



Min Xiao-Fen

by Kurt Gottschalk

Last month, pipa player Min Xiao-Fen was at Flushing Town Hall in Queens, playing a matinee concert with the Momenta Quartet in a program that included her own compositions as well as a piece by the celebrated Chinese composer Tan Dun, one of the first contemporary composers she worked with after moving to San Francisco 13 years ago. Playing Tan's concerto for pipa and string quartet she fell in with the staccato of the string quartet and played so fast sometimes that her plectra against the pipa strings sounded like the scratching of a bow pulled lightly over violin strings. On her solo piece "ABC (American Born Chinese)", she played with a slide, coaxing 'blue' notes and half- and quarter-tone wavers from her instrument. She further explored those bent tones in her "Tan Tan, Chang Chang", a piece that borrowed from Southeast Chinese traditions as well as American blues and bluegrass, played on the banjo-like sanxian.

A week later - on Chinese New Year - she played solo for the Jazz Vespers Sunday evening service at Saint Peter's Church. Opening the service with a sort of improvised meditation, she steadily ramped up to a level that may have surprised some for a house of worship. The corners of her mouth betrayed a smile as she ululated in an improvised lingo inspired by her native tongue. After the service she played again, this time with her Blue Pipa Trio, a jazzier setting with acoustic guitar and upright bass.

While the sources Xiao-Fen drew from in those two appearances ranged from Chinese folk and classical music to jazz, blues and bluegrass and the lessons she's learned collaborating with free improvisers around the world, what's notable about her artistry isn't the diversity but the fluidity with which she moves between different streams.

It's the music of a virtuosic performer certainly, but it also may be the product of a restless spirit. Even as a child in a family of musicians - a pipa master father, a sister who is a celebrated erhu player and an orchestra conductor brother - her interests were often diverted. "I played erhu, then finger-painted," she said. "Somehow I'm not the kind of person - like my father, like my sister - that can focus on one thing. But society, family, only want you to do one thing. I'm not the kind of person who wants to stay on one thing."

As a child, she interspersed music lessons with her father - who was forbidden from teaching under Chairman Mao's rule - with art lessons (she still paints and designs her album covers), but as a teenager dedicated herself to the instrument her father played. "My father was my teacher," she said. "I remember I was kind of a little bit afraid of him. And I had a very famous sister so my father had very high expectations. I studied six years with him, strict traditional music. I was pretty lucky because just as I graduated from high school the Cultural Revolution was about to end but the colleges were not ready; they were closed and my father focused on me."

Under her father's tutelage she found a talent for

the Chinese lute and when musical ensembles finally awoke from their state-imposed dormancy, Xiao-Fen was quickly able to find work with the Nanjing Traditional Music Orchestra. She stayed with the orchestra for a decade before again growing restless and relocating to San Francisco, where she was soon working with some of the great innovators of contemporary Chinese composition, including Tan Dun, Zhou Long and Chen Yi. She began touring the country playing their music and found herself playing solo in Chicago on a program with a composition by trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith. After the concert he approached her and said he wanted to write a piece for her. That piece, "Lake Biwa", was featured on the first recording she made after moving to America. She also began playing with him, learning improvisation and cementing one of her closest musical relationships.

"His music is like 'take time, follow your feelings,'" she said. "I had to tell him I don't improvise, I don't know how to improvise. And his score was graphic, it was hard for me. I was already scared and then he looked at me and said 'improvise' and I was, like, sinking into a hole. I was so sweaty, my hand just stopped. I never had that experience before. We were trained that you can't make mistakes." "I didn't like improvisation," she added. "It took me like 10 years before I started to like it, started to feel comfortable."

A similar meeting after moving to New York City in 1996 led to two other formative relationships. After a concert at the old Knitting Factory she was approached by John Zorn, who had an idea for a record. "He said, 'Do you know Derek Bailey?'" she remembered, "And I said 'I don't do it, I don't improvise.' He gave me CDs and said, 'I'll give you one week.' I told myself, 'I have to take a chance, otherwise I'll never change.'" She went to the studio without ever having met the guitarist and while the resulting *Viper* isn't the record she's proudest of (her second session with Bailey, *Flying Dragons*, is stronger), she said she has a fondness for it. "I can feel it, my innocence. I was a little bit careful and just followed him. It was a very innocent experience."

Last year she released her boldest album yet. *Dim Sum*, on her own Blue Pipa imprint, employs such devices as string preparations and a distortion box for her most experimental effort to date (made possible by a grant from the Peter S. Reed Foundation). "I went to China this year and showed my father my new CD. He listened to the whole thing and he said, "This is very interesting." He was so happy. I dedicated it to him and he said it's a little strange for him but at least he listened to the whole thing. I told him, "This is myself, I came to America, I found myself. I was always so nervous in China. You have to be perfect."

"Little by little I feel more comfortable and more competent and little by little I feel so happy to be onstage," she added. "A door totally opened for me. This is what's so great about being in New York and being in America. You can always do what you want." ❖

For more information, visit bluepipa.org. Xiao-Fen is at Brooklyn Public Library Central Branch Mar. 3rd, Aery Fisher Hall Mar. 16th and Museum of Chinese in America Mar. 22nd. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- John Zorn - *Filmworks VIII* (Tzadik, 1997)
- Derek Bailey/Min Xiao-Fen - *Flying Dragons* (Incus, 1999)
- Ned Rothenberg - *Ghost Stories* (Tzadik, 1999-2000)
- Leroy Jenkins - *The Art Of Improvisation* (Mutable, 2004)
- Wadada Leo Smith Mbira - *Dark Lady of the Sonnets* (TUM, 2007)
- Min Xiao-Fen - *Dim Sum* (Blue Pipa, 2012)

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