

WALL STREET JOURNAL

Asian-Fusion Sound With Notes of Jazz

Chinese Musician Mixes Improv and Eastern Traditions While Playing Instrument With 2,000-Year History

By LARRY BLUMENFELD

Min Xiao-Fen plucked and strummed a pipa, the four-stringed Chinese instrument she has played since childhood, at Flushing Town Hall one recent Sunday. Together with a string quartet and then solo, she summoned the sharp percussive tones and quivering vibrato associated with her instrument. She also evoked further-flung sounds: a banjo's twang; a violin's lyrical lines; and the crisscrossing overtones of a Resonator guitar. She played music by Tan Dun, a Chinese composer who has notably fused Eastern and Western traditions, and an original piece that blended elements of jazz and blues with snatches of songs from Jiangsu, an eastern Chinese province.

New York has long served as cultural meeting ground and springboard for personalized musical expression. Even within this context, Ms. Min's story is distinct. Since her arrival here in 1996, she has expanded her instrument's possibilities as an element for contemporary composers and as a voice within the landscapes of jazz and free improvisation.



Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

Min Xiao-Fen, with her pipa, will explore the connections between jazz and Chinese music in various venues around the city in March.

The breadth and depth of her abilities will be amply showcased in March. She'll explore connections between jazz and Chinese music with her Blue Pipa Trio at the Brooklyn Public Library's Dweck Center on

Sunday. She'll perform "Mind Mirror," by Japanese composer Yuriko Hase Kojima, at Columbia University's Miller Theater on March 8, and one movement of Tan Dun's "Concerto for String Orchestra and Pipa" with the Little Orchestra Society at Avery Fisher Hall on March 16. On March 22, she'll improvise with Jin Hi Kim, who plays the Korean komungo, and Max Pollack, a tap dancer, at Lower Manhattan's Museum of Chinese in America.

At her home in Forest Hills recently, Ms. Min discussed the pipa's 2,000-year history and described her primary instrument's features: a pear-shaped rosewood body, 30 bamboo frets, and tuning pegs crafted from water-buffalo horn. She presented a cruder version—her first instrument, given to her by her father, a pipa master and her first teacher in her native Nanjing, China.

Ms. Min comes from a musical family: In China, her sister is a prominent virtuoso on the erhu (two-stringed fiddle); her brother, an orchestra conductor. When Ms. Min graduated from high school, Chinese universities were closed, owing to the Cultural Revolution. But the Nanjing Traditional Music Orchestra had started back up. She won a coveted soloist spot, and held it for a decade. After the Cultural Revolution, her sudden exposure to American pop music was jarring and intriguing. She began singing in clubs, accompanied by guitars and saxophones, to the displeasure of her father's colleagues. She sought something beyond traditional music but wasn't sure what. "During this time, I lost myself," she said.

Ms. Min moved to San Francisco in 1992. There, she encountered composers whose complex music required diligence of a new sort. She felt intimidated by improvisation, yet others heard something in her. Trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith invited her to play pipa with his group. "Onstage, he pointed to me," she recalled. "He wanted me to improvise. My hands felt stuck. My heart skipped. In Chinese music, you can't change a note."

Mr. Smith, with whom she still works, said, "I could feel such sincerity in her playing, that it wasn't a leap of faith to believe she could improvise at the highest level."

Months after her arrival in New York, composer-saxophonist John Zorn invited her to record an entirely improvised album with guitarist Derek Bailey (produced by Mr. Zorn). "I still didn't know what I was doing," she said. But the music was well received and Mr. Zorn had opened an important door.

Ms. Min came innocently to jazz. When Jazz at Lincoln Center invited her to interpret Thelonious Monk's music in 2003, "I thought they were referring to a Buddhist monk," she recalled. His "Ask Me Now" remains a fixture of her repertoire.

In jazz, she found deep and unexpected connections. A chance meeting with pianist Randy Weston led to joint research that suggested African influence during China's Shang dynasty. (Mr. Weston honored that bond on his 1998 album, "Khepera," which features Ms. Min.) With her trio, she is now mining the legacy of Li Jinhui, the "father of Chinese popular music," who worked closely with jazz trumpeter Buck Clayton in Shanghai during the 1930s.

For her own wide-ranging recent album, "Dim Sum," Ms. Min based one track on Miles Davis's "All Blues." She often sings while playing, improvising like a jazz singer while drawing on the Beijing opera style she learned in childhood. Dean Johnson, her trio's bassist, thinks the group's dynamic is "pretty much like any jazz band." Guitarist Steve Salerno prizes its "openness and creativity."

At her apartment, Ms. Min said, "The greatest thing about improvisation is that you don't know what's going to happen. But this came little by little for me in New York. I finally found myself."

A version of this article appeared March 2, 2013, on page A22 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Asian-Fusion Sound With Notes of Jazz.

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