

History & Technical Notes

... regarding this beautiful piece of music

The Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto is one of the most famous works of Chinese music and certainly one of the most famous outside of China. It is an orchestral adaptation of an ancient legend, the Butterfly Lovers. Written for the western style orchestra, it features a solo violin played using some Chinese techniques.

Traditional Chinese composers often write in a different tonal system than western classical music. As a result, this can make the music sound constantly out of tune to some Western ears. The Butterfly Lover's Violin Concerto is written in the familiar western tonal system, but it utilizes many Chinese melodies, chord structures and patterns. This makes the Butterfly Lovers' more accessible than other Chinese works, such as the also famous Yellow River Piano Concerto.

Two Chinese composers, Chen Gang and He Zhanhao in 1959 (while they were students at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music) wrote the Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto. The music did not acquire popularity before the late 1970s, when China loosened its restrictions after the Cultural Revolution. Once released from censorship, it became an embodiment of China in transition. Today it is popular and is slated as part of the Olympics celebrations in 2008. The work is also a common feature in figure skating and in concert halls worldwide. This concerto is now often performed with Chinese instruments playing the violin part, the most common being Erhu, Pipa and Liuqin. In such cases an orchestra consisting of Chinese instruments often accompanies the soloist.

He (Zhanhao) is more widely credited for the composition of the concerto. However, his main contribution was the famous opening theme while Chen Gang in fact wrote most of the development. This was revealed in an exclusive interview with the latter.

Story and Musical Elements

The concerto is in one movement, but is broken into distinct sections. Each tells a different part of the story of the Butterfly Lovers. Some of the melodies come from the Chinese Opera of the same name or from traditional Chinese folk songs. The solo violin of the concerto is symbolic of Zhu Yingtai, the story's protagonist, and the cello part is symbolic of Liang Shanbo, her lover.

The concerto begins with a flute and then enters into a simple melody played by the solo violinist. This melody comes from a Chinese folk song of the yellow river, and tells the story of Zhu Yingtai's childhood. A harp and other elements of the orchestra accompany the solo violin.

Next, the concerto tells of Zhu Yingtai's disguising herself as a man and her journey to Hang Zhou to attend university. The solo violin plays a complex and fast melody floating above the rest of the orchestra. When Zhu arrives she meets Liang Shanbo, a fellow student. The two spend three years together as good friends. Zhu falls in love with Liang, but cannot express her feelings without revealing her identity as a woman.

When both the students must return home, Zhu invites Liang to visit her family and to court her sister. He doesn't know that Zhu is really inviting him to marry her. Liang promises to see Zhu again, but Liang waits before doing so. When Liang arrives, he sees Zhu and realizes that she is a

woman, and they fall in love. The solo violin and cello parts play a sad duet that is the most famous and powerful of the work.

The love duet between the two is replaced by anger as Liang learns that in his absence, Zhu has been betrothed to another. The two solo parts contrast the rest of the orchestra. Several melodies are used in this section, the orchestra plays loud and accented chords in between the softer cello and violin parts and the parts are often intertwined. Liang becomes sick and dies as the music replays the duet of their love. Zhu and the orchestra continue to play their contrasting parts. The section ends with the suicide of Zhu Yingtai as the solo violin plays an overarching high note. A final orchestral section overcomes the lover's parts. In the legend, Liang's grave opens and Zhu throws herself into the chasm.

The lovers' themes return and the two lovers are magically transformed into butterflies.