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## MUSIC REVIEW

# Music Across Generations and Cultures

Composers with connections to both the U.S. and China have found a distinct place in contemporary music, highlighted by a recent concert by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project.



Beibei Wang PHOTO: CLIVE GRAINGER

By *Allan Kozinn*

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## *Boston*

Composers who were born in China, studied music both in their homeland and in the U.S., and remained here to build their careers have become a distinct current within the chaotic ocean of 20th- and 21st-century American music. Now spanning three generations, these composers write music too diverse to be regarded as a cohesive stylistic school: Some mix Chinese and Western instruments, others write exclusively for Western ensembles; some draw on Chinese folk themes, others favor a bracing post-tonal acidity, and still more are neo-Romantics. Yet their works often stand out for their freshness and vigor, qualities that seem rooted in an approach to musical thinking that prizes the flexibility, and even malleability, of Western instrumental timbres but avoids conventional European formal models.

The conductor Gil Rose and his Boston Modern Orchestra Project shone a spotlight on this growing repertory on Saturday evening at the New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall, when they presented the world premieres of works by Yu-Hui Chang, Lei Liang and Anthony Paul De Ritis—an American who studied in China and became smitten with its sounds and culture—and the American premiere of a piano concerto that Huang Ruo composed during his residency at the Concertgebouw, in Amsterdam.

Ms. Chang's "Pixelandia" (2015), which opened the program, seemed whimsical in prospect, based as it is on the composer's memories of playing early videogames like Pac-Man and Space Invaders as a child in the 1970s and 1980s. But it has a wistful element, too: Watching her daughters play today's far more high-tech games set Ms. Chang to thinking about how the games of her own childhood represented "a simpler time, and the youth that will never return."

Ms. Chang grew up in Taiwan, but the politics of Taiwan and China were avoided in both the program notes and the pre-concert talk. Mr. Huang and Mr. Liang were raised on the mainland. But what she shares with them is an approach in which narrative is based on textural, rather than thematic, transformation. Her music is decidedly more complex than the games she memorializes, but she captures their spirit and energy in the lively interplay of lurching bass figures, wind themes that struggle to take shape but evaporate instead, and a rich variety of percussion sounds, including a brief evocation of a briskly ticking clock. Undercurrents of distance and nostalgia are palpable, too, in the frequent pianissimo passages and the short, quiet finale, “Game Over,” a title that sounds more pessimistic than she may have meant it to be.

Mr. Huang, who has always been a vivid colorist with a sensibility that is often as visual as it is musical, used traditional Chinese landscape painting, which is done on long scrolls, as the model for his concerto, “Unscrolled” (2015). Just as the paintings reveal themselves as you pull the scrolls open, Mr. Huang’s episodic score begins with vague motifs and waves of quickly shifting timbres—a low-pitched, decaying piano tone is overtaken by percussion swells, which give way to short brass and wind bursts and patches of string texture—but steadily coalesces into a grand, picturesque texture. It is not a conventional piano concerto, in the soloist vs. orchestra sense; the piano is an active and crucial part of the whole, rarely the main focus, and hardly ever heard on its own. But its insistent figuration demands considerable energy, which Vivian Choi supplied expertly.

Mr. Liang’s work, “A Thousand Mountains, a Million Streams” (2017), was inspired by visual art as well—specifically, works created by Huang Binhong in the early 1950s, when cataracts robbed him of most of his sight. Cast in two large sections, reflecting the two parts of the title, the piece begins, much like Mr. Huang’s work, as an abstract exercise in timbral morphing. But it quickly takes more concrete form, with the first, densely layered section evoking the imposing majesty of the mountains, and the second—scored mainly for tactile percussion—suggesting the fluidity of the streams.

Mr. De Ritis, curiously, was alone in using Chinese folklore and instrumentation. An eclectic whose other works draw on popular and electronic music, he based “The Legend of Cowherd and Weaver Girl” (2018) on an ancient tale of forbidden love between celestial beings. It is built on narrative elements, or at least motifs that represent characters and actions (including a transcription, for winds, of traditional Chinese wedding music). But it is also a concerto for a large array of Chinese percussion instruments, and that aspect, thanks to the high-energy virtuosity of Beibei Wang, is what captured the attention in this colorful, 20-minute score. Still, a listener without a program book would not have picked it out as the program’s only score not written by a composer born in Asia.

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