

## **Train Toccata**

### **Liu Yuan**

**L**iu Yuan serves on the faculty of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, the leading conservatory of China, where he is a professor of composition and orchestration. After spending much of his childhood in the southeastern Chinese province of Fujian, he studied composition at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (China's oldest such institution, having been founded in 1927). From 1991 to 1999 he worked as a resident composer for the Shanghai Song and Dance Ensemble (a.k.a. Shanghai Dance Theatre) and at the Shanghai Opera House. He earned a doctorate from the China State Music Conservatory.

He was a pupil of Zhao Xiaoshen, one of a group of composers who began experimenting with new ideas in music in the mid- to late-1950s but who effectively withdrew from composing during the Cultural Revolution. Zhao Xiaosheng, for example, composed music using the 12 tones of the equal-tempered Western chromatic scale; in the early 1980s he studied computer music in the United States, and in 1987, back in China, he formulated a style of serialism based on complicated symmetrical scales.

Liu Yuan was therefore ushered into a climate that was incorporating many aspects of Western composition into practice in China. Nonetheless, his personal style has reflected a grounding in long-respected principles. In her 1997 book *Dangerous Tunes: The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China*, Barbara Mitterler mentions him among composers she describes in these terms:

The works by numerous composers ... who work for government orchestras or ballet troupes today still have to employ a musical language similar to that favoured

during and before the Cultural Revolution, that of pentatonic romanticism.

*Train Toccata*, for example, draws from the full chromatic palette of Western music in depicting a rushing locomotive, but it also maintains a distinctly Chinese flavor, even to the extent of quoting from the song "Train," made famous by Taiwanese pop star Lo Tayu.

Liu Yuan is particularly noted for compositions inspired by or reflecting Chinese landscapes or artifacts. His *Symphony No. 1: Symphonic Fantasy — Memories of the Awa Mountains* is a musical depiction of the Awa range, which straddles the border between China and northern Myanmar. His *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* took as its point of departure a gigantic painting — 23 feet long — by Yuan Dynasty artist Huang Gongwang (1269–1354). "Compared with the 600-year-old painting, orchestra music is a young art," remarked Liu Yuan, who spent two months traveling in the Fuchun Mountains, southwest of Hangzhou, where the painter spent his last years. His *Echo from the Three Gorges* (2005), inspired by the passion of workers at the Three Gorges Dam construction site, was pre-

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## **IN SHORT**

**Born:** 1959, in China

**Resides:** in Beijing

**Work composed:** 1997

**World premiere:** 1997, in Beijing, by the China National Symphony Orchestra, Chen Zuohang, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** this performance

**Estimated duration:** ca. 5 minutes

miered to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the founding of the Central Conservatory of Music. Characteristically, his research included visiting the site as he created this symphony-oratorio set to Tang Dynasty poems about life along the Yangtze River.

His work *The Echoes of Hakka Earth Buildings* has been performed throughout China and was played on European tours by ensembles including the China Traditional Orchestra Zhejiang. Written at the behest of the venerated Chinese conductor Zheng Xiaoying, it ruminates on the lives of the Hakka people in the rural dwellings in southeastern Fujian. The piece won the first-ever Golden Bell Award bestowed by the Chinese Musicians' Association, in 2001. Sometimes Liu Yuan mixes Chinese and Western instruments in a single ensemble, as in his *Reverie of the East* (for orchestra, traditional Chinese instruments,

and chorus), commissioned by Shanghai World Expo in 2010.

He has also composed music for film, including the soundtrack for the 1994 *Painting Soul* (also known as *A Soul Haunted by Painting*), starring Gong Li. The story of Pan Yuliang, the first Chinese woman to paint in Western style, this film classic was recently revitalized through a restoration project involving the Shanghai International Film Festival. In addition to the Golden Bell, Liu Yuan has been recognized through such honors as the 14th Shanghai Spring Award and the Golden Eagle Award.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, two tambourines, tam-tam, marimba, claves, snare drum, bass drum, piano, harp, and strings.

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## Listen for . . . the Train Whistle

Quite a few pieces of concert music depict trains. To cite just a few, the symphonic repertoire includes Honegger's *Pacific 231* (from 1923) and Villa-Lobos's *Little Train of the Caipira* (1930); chamber music enthusiasts will know Steve Reich's *Different Trains* for string quartet and tape (1988); pianists might consult Grainger's *Arrival Platform Humlet* (1908); singers could turn to Glinka's "Train Song" (1840); and aficionados of the deeply obscure will take pleasure from Berlioz's unrestrained cantata *Le Chant des chemins de fer* (*The Song of the Railroads*), written to celebrate the opening of the Paris to Brussels railroad line in 1846.

In *Train Toccata*, Liu Yuan captures the energy of a locomotive by using propulsive rhythms and repeating melodic gestures. At one point he mimics a double-blast of a train whistle, instructing the woodwind players to blow just into their reeds or the top sections of their instruments, yielding a gripping cluster of indistinct pitches.



Along the South Manchurian Railway in the early 20th century