

The Millbrook Independent

Bard College & Chinese New Year

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By Kevin T. McEneaney



Bard College celebrated Chinese New Year with a concert titled Sound of Spring on February 13. Hosted by conductor Jindong Cai and world-renowned string pipa player Wu Man, the concert was like a pinata with candy exploding every which way, or perhaps more accurately a surprise birthday party where famous musicians drop by for a brief performance and one feels like a lurking hanger-on, lucky to be spying on the event without pulling a Jackson from your jeans. By the way, we are now in the Year of the Ox.

The title of the concert was obviously a metaphor, since a glance out my window displayed frozen mounds of snow. The concert opened with Tan Dun's Heroic Symphony, which was inspired by Beethoven's Eroica, performed last year with western instruments in China, but this year performed in a new Tan Dun arrangement for strictly Chinese instruments. The orchestra was divided into three parts: strings, horns, and plucking instruments which included chimes and bells. The opening horn fanfare was impressively arresting and quite Western yet the plunge into traditional Chinese sounds was more magically wondrous.

"A Beautiful Night for New Year" was played with a combination of Chinese instruments and Western instruments by Bard's The Orchestra Now.

Wu Man was the featured pipa player for three folksongs by Bao Yankai, an early 20th century composer and arranger from the rural region near Shanghai. Her facility was something astonishing to watch and wonder—and, yes, she is one of the most remarkable string players in the world, if not the most remarkable!

Bard's Nicole Oswald played violin in "Going to the West Gate" from Northern China. "The Amusing Couple" featured a cello played by Bard's Eva Roebuck (who appears to be a young star we will hear more about in the future) where the cello slyly jokes and converses with the orchestra.

Evolution by Julian Yu featured Lü Jia conducting the Chinese National Center for Performing Arts orchestra. A meditation on the history of China, this was performed with ardent force.

As most Americans know, China loves opera. An excerpt (with fantastic costumes) of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream was performed by two impressive singers. (Bard will be producing a China language opera version of Shakespeare's historical play Julius Caesar later this year.) For unexpected finale, Jingdon Cai conducted a new composition by Li Shaosheng. This featured Bard's Blair McMillan on piano and The Orchestra Now. Here the piano was wildly dissonant and appeared to argue with the more traditional harmonies which the orchestra demanded. The argument was cordial, but the piano sounded more confidently assertive and brazenly amazing in its more complicated nuance and sophisticated panache, as if demanding that dissident voices be heard, considered, and respected.

Within the first twelve hours of this concert, there were over 2,000 viewers on YouTube. Here is the free link to this extravaganza: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDXgB8YoN90&t=982s>

<https://themillbrookindependent.com/?p=932>