

Pipa Prodigy Set to Play at Armory

By ELIZABETH YUAN

The woman now considered the world's greatest pipa player spent years asking herself, "What am I going to do?"

Wu Man, now 54 years old, was the first person to get a master's degree in her instrument—a four-stringed lute with a two-millennia history—at China's top music school, the Central Conservatory of Music, in Beijing. She became its youngest faculty member. She had learned the very limited repertoire of notated pipa songs, which numbered a few dozen, given its oral tradition roots.

In 1979, she got a glimpse of the world outside thanks to the historic tour in China of Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony. Three months later, violinist Isaac Stern visited her school. He gave a master class where he taught musicians to project to the last row of the audience, a new concept.

Ms. Wu saw an alternative to what she considered the all-too-smooth path that lay before her as professor. It meant stepping onto a bigger stage—and ultimately to the U.S.—to find out the possibilities for her instrument and for herself as a musician. And for the last 25 years, "that is what I'm doing."

Her step on the broader stage brings her to New York City this week. Tuesday and Wednesday, Ms. Wu will join the Shanghai Quartet for concerts at the Park Avenue Armory in Manhattan. The program will include only works of Chinese composers. On Thursday she and the Miró Quartet will perform the world premiere of Chinese composer Ye Xiaogang's "Gardenia" at the International Festival of Arts & Ideas in New Haven, Conn.

Ms. Wu was a Fellow at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute in 1998 when cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who lives near Boston, asked if she were interested in joining "this ensemble idea," she said. Her goal was to introduce the pipa to different audiences.

At Mr. Ma's invitation, she joined him the following year to perform at the White House dinner hosted by President Bill Clinton for Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, becoming the first artist from China to perform at the White House.



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Wu Man, with her pipa, performing with the Shanghai Quartet at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center on April 13.

Mr. Ma recalled, in an email, "Those first Silk Road Ensemble rehearsals included musicians from Azerbaijan to China, Iran to Uzbekistan, with as many different languages and musical traditions. You can imagine the challenges!"

A year ago, Ms. Wu became an adviser on the visiting committee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's musical-instruments department, which

Wu Man will play the traditional Chinese instrument this week in Manhattan.

has among its holdings a 400-year-old Ming dynasty pipa with 110 hexagonal ivory plaques depicting Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist figures.

"If we have a question about a source in China, she can advise as to who is a good go-to person," explained Ken Moore, the department's curator emeritus.

This year the Silk Road Ensemble's sixth album, "Sing Me Home," won a Grammy for Best World Music Album, while its documentary, "The Music of Strangers," was nominated for a Grammy for best music film.

Last month, Ms. Wu and three musicians (from Tajikistan, China and Italy) toured

12 Chinese cities as part of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture's Music Initiative.

After that, Ms. Wu was at Indiana's DePauw University to serve among the dozen faculty of the weeklong Global Musician Workshop, the training program inspired by Mr. Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, the international artists collective.

Think of the workshop as "a lot of tiny Silk Road Ensembles," said Brian Grimm, of Madison, Wis., who plays the seven-stringed Chinese zither, guqin—an instrument that dates back 3,000 years—along with the pipa, cello, and bass guitar.

Under Ms. Wu's guidance, Mr. Grimm's group of musicians—playing the clarinet, cello, piano, violin, tabla, guqin and pipa—would take on a love song from China's Sichuan province and try different styles: a funky Afrobeat version, upbeat bluegrass. "We'd keep tweaking so that we could perform it three different ways," Mr. Grimm said.

Working with musicians from different traditions "brings me life," Ms. Wu said.

It was Ms. Wu's parents who chose the pipa for her to play at age 9, seeing it as the most important Chinese instrument, steeped in history, literature, painting and poems, and with a beautiful shape. "I think they are right," she said.