

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Spring Festival Overture

Li Huanzhi

Vibrant brilliance of orchestral sound infuses the *Spring Festival Overture* right from its energetic opening. A spirit of dance propels the cheerful principal theme; to ears accustomed to the European symphonic tradition, this opening section will greatly resemble folk-infused pieces by Dvořák in both mood and effect. Two folk dances from North Shaanxi furnish melodies in this opening section. An expanse of keening lyricism provides gracious, even nostalgic contrast in the middle of this short piece; another North Shaanxi tune emerges, in this case a dance celebrating the growth of seedlings. At the end, the tempo picks up again for a return to an abbreviated version of the “A section,” which serves as a brief coda, powerfully underscored by percussion.

Of the four movements making up Li Huanzhi’s *Spring Festival Suite*, this first movement — the *Spring Festival Overture* — became widely known as a stand-alone work. It has been performed in many arrangements for various groupings of Chinese instruments, Western instruments, or combinations of the two, either in chamber ensembles or in full orchestral garb. It is popularly regarded as a traditional piece, although it was actually composed in 1955–56 by Li Huanzhi, who was born in Hong Kong into a family that traces its origins to Jinjiang, Fujian.

A major force of music in the People’s Republic of China, Li studied at the Shanghai School of Music (beginning in 1936) and the Lu Xun Institute of Arts in Yanan. He had already studied styles of Chinese opera and of European and American composition (in-

cluding popular song) by the time he arrived at Lu Xun. After enrolling there he expanded his education by studying choral music and conducting with the composer Xian Xinghai. He was for a while editor of the periodical *National Music*, wrote voluminously about music, and from 1946 to 1949 served as 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 China Central Chinese Orchestra. Beginning in 1985, he served as the chairman of the Chinese Musicians’ Association.

Li Huanzhi was a prolific composer, producing more than 400 pieces in many genres, including opera, orchestral works, and cantatas. He created a large body of choral works for both adult choirs and youth choruses, very often incorporating adaptations of folk songs and dances

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Born: January 2, 1919, in Hong Kong

Died: March 19, 2000, in Beijing

Work composed: 1955–56

World premiere: July 1956, in Beijing, in a concert of the First National Music Week

New York Philharmonic premiere: May 17, 1972, Andre Kostelanetz, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 20, 2018, Long Yu, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 5 minutes

of various regions. His setting of the song “Socialism Is Great” became a standard in the People’s Republic of China. He composed practically until his death in 2000, notwithstanding that in his later years he suffered from encroaching deafness and, in the end, terminal cancer.

“Spring Festival” is the term used in China for what Westerners call “Lunar New Year” or “Chinese New Year.” In the West, the celebration falls in the middle of winter, but in the traditional Chinese calendar it marks the end of winter and the beginning of spring — cause for festivity, indeed. The music in this overture relates specifically to the Spring

Festival as it is celebrated in the Shanbei region of Shaanxi Province in northwest China. The piece has become immensely popular throughout China, but it 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.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, Chinese cymbals, Chinese bass drum, and strings.

New Year Celebration

The Spring Festival, as the Lunar New Year celebration is known inside China, takes place over 15 days. A thorough house cleaning sweeps away bad spirits of the passing year, and red and gold decorations, wishing good fortune, are hung. The color red, which symbolizes joy, virtue, and sincerity, infuses the celebration, including on envelopes containing money that are given to wish the recipient prosperity. Family gatherings feature foods rich with symbolism: whole fish represent togetherness and abundance; uncut noodles, longevity; dumplings (said to resemble traditional currency), good fortune; and bags of tangerines or oranges, good luck.



Gold coins, symbolizing prosperity, are popular Spring Festival decorations

— The Editors