

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator

The Leni and Peter May Chair

Chinese New Year Celebration: The Year of the Monkey

The *Spring Festival Overture*, composed in 1955–56 by **Li Huanzhi**, opens the program with a cheerful depiction of the Spring Festival, the term used in China for what is known in the United States as Chinese New Year or Lunar New Year. The piece has become immensely popular throughout China and has also made its way far beyond earthly borders; in 2007 it was one of 30 musical selections sent into outer space aboard *Chang'e No. 1*, China's first lunar-probe satellite, which beamed this music back to earth from a distance of some 236,000 miles.

Brilliant orchestral sound infuses the *Spring Festival Overture* right from its energetic opening. A spirit of dance propels the joyful principal theme; to ears accustomed to the European

symphonic tradition, the mood and effect of the opening may recall folk-infused pieces by Dvořák. Two folk dances from North Shaanxi furnish melodies in this section. A lyrical expanse provides nostalgic contrast in the middle of this short piece; another North Shaanxi tune emerges — a dance celebrating the growth of seedlings. At the end, the tempo grows faster for a return of a shortened version of the opening music, which serves as a coda powerfully underscored by percussion.

The *Spring Festival Overture* has been performed in arrangements for various groupings of Chinese instruments, Western instruments, or combinations of the two. Its composer, Li Huanzhi, was born in Hong Kong into a family

Spring Festival Overture

Li Huanzhi

Born: January 2, 1919, in Hong Kong

Died: March 19, 2000, in Beijing

Work composed and premiered: composed 1955–56; premiered July 1956, in Beijing, in a concert of the First National Music Week

New York Philharmonic premiere and most recent performance: premiered May 17, 1972, Andre Kostelanetz, conductor; most recently played, February 24, 2015, Long Yu, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 5 minutes



Spring Festival lion dancers in New York City's Chinatown

that traces its origins to Jinjiang, Fujian. A major force for music in the People's Republic of China, Li studied at the Shanghai School of Music (beginning in 1936) and the Luxun Institute of Arts in Yanan. He served as editor of the periodical *National Music*, and from 1946 to 1949 was dean of the music department in the Arts and Literature Institute of North China United University. He was later associated with the Central Conservatory of Music, the Central Ensemble of Songs and Dances, and the Central Chinese Orchestra; beginning in 1985 he served as the chairman of the Chinese Musicians' Association.

The musical rapprochement between China and the West extends farther back than one might expect. In 1879 a Shanghai Municipal Band was jointly sponsored by the local municipality and French expatriates, and in 1918 an Italian pianist and conductor named Mario Paci led the first concerts of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, which evolved into the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, today an orchestra of international repute and a partner with the New

York Philharmonic in the Shanghai Orchestra Academy and Residency Partnership. By 1927 the city boasted a National Conservatory of Music, founded by the Leipzig-educated Chinese citizen Xiao Youmei. In 1937 the Shanghai Opera House produced and presented a season of six standard European operas and, in the case of *Rigoletto*, included on its roster two Chinese singers. Western music had clearly built up a considerable following in China prior to the disruptions in the second half of the 20th century, even if its enthusiasts were few compared to the extraordinary Chinese presence in European and American musical life and the emphatic embrace of Western concert music among Chinese audiences that is so evident today.

In the mid-1950s Chinese composers became active in producing concert works that amalgamated Chinese and Western modes of music-making. The most enduring example from that period is *The Butterfly Lovers*, a violin concerto composed collaboratively by **Chen Gang** and **He Zhanhao**, two students at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (now the third collaborator in the Shanghai Orchestra Academy),

Spring Couplets

A popular hallmark of the annual Spring Festival in China is the calligraphic inscription and display of "spring couplets." The tradition of writing poetic couplets goes back more than a millennium. The earliest is sometimes said to be one inscribed by the king Meng Xu (919–965 C.E.). It read:

新年纳余庆，
嘉节号长春

The New Year enjoys surplus celebrations;
happy holiday sounds invoke lasting spring blessings.

These brief poems are typically written in black letters on red paper banners that are displayed for a number of weeks, very often hung around doors – for which reason they are also called "door couplets." The couplets are two-line poems, the lines being equal in length (most characteristically consisting of five or seven characters), the corresponding characters of each line adhering to identical lexical patterns and matching or symmetrical tonal inflections.

A doorway decorated with spring couplets

