

SONGLINES
TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The PIPA

CHINA A masterful instrument played by masterful players – Michael Church talks to internationally acclaimed artist Wu Man and looks at the historical importance of the Chinese lute

PHOTOS JAIMIE GRAMSTON

thousand varieties of folk music still thrive in China's villages, but after 60 years of communism, Red Guardism, and rampant capitalism, China's court tradition has withered on the vine. Belatedly, the country's rulers have now woken up to the musical heritage they have all but lost. Hence the eagerness with which they are now promoting young virtuosi on the *pipa*, which historically spans both court and folk traditions, without belonging entirely in either. And hence the close attention Western musicians are paying to the new soundworlds being opened up through cross-cultural collaborations led by the instrument's most celebrated exponent, Wu Man. "The shape and the sound of the pipa is elegant, yet also dramatic," she says. "And its personality is strong – you can express yourself in many ways."

As a soloist, the effects Wu Man can extract from her instrument cover a very wide spectrum: it can caress, crack jokes and sing sweetly, or it can howl and roar to a degree you'd scarcely dream possible with ten fingers and four strings stretched over a shallow rosewood box. Her musical lineage plugs directly into Imperial times. Her professor at the Beijing conservatoire was the virtuoso Lin Shicheng (1922-2006), whose tutor Shen Haochu (1889-1953) had published a seminal pipa manual in 1929. He himself had studied with Chen Zijing (1837-91), a brilliant young player who had been pressed into service by the royal family after he won a competition in Shanghai, before being summarily dismissed for being caught giving lessons to a prostitute: the solo pipa was the preserve of the elite.

Pipa history

Wu Man's distinguished musical lineage is nothing compared to that of her instrument. First known as the *han pipa*, its earliest representations are in sculptures from the Gandhara kingdom, which held sway, with its civilising Greek and Indian influences, in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan in the third century AD. Literary legend has it that in the first century BC, two exiled Han princesses had it played to them to assuage their homesickness: one of them, Wang Zhaojun, is the subject of a piece in the *Hua Collection*, the first woodblock-printed edition of solo pipa music which was produced in 1819.

The han pipa first gained general currency under the artistically sophisticated Tang dynasty, in the seventh and eighth centuries. At that time the original plectrum was gradually replaced by finger-plucking, and the quality of the music played was eternalised by the poet Bai Zhuyi (722-846) with his oft-quoted likening of the pipa's tremolo effects to 'pearls falling onto a jade plate'. When the xenophobic

Ming dynasty took over, the pipa – associated with foreign culture – was removed from its court position and took root in the provinces instead. And that led to the different schools of playing which persist to this day, with Shanghai as the dominant focus. Styles were passed down orally, within families.

War and peace

What's remarkable is that, despite the considerable changes in both the instrument and how it's played – moving from a horizontal to a near-vertical position – the main elements in the repertoire have hardly changed over four centuries. The pipa piece which most Chinese know today is 'Ambush From Ten Sides', a rousing evocation of the Han founder's victory over the warlord of Chu, complete with the sounds of drumming hooves, screaming soldiers and clashing weapons, and first published in 1662. 'The Tyrant Removes His Armour' – a retelling of the same story from the loser's perspective – is of a similar vintage, and is one of the pieces with which young pipa virtuosi show off their skills today.

The titles of the traditional pieces indicate their original aesthetic purpose, which was to evoke either *wen* (civil) or *wu* (martial) moods, with *wenwu* – echoing the Taoist *yinyang* – being the ideal balance. The *wen* pieces are stable and restrained, the *wu* are louder and have more rhythmic freedom, with much use of percussive right-hand techniques. Thus 'The Speckled Dove Crosses the River', 'A Lady Grooming' and the wonderfully suggestive 'Too Lazy to Paint Eyebrows' would be countered by the thunderous 'The Tyrant Removes His Armour'; a piece like 'The Moon On High', meanwhile, would synthesize the two moods. To do the *wu* pieces justice you need a technique like Wu Man's, with brilliant finger-picking, machine-gun tremolos and ferocious strumming.

Wu Man's story

So how did this woman, who describes herself as a "child of the Cultural Revolution," find her métier? Born in 1963 in the historic city of Hangzhou, near Shanghai, she loved the marching bands and Madame Mao's 'Eight Model Operas', and it was a song from one of those that a neighbour heard her sing while she was working in the communal laundry when she was eight. "He was so surprised by my musicality," she recalls, "that he told my parents I should study music." She began to take lessons on a miniature version of the pipa called a *liu qin*, became a fanatical practiser, and was soon launched into orbit. Triumphant first in local auditions, then in national ones for the Beijing Conservatoire, at 13 she was the top junior pipa player in China. At the end of her conservatoire stint she again passed out >>

A cave painting of the *pipa* in cave temples in Dunhuang, from the fifth century AD



Wu Man, photographed at the Barbican in London in May 2009



The pear-shaped body of the pipa is made of teak and wutong wood

top, and was made a professor: "And people said to me, you are the rising star, the next pipa master. But I couldn't limit myself to the ten big traditional pieces all my life – that would have been a prison. So I thought, what's next?"

