man; among others. There's no holding back from two

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Shanghai Quartet wives, also professional musicians, with husbands traveling somewhere in the world 180 days out of the year.

"*Behind the Strings* is a calendarized tapestry showing how the Shanghai Quartet has progressed in the US, coming from a country whose government once didn't want Western classical music performed there. And now it's inviting them back more than ten times a year," says Peroff, of Montclair, New Jersey.

Growing up in Shanghai in the 60s, Weigang and Honggang were five and seven when they started learning the violin, secretly, from their parents, both well-known professional violinists with a love of Western classical music. The two brothers attended the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, as soloists.

Then their lives took a major turn. In 1983, when Western chamber music was practically nil in China, the government organized a national chamber music competition. The winner would go to

Members of the quartet perform with a student at the Shanghai Isaac Stern International Violin Competition.



England to compete in the 1985 Portsmouth International String Quartet Competition (now the Wigmore Competition). Weigang and Honggang quickly found two collaborators, never imagining they'd become a serious ensemble. They rehearsed intensely for a year, mentored by foreign visiting artists. The group won in China, and came in second in the Portsmouth: China's first chamber-music prize in a Western competition.

Portsmouth juror Shmuel Ashkenasi, then of the Vermeer Quartet, invited the group to study under him at the Northern Illinois University. Next came Juilliard, where Weigang was assistant to Robert Mann. In 1987, the Shanghai Quartet made its New York debut and nearly 100 concerts worldwide followed. That year, Quartetto Italiano's Elisa Fegreffi gave Honggang a 1757 DeCable violin, the special prize of the first Premio Paolo Borciani International String Quartet Competition. Yi-Wen joined the quartet in 1994 as second violinist, Honggang taking the then-empty violist's seat.

The brothers grew up with Yi-Wen. His mother was a soprano and his concertmaster father started giving him violin lessons at age six. After graduating from the Central Conservatory of Music, Yi-Wen received a scholarship in 1985 to study with Taras Gabora in the US. He also worked with Arnold Steinhardt and Pinchas Zukerman.

While quartet-in-residence at the University of Richmond in Virginia, the Shanghai Quartet met Tzavaras. Growing up in Spanish Harlem, by age two he was learning the violin from his mother, Roberta Guaspari-Tzavaras, also a music educator and the subject of the 1999 film, *Music of the Heart*, starring Meryl Streep. He switched to the cello at six.

Tzavaras joined the Shanghai Quartet in 2000. "I was quite a bit younger than the others and wasn't even finished with my degree," he says. He graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music and the State University of New York at Stonybrook, his teachers Laurence Lesser and Timothy Eddy. "The quartet took a gamble with me. And I didn't realize how challenging it would be as a professional string-quartet player. You also have to be good at business, and think of the product, branding, social media presence, and commissioning enough. I feel really honored to be in this group."

The Shanghai Quartet has always played the core, Western standards. It celebrated its 25th anniversary by performing the Beethoven String Quartets and recording them in a six-CD set (Camerata, 2009). It's the first quartet to play the complete cycle in China.

"We enjoy the great masterworks, but it's our responsibility also to play music that's composed today. It's important to stay relevant," says Tzavaras. Contemporary classical music makes up about one-third of the group's repertoire, with one to two commissions per year. "We want musically profound works, ones that have impact for the audience. We want them to enjoy the piece, be moved by it, and leave thinking about it and what it makes them feel."

Krzysztof Penderecki wrote his third quartet for the group, and the fourth is coming. So is a piece for string quartet and tenor voice by Marcos Balter, associate professor at Montclair State. Another is by Tan Dun, newly appointed dean of the Bard College Conservatory of Music. For its 35th anniversary, along with performing the Beethoven cycle again, the Shanghai Quartet commissioned Tan Dun's revision of his very first string quartet, "Feng Ya Song," (1982) with its blend of traditional Chinese melody and Western harmony.

"The Shanghai Quartet revised [the piece] with an absolutely virtuoso performance," says Tan Dun. "It actually made me really hear it for the first time after 35 years. I think [the group] is absolutely on the top of artistic discovery, level, and creation. They are discovering a link between the past and future, the individual and the world, East and West. And that kind of attitude, achievement, and vision are close to my heart. I believe the Shanghai Quartet is one of the best since the quartet art form was invented."

Add to the list of contemporary Chinese composers Bright Sheng, Lei Lang, Chen Yi—and Zhao Jiping and Zhao Lin's "Red



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Lantern,” featuring the lute-like *pipa*, co-commissioned with Wu Man in 2017. That was the first time she and the Shanghai Quartet worked together, always knowing they would, ever since their teens together at the Central Conservatory of Music. “I highly respect them,” Wu Man says. “They work very hard and with a deep understanding of the music, and still push themselves forward.”

Yi-Wen himself has arranged more than 50 pieces for string quartet and other instruments. The group’s recording, *ChinaSong* (Delos, 2002) features his crowd-pleaser arrangements of 24 traditional Chinese folksongs, popular during the Cultural Revolution, and still today. He had no agenda when he began the project in 1999, only that “I got tired of writing cadenzas,” he says. “And I wanted to see how old Chinese music would sound as a string quartet. Then I started adding piano, vocals, and Chinese traditional instruments. They’re great melodies, very charming and expressive and easy to absorb. There’s a sensation that is distinctly not Western, in the chords, harmony, and plucking.”

Every two years the Shanghai Quartet selects one ensemble for Montclair’s Cali School Graduate String Quartet Fellowship program, which the group founded in 2013. All three quartets, their members now having graduated, have successfully launched their careers, concertizing and teaching.

Though the Shanghai Quartet seems to always be off performing and teaching elsewhere, “we never miss any Montclair classes or lessons,” says Yi-Wen. He challenges his students: How do you communicate the fundamental values of what you believe about the music? What kind of message are you sending?

He asks students newly arrived from China why they chose the States. “The answer is always higher education, because Western classical music plays no part in Chinese history. But if you want to study here, you have to absorb not just the music, but everything, so you don’t play Western instruments in a Chinese way. And it’s OK that you don’t win a prize or get into some great orchestra. You’ll come into this room and improve a hundred times better.”

The Shanghai Quartet also is opening the ears and minds of students and audiences in China, which has traditionally focused on the soloist or the orchestra seeking the country’s honor in high-profile competitions and extravagant spectacles. “You’re not encouraged toward creativity for its own sake,” says Yi-Wen. But that’s changing, as chamber music there, now in its early stages, grows. Unlike ten years ago, full-house audiences in cities other than Shanghai and Beijing are applauding Beethoven.

“China realizes it can build up its musicianship, to develop a sense of listening and awareness. And that what it takes to play in a chamber group can only contribute to an orchestra,” continues Yi-Wen. “Meanwhile, we’re sharing with Westerners 5,000 years of Chinese musical treasures, from a different angle. I feel proud that we can be ambassadors of cultural exchange. No matter where you’re from or whatever your nationality or ancestors, music binds you together.”

Claire Sykes is a freelance writer in Portland, Oregon. Along with this magazine, her music articles have appeared in Strings, Bass World, Piano & Keyboard, Opera News, The Wire, Musicworks, and others. She also covers the visual arts, health and bioscience, philanthropy, and business.