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Composing the Sino-American cultural mosaic

By Zhao Wei · 2023-12-31 · Source: NO.1 JANUARY 4, 2024

The air in the concert hall of the National Center for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in Beijing was thick with anticipation on December 9, 2023. In this charged atmosphere, violist extraordinaire Paul Neubauer strode to the edge of the stage. Bow in hand, he conjured from his viola a mesmerizing sound reminiscent of a chorus of birds in joyful song. The notes fluttered and soared, enveloping the audience in an enchanting forest soundscape.

This enchanting moment unfolded during the second encore of the evening, a testament to the audience's unbridled enthusiasm. Neubauer, a celebrated New York-based musician, along with five fellow virtuosos from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (CMS), basked in the afterglow of their performance. Their extraordinary artistry prompted an unprecedented three encores, each of which was met with thunderous applause and deep appreciation from a captivated audience.

Harmony in music

In the realm of international relations, the power of cultural exchange is hard to ignore. A shining example of this was the CMS's latest engagement with China. Since their first visit to the country in 2015, and especially since their post-pandemic return, the CMS has become a beacon of cross-cultural connection, using music as a universal language that transcends borders and political differences.

At the heart of this exchange lies the CMS commitment to not just perform, but to engage deeply with Chinese audiences and musicians. Their two-week and six-city tour in late 2023, including a stop in Beijing, consisted of not mere performances but immersive cultural dialogues. Each city visited marked a new chapter in this evolving story of mutual understanding and appreciation.

As co-artistic director of the CMS, pianist Wu Han, the first Chinese woman to receive this honor, emphasized the society's focus on the repertoire and quality control. But beyond the technical mastery, their approach to music as a conversation and an intimate form of communication resonates deeply with audiences. This approach, coupled with the high caliber of performances, has been essential in bringing chamber music closer to the Chinese people.

An innovative aspect of the CMS's work in China is its educational initiatives, particularly the master classes organized during the tour. The program has been instrumental in nurturing young talent in four cities. By playing alongside seasoned musicians, participating young artists gain invaluable experience and guidance. And this method of side-by-side learning has a profound impact.

For Wu, in addition to understanding the core of a piece of music, another important thing to teach the younger generations is the position of communication, "which was the beginning of the class." "A lot of

them were just sitting around, not really aware of each other. So we spend a lot of time trying to get everyone in the best possible communication position to start with," Wu told Beijing Review.

The significance of the CMS's presence in China goes beyond music. It's an example of how artistic endeavors can foster deeper, more meaningful connections between people of different nations. In a world where misunderstanding and conflict are still part of reality, this type of cultural exchange can guide the way to harmony and mutual respect.

Another world-renowned New York-based musical institution, The Juilliard School—a global leader in performing arts education, has played a significant role in this cultural exchange by opening its only overseas branch in Tianjin Municipality, a 30-minute high-speed train ride from Beijing, in October 2021. The Tianjin Juilliard School symbolizes the growing importance of music in Sino-American relations and highlights the potential for future collaborations.

"It is very obvious that China and the U.S. have chosen classical music as a way to build a bridge between the countries. Because it's the same music—whether we play it here in China or not in the U.S.; we're studying exactly the same art form, the same composers, the same notes and the same repertoire," David Finckel, a distinguished cellist and co-artistic director of the CMS, as well as a teacher at The Juilliard School in New York, shared with Beijing Review.

Pas de deux

The CMS is not the only company to have recently graced the NCPA stage. From November 9 to 12, 2023, the American Ballet Theater (ABT) made a triumphant return after a decade-long absence by participating in the 2023 NCPA Dance Festival. Led by 10 principal dancers, the ABT presented the classic masterpiece *Giselle*, a ballet by French composer Adolphe Adam, captivating audiences with a stellar performance.

At the same time, in a profound gesture of cultural solidarity, the Philadelphia Orchestra commemorated the 50th anniversary of its first-ever concert in China last year. Between November 9 and 18, 2023, the ensemble conducted a series of cultural exchange events in Beijing and three other Chinese cities that symbolized its ongoing commitment to fostering artistic harmony.

The dialogue of artistic exchange is not a one-way street. It's what one might refer to as a *pas de deux*, a ballet term denoting a dance for two people.

In a significant reciprocal gesture, the Central Conservatory of Music Symphony Orchestra (CCOM) from Beijing made a historic appearance in the United States on the evening of November 24, 2023. As the first Chinese symphony orchestra to tour the U.S. after the Sino-American leaders' summit in San Francisco, California, on the preceding November 15, its performance at Carnegie Hall in New York City was a momentous occasion. The event marked the orchestra's long-awaited return to the prestigious venue since its debut there in 2019.

At Carnegie Hall, the orchestra presented an exquisite selection of concertos and orchestral works by eight contemporary Chinese composers. Drawing on classical Chinese poetry and philosophy, these works are a symphony of cultural fusion.

Their performance was not just a concert; it was a celebration of shared artistic values. As such, it represented another pivotal chapter in the ongoing story of the Sino-American cultural dialogue, proving that communication through art does indeed transcend national borders.

The essence of this vibrant fabric of Sino-American cultural relations and people-to-people exchanges was a positive echo of a welcome dinner hosted by friendly American organizations in San Francisco on

November 15, 2023, for Chinese President Xi Jinping, who was there for a summit with U.S. President Joe Biden and to attend the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Economic Leaders' Meeting.

In a heartfelt speech, Xi recalled the ties between the Chinese and American people. He pointed out that the bedrock of China-U.S. relations has always been the people. It was the people who laid the foundation, opened the doors, wrote the stories and, most importantly, will continue to chart the course of this bilateral relationship.

Xi's words resonated deeply, not only with those in attendance but also with citizens of both nations. They echoed the sentiment that the future of China-U.S. relations hinges on continued people-to-people exchanges. These exchanges, as exemplified by the cultural collaborations of the CMS, the ABT, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the CCOM, are more than just diplomatic gestures.

They are living, breathing interactions that build understanding, respect and friendship between two diverse yet interconnected worlds.

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