Fleeing the unnatural silence which fell on the streets of Beijing after the Tiananmen massacre, she took her pipa (plus four other string instruments) to New York, where she was welcomed with open arms by an expat Chinese ensemble. The turning point came with a phone call from David Harrington, leader of Kronos Quartet, who had seen a video of her performing a piece by her fellow expat Zhou Long. Thus began a creative partnership which has led to several others. When Wu Man and Kronos were premiering Tan Dun's *Ghost Opera* in 1995, the composer Terry Riley happened to be in the audience: that has led to further collaborations, with Riley accompanying her by singing and playing the *tanpura* drone. "I realised that her nuances on the pipa – what happens between the notes – were very similar to the way they are in Indian classical music," he says.

But what makes the tone-colour of the instrument quintessentially Chinese is its absolute transparency, and the way notes are bent. Where, I ask, do beginners start? "With a tremolo," responds Wu Man. "I had to practise it non-stop for three years, and it's the hardest thing. You start repeating the same note slowly, and then speed up." She demonstrates, getting faster and faster, and then with all five fingers: her hand is now a blur. "It's less a matter of speed," she explains, "than of absolute evenness, and making a good sound." The next big thing, she says, is a left-hand scale, pressing the string between the frets. Then, making the most of her plastic fingernails, she demonstrates a wailing slide, making a sound reminiscent of the slide guitar and the Vietnamese *dan bau* (monochord). Then she shows how, by pushing a string to one side, she can bend the pitch by a third of a tone. And yes, she gets calluses on her fingers.

Wu Man was trained by Lin Shicheng in the southern Pudong style, which is more elegant and leans more on vibrato and harmonics than the wild and forceful style of the north. She adds that the silk strings in use one hundred years ago would have created a very different effect from nylon, which appeared in the 50s, and even more from today's steel strings, more suited to bigger auditoria.

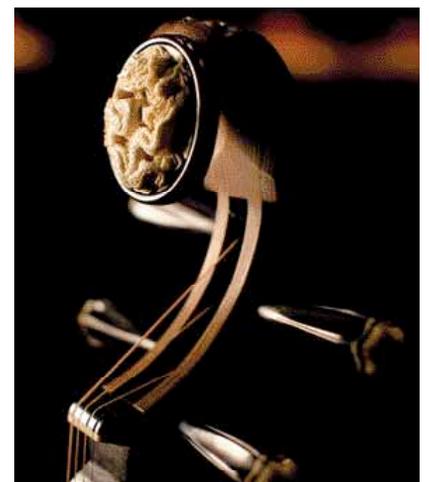
Wu Man has four instruments; all have different decorations on the head. One for instance has a *yue* (flower), the Chinese character for music, while another she is currently performing on has a dragon on it which symbolises power. This instrument has special significance, having belonged to her late master Lin Shicheng. Made from a single piece of rosewood, it's surprisingly heavy.

Pipa evolution

A variety of materials go into the instrument's making. The back of the most common kind is made of teak, and the soundboard of light wutong wood, also commonly used for the *qin* and *guzheng* zithers. The upper frets (on the neck) and the tuning pegs are made of ivory, buffalo horn or wood; the lower frets (on the body) are made of bamboo. The head is slanted slightly, with its middle part often inlaid with jade or ivory. Over the centuries, the number of frets has steadily increased: most now have

16 frets and span three octaves, but a type developed in the 50s had 30 frets, with a correspondingly larger register. Most of the frets produce intervals corresponding to Western whole-tones, with a few producing three-quarter tones. The intervals between the four strings are a fourth, a second and a fourth – A, D, E, A from bottom to top.

