



**(LYRCD 7409)**

## **THE ANCIENT ART MUSIC OF CHINA**

LILY YUAN, Playing the Yangqin

### CHINESE MUSICAL TRADITION

Music has always been central to Chinese culture. Beyond its overwhelming cosmological, religious and moral significance, society considered music to be the very foundation of government. An indication of music's essential role in ancient China was that the Imperial Office of Music (Yuefu) was affiliated to the Office of Weights and Measures. As early as the 3rd century B.C. historian Lu Pu-We claimed, "Music stems from measure." The standard for capacity and length was derived from the tube which produced the Foundation Tone, known as the *huang chung* ("yellow bell").

Each successive Dynasty in China set its own value on the art of music. Of the many Dynasties in China's long history, the contrast between the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.) and the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) is most striking. The Tang Dynasty stands out as a "Golden Age of Music." Music exercised a great influence on the other arts as well; musical subjects were substantially favored by poets and artists. The Royal Court of Imperial China retained no less than ten foreign orchestras, mostly from Central Asia, for concerts and entertainment. It was during this period of great cultural interchange between countries that China's entertainment music was adopted by Japan and later transformed into its ceremonial music, *gagaku*.

During the following Sung Dynasty China was a self-consciously nationalistic country, unlike the cosmopolitan Tang Empire. The penchant for theory and antiquarian concerns, so typical of the Sung Dynasty, as well reflected in its music. Whereas musicians from the Tang period were inclined to current trends and foreign influences, theorists of the Sung Dynasty were occupied by practical matters such as tuning strings, reading notation, making instruments and measuring pitches, in part because of their potential application to the revival of ancient ceremonial music.

Music has continued to be shaped by extraneous factors, such as foreign influence and Confucian ideals, throughout the remainder of the Dynastic periods. At the present time, even the European musical traditions have been integrated into the curriculum of China's conservatories.

## THE YANGQIN

The yangqin (pronounced yang chin), Chinese hammered dulcimer, belongs to the zither family, which comprises those instruments with strings stretched across a wooden sound box. Dulcimers and psalteries are also members of the zither family as are their ultimate descendants, the harpsichord and piano. The primary feature, which separates the yangqin from its foreign counterparts, is the use of supple bamboo beaters, which enables a skilled performer to execute passages of wide timbral and dynamic range.

The word yangqin is written in Chinese by two characters denoting "foreign"(yang) and "stringed instrument" (qin). While conclusions are still tentative as to the yangqin's exact place of origin, it is clear that the instrument in its early form came from outside China; much research indicates that the instrument found its way the China from the Middle East, probably Persia, where it has always been known as the santur. The yangqin was traditionally used to accompany singers, other instrumentalists, and larger ensembles. It is only in the past few decades that the yangqin has developed as a solo instrument. Because the instrument has fixed pitches, valuable performance innovations have been made, such as the pitch-bend, harmonies, and slide (developed by Zheng Baoheng in the 1960's, utilizing a ring made of copper or stainless steel worn on the middle finger of the left hand), in order to realize the essential vocal character of Chinese music.

## TRACKS

### 1. Dance of the Yao People (Yao Zu Wu Qu) - 7:59

This music is based on folk melodies of the Yao ethnic group situated in Yunan province of southwest China. It was adapted originally by Mao Yuan and arranged for the yangqin by Kejian Tian.

### 2. Sacred Purification/Hua Yan Jun (Da Lao Tao Sha) - 5:56

This was composed by Hua Yan Jun (1893-1950), who came from Jinag Su province near Shanghai. After being orphaned at an early age monks took him under their care and raised him in the confines of a monastery. He eventually became a monk and learned to

play the er-hu, a two stringed, bowed instrument. He performed often in the streets to an appreciative audience; this activity, however, caused his expulsion from the priesthood. He was well known throughout China as a folk musician.

3. Azalea/Fu Gengcheng and Gui Xili (Ying Shan Hong) - 6:50

This was written by Fu Gengcheng and adapted for yangqin by Gui Xili. This composition depicts a peasant family's optimistic outlook for the future.

4. Angelic Fantasy (Ni Shang Qu) - 7:06

This piece is from the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.), written by Emperor Minghuang (685-762) and arranged for yangqin by Xiang Zuhua. Emperor Minghuang conceived, wrote and choreographed this piece for his favorite concubine, Yang Guifei, whose exquisite beauty is legendary in China. In deference to the Emperor, she performed a sensuous dance to this music, with him as the sole audience.

5. There and Six (San Lieu) - 3:30

This piece, adapted by Xiang Zuhua, expresses the festive customs of the Jiangnan area, including Shanghai, Jiangsu province and Zhejiang province. Its structure is similar to the classical rondo, but here the repeated melody (called hetou, lit. joint) functions primarily as a transition to other themes.

6. Moonlight on the Spring River (Chun Jing Hua Yue Ye) - 10:27

Based on a classical piece from south China, this famous work was written as a solo piece for the pipa, the Chinese lute; it was called "Duo for Flute and Drum at Sunset." Late in the Ching Dynasty (1644-1911 A.D.) it came to be known as "Pipa played by the Xun Yang River" for solo pipa. There are ten sections, which evoke a peaceful scene at twilight.

7. Music for the General (Jiang Jun Ling) – 5:47

This was adapted by collaborators Xiang Zuhua and Li Deyuan from theater music which was originally used to accompany the entrance of a military general, fighting scenes or as an opening fanfare of Sichuan opera from south central China. The music begins slowly and deliberately, gains speed and momentum, and then races with rapid passages to an animated conclusion.

8. The Rain Falls on the Leaves of the Banana Tree (Yua Da Ba Jiao) – 3:23

This popular, light composition contains many variations, which highlight the timbral range of the yangqin.

9. Suwu the Shepherd (Suwu Mu Yang) – 7:43

This anonymous song was written in the early 20th century, but it is unclear whether it comes from a folk or from an art tradition. It was adapted for the yangqin by Xiang Zuhua. The song relates the legend of Suwu who was sent by Emperor Wu-di of the Han Dynasty (202 B.C. - 220 A.D.) to negotiate with the northern tribe of Xiongnu. Suwu was captured and imprisoned for nineteen years. Pitch-bends, slides and harmonics admirably enhance this beautiful composition.

## LILY YUAN

Lily Yuan, the foremost yangqin performer of the younger generation in China today, is acclaimed worldwide for her virtuosity. Born in Shanghai, she began her musical training at the Shanghai Children's Palace. Hailed as a child prodigy, she was often featured as a soloist on national television and radio programs. Ms. Yuan was admitted into the prestigious Middle School of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing at the age of eleven, and regularly performed before national leaders and visiting dignitaries, including President Carter.

Ms. Yuan entered the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1979 and joined the faculty upon graduation in 1983. She won first prize in yangqin performance in the National Music Competition in 1982, and made her American debut as soloist with the Shanghai Music Group. In 1987 Ms. Yuan received her Masters Degree in music from the University of Toronto.

During the past few years, Ms. Yuan has performed to critical acclaim in over sixty solo recitals in more than thirty major cities and many universities in the United States and Canada. She taped a number of special programs for television and NPR (National Public Radio). The Toronto Star praised her "remarkable virtuosity on the Chinese dulcimer...forceful yet resonant...truly excellent."

Notes by Gerald Gold, 1990  
With contributions by Lily Yuan.



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