

All-State: “Flying Dragon” Visits Winona State University

by Elizabeth Becker

If the mention of Chinese music brings *Chopsticks* or *Sakura* to mind, then you haven't listened to much Chinese music lately. I had the opportunity to hear Gao Hong perform on the guitar-shaped *pipa* at the All-State Teachers Workshop and the performance really opened my eyes to non-western music.

When I saw the four-stringed, fretted *pipa*, I expected plucked variations on the pentatonic scale. I soon realized, however, that this was like looking at the four-stringed, bowed violin in the hands of Fritz Kreisler and expecting *Hot Cross Buns*. Instead, Gao Hong unleashed a virtuosic fury on a par with the Paganini *Caprices*.

After grabbing the audience's attention with her first piece, Gao Hong proceeded to demonstrate her right hand technique. Like a guitar, the *pipa* is sometimes plucked with one finger or strummed with the entire hand. Most of the time, though, the strings are plucked one finger at a time (the finger flicks away from the instrument, not towards it) in rapid succession. Gao Hong started slowly, “1... 2... 3... 4... 5... 1... 2... 3... 4... 5...” gradually increasing the speed until the notes came in a steady stream and her fingers were a circular

blur. And I thought flying spiccato was difficult to control!

Next Gao Hong demonstrated sound effects that can be produced on the instrument. Images of wind, waves, birds, fireworks, and people fighting, laughing and crying soon came to life. She then incorporated these sounds into the piece *Dragon Boat*.

At this point, Gao Hong took a moment to tell us a bit about her background. She was born during the Cultural Revolution, in the Year of the Dragon. Her father was a landowner and her mother a music teacher. The state persecuted landowners, so her father was forced to divorce her mother. Gao Hong became a professional musician at the age of 12 and was often separated from her family. Because she travels the world performing, she sees herself as a “flying dragon,” playing solo, but also collaborating with traditional ensembles, symphony orchestras and multicultural ensembles. Gao Hong has found a permanent home—in Minneapolis.

Gao Hong ended her presentation by performing pieces which showcased the expressive capabilities of the instrument. *Send me a Rose* and *Flying Dragon* both employed dynamic contrasts, varied tone

colors, and a very expressive vibrato. As the last note died away, I realized that “Flying Dragon” had spoken to me through music in another language. And ultimately, opened my heart and mind.

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Gao Hong (left) with an All-State student