Wu Man has made her own modification, adding a wah-wah pedal which she uses for jazz collaborations. In the 70s, she says, some pipa-makers started producing electronic pipa, but the all-important tremolos sounded so muddy that nobody wanted to buy them. It's by no means the most popular instrument in China now, but quite a lot of children in the big cities take private lessons in it and a basic instrument costs between \$500 and \$1,000. Since Wu Man is now such a celebrity – Ryuichi Sakamoto drafted her in for the soundtrack of *The Last Emperor*; Ang Lee used her music in *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink Man Woman*; and Bill Clinton made her the first Chinese musician to perform at the White House – the Chinese government has been cashing in, getting her to help open the Special Olympics in Shanghai. "They are happy for me to give masterclasses to students," she says, "but though I'm respected in Chinese musical circles, and have pipa followers who play the pieces I have premiered, I'm not



Clockwise from top left: the upper frets are made of wood tipped with ivory; the lower frets are made of bamboo; the decorative dragon – a symbol of power – on the head of Wu Man's pipa; the plastic fingernails she wears during playing

Wu Man's hand becomes a blur when playing: "It's less a matter of speed, than of absolute evenness, and making a good sound"



famous like Lang Lang [the pianist]." Quite so. In China the piano has now eclipsed the pipa, to a point where its future probably lies more with enthusiasts in the West. And with avant-gardists leaping on the bandwagon and queuing to write pieces for Wu Man, as Lou Harrison, Philip Glass, Tan Dun and other composers have done – the pipa's future looks good. Her recent recording of Lou Harrison's *Pipa Concerto* won her a first Grammy nomination for a Chinese instrument. Kronos leader Harrington says his first taste of Wu Man's playing was like hearing violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz for the first time. Meanwhile her collaborations with the Romanian Gypsy group Taraf de Haidouks, the Bollywood diva Asha Bhosle and the Azerbaijani *mugham* singer Alim Qasimov point in a plethora of other potential directions.

But Chinese trailblazers are paying attention too. The composer Chen Yi has written a fascinating work for Wu Man in which projected ink-brush calligraphy reinforces the effect of the music. "There is

much to be explored with the pipa now," the composer says. "The pipa can combine with Western instruments to explore new sonorities, textures and timbres – it can create new soundworlds, and Wu Man is helping my explorations. I can combine the pipa with string instruments in a joint pizzicato, and I can also make it create long lines by fast rotation of the fingers on one note, so that the pipa seems to be playing one long note while the bowed instruments can be plucking, so their traditional roles are reversed. This is music for the 21st century."

The pipa remains essentially a solo instrument, in irreducible symbiosis with its player. How does Wu Man sum up her feelings for it? Her reply comes quick as a flash: "My instrument is my child, my lover, the other half of me." Then she lays an affectionate hand on its closed box. "We've been through so many things together, in the last 30 years. We have down-time together too – sometimes things don't work between us." Does it have a gender? "Yes. It's a she." ●



We have three copies of Wu Man's *Wu Man and Friends* album to give away.

To enter, answer the following question:

What year was Wu Man born in?

See p5 for *Songlines* competition rules and address. Closing date: September 18 2009

Wu Man's family album

▶ With David Harrington from Kronos Quartet and Asha Bhosle



▶ Meeting Bill Clinton at the White House – she was the first Chinese artist to perform there



◀ Collaborating with Azerbaijan's Alim and Fargana Qasimov



◀ Wu Man with avant-garde Chinese composer Chen Yi

Pick of the Pipa



Wu Man, *Wu Man and Friends* (Traditional Crossroads, 2005)

More collaborations, with Ukrainian *bandura* (zither), the Ugandan *endongo* (harp) and Appalachian banjo.



Wu Man, *The Pipa from a Distance* (Naxos World, 2003)

New music for *pipa* including collaborations with didgeridoo, trombone, guitar and sampling.



Wu Man, *Chinese Traditional and Contemporary Music for Pipa & Ensemble* (Nimbus, 2000)

The ideal pipa showcase, with new pieces alongside ancient ones. The instrument is featured both solo and with an ensemble.



Various Artists, *Traditions and Transformations: Sounds of Silk Road Chicago* (CSO Resound, 2008)

Wu Man with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in Lou Harrison's *Pipa Concerto*, the first by a Western composer dating from 1997. Plus works by Prokofiev, Bloch and Mongolian composer Sharav.



Yu Lingling, *Xu Lai* (Felmay, 2009)

A young player who has her own kind of virtuosity. One to watch for the future. Reviewed in #61.



Liu Fang, *Le Son de Soie* (Accords Croisés, 2006)

Fusions with *oud*, flute and *kora* master Ballake Sissoko. Liu Fang is another fine virtuoso on pipa and *guzheng*.



Liu Fang, *The Soul of the Pipa 2* (PhilMultic, 2006)

Solo collection of Chinese pieces from ancient to modern.

LIVE Wu Man performs with the Silk Road Ensemble at the BBC Proms on September 11

PODCAST You can hear a track from Wu Man on this issue's podcast

EXCLUSIVE VIDEO See Wu Man performing a traditional piece on our interactive sampler: www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/062