



VIOLIN

Fiddling in China

by Sally O'Reilly

When I traveled to the People's Republic of China in 1988, I taught at the conservatories in Beijing and Shenyang for three weeks and lost 12 lbs. !!! This past October I returned to teach at the conservatories in Tianjin, Xi'an, and Shanghai, and barely avoided gaining weight!

What does the quality of food have to do with violin playing in China? Above all, it is indicative of great improvement in the quality of life in China's larger cities, and this has a tremendous impact on students' health and energy levels.

All three conservatories have stunning high-rise buildings constructed in the past decade. Xi'an is building two new towers, one a dormitory, the other containing 1000 practice rooms. (When I reported that last item to my students at the 'U,' one moaned, "If we only had *ten* more!")

The schools in Tianjin and Xi'an have enrollments of approximately 3000 students. Shanghai, which, along with Beijing, is one of the two elite schools, has 1500. The numbers are staggering by our standards, but Beijing's population is 30 million and China itself dwarfs us with its billions of people...ergo, big conservatories.

The Minnesota Orchestra's Mary Anne Feldman asked me where all these music students will work eventually. China is still a communist country, so there are many government-sponsored orchestras at city, state, and national levels. Then there are all those students to be taught, so there are leagues of teachers.

At these large conservatories, the most gifted and promising students are identified and brought into the musical community at an early age. In Xi'an, I heard an extremely talented 12-year-old girl who was accepted as a regular student in the fall. There is supervised housing for advanced preparatory students, allowing early training in a musically concentrated environment.

The level of violin pedagogy at these

three schools is very high. The tradition is Franco-Belgian and can be attributed to the presence of European musicians in China before and after World War II. Professor Ding Zhi Nuo, who was my host in Shanghai, showed me a large house on the grounds of the Conservatory which is built in the former French Concession. This house was inhabited by European Jews who fled east during the '30s and '40s. Many were musicians said Professor Ding, and they were responsible for establishing a strong tradition of Western classical music in Shanghai. This happened in cities as far north as Harbin and as far south as Hong Kong.

During the travesty of the Cultural Revolution in the '70s, Chinese musicians were sent to the countryside as manual laborers for "re-education." For my generation and the one just younger, this was disastrous, destroying technics and often resulting in injuries that precluded any return to music as a profession once sanity was restored. But the roots of solid pedagogy go deep, and the many musicians who survived have worked hard to restore a tradition that was embraced enthusiastically in the mid-20th century.

Unfortunately, many students play on substandard instruments which hinder their search for color. However, vibratos, which were more nasal and tight in the '80s, have given way to richer, more Euro-American vibratos. This is due in large part to the availability of recordings of major violinists. Chinese student violinists are familiar with the full range of artists, from Kreisler and Heifetz to Bell and Shaham, and they are eager to discuss their favorite performers with visitors.

I found the technical training to be thorough and exact. Left hands are accurate and bow arms are flexible. The one weakness that was consistent, north to south, was lack of a true "contact point." I continually

set bows closer to the bridge for bigger, more focused sounds.

Most students had metronomes but didn't really know how to use them. In every masterclass I chose at least one passage from a major work as an opportunity to demonstrate the value of progressive metronome practice. One of the most rewarding things about teaching in China is that the students and faculty are so hungry for information, that you can be assured that the large majority of students will glom onto your suggestions and put them into practice.

The concept of maintenance doesn't exist in China. This is reflected in many ways including dirty instruments and dilapidated interiors of residential buildings and the conservatories themselves. I talked at length about the importance of cleaning rosin off violins and bows every day. One faculty member proudly showed me his violin and asked my opinion of it. It came out of a case that reeked with mildew and was so corroded with rosin, dust, and God-only-knows-what that I was afraid I might catch something from it!

Still, I was tremendously impressed with the progress that has been made in the conditions under which Chinese faculty and students work. Of course, this generation of Chinese students is made up of "only children" produced by the one-child policy, so you deal with a lot of "princes" and "princesses." They are doted on but they don't seem to be spoiled. Instead, they seem determined to deserve their parents' adoration and to make them proud. It was a joy working with them.

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