

The Butterfly Lovers, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra

Chen Gang / He Zhanhao

The musical rapprochement between China and the West extends farther back than many American listeners 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 would evolve into the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, today an ensemble of international repute. 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 presented a season of six standard European operas, produced by the house itself and, in the case of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, including 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 or 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 (which today has joined forces with the New York Philharmonic and Shanghai Symphony to form the Shanghai Orchestra Academy), and completed in 1959. (Collaborative composition was common, reflecting as it did the cooperative attitude that was promoted in China.) Chen Gang was born into a musical

family — his father was also a composer — but aspired to a military career. Unable to join the Air Force due to near-sightedness, he was assigned instead to perform in the Liberation Army Song and Dance Troupe. There he polished his musical skills enough to gain admittance to the Shanghai Conservatory in 1955. He would later teach harmony and composition on the school's faculty, direct the Shanghai Chamber Music Ensemble, and serve as president of the Chinese Musicians' Society. He Zhanhao grew up immersed in folk music and *yueju* (Shaoxing opera), although he became a violin major at the Shanghai Conservatory. In an interview in 2000 he recalled:

But, I asked, who am I studying this for? Am I going to play Bach and Beethoven for the peasants? ... I ask if they understand, they all say no. But they love to hear *yueju!* ... So this influenced our thinking — how could we use folk music with the violin? How could we nationalize the violin?

In Short

Chen Gang

Born: March 10, 1935, in Shanghai, China

He Zhanhao

Born: August 29, 1933, in Hajiasham, Zhuji, Zhejiang Province

Work composed: 1958–59

World premiere: May 1959, at Shanghai's Lyceum Theatre, by the Shanghai Conservatory Symphony Orchestra, Fan Chengwu, conductor, Yu Lina, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 9, 2016, Long Yu, conductor, Maxim Vengerov, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 25 minutes

