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

The Butterfly Lovers, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra
Chen Gang / He Zhanhao
The solution to this conundrum was *The Butterfly Lovers*, in which the solo violin employs many gestures characteristic of *yueju*, such as extravagant portamento, glissandos, and expressive shadings of vibrato. The composers also grafted into the violin part sounds associated with other Chinese instruments, including the zheng, pipa, and erhu. The composers later revised it into a final form in which its original preponderance of Chinese-opera style assumed a more Western guise. The piece was temporarily silenced during the Cultural Revolution due to what was deemed its “feudalist” foundation, but it has since emerged as an essential classic of Chinese concert music.

The concerto is cast in a single movement made up of three principal sections. The first corresponds to the idea of romance, with the violin presenting a love theme and then duetting with the cello to depict the intertwining emotions of Liang and Zhu, characters from the folk tale *The Butterfly Lovers* (see below). The second principal section focuses on Zhu’s defying her father over an arranged marriage, with some of the orchestra’s deepest sounds — bassoon, bass, gong — creating an ominous atmosphere. Another duet between violin and cello depicts the lovers’ farewell, and a percussion crash signals the opening of the grave. In the third section, the muted violin and delicate orchestral texture illustrate the lovers’ transformation into butterflies.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, cymbals, tam-tam, clappers, harp, piano, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

*This note originally appeared in programs of the Oklahoma City Philharmonic.*

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### The Work at a Glance

*The Butterfly Lovers* is based on a Chinese folk tale, dating back to the late Tang Dynasty (9th or 10th century), involving Liang Shanbo (a boy) and Zhu Yintai (a girl). In fact, the work’s title in Chinese is *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yintai*, and it is popularly referred to as the Liang Zhu Concerto. (The names are sometimes transliterated as Shanpo and Yingtai.) Zhu ran away from home, disguised herself as a boy, and enrolled in a school, where she was a classmate of Liang’s for three years. She fell in love with Liang but could not reveal this without compromising her disguise. She eventually left. Liang, missing his companion deeply, traveled to Zhu’s home, where he discovered not only that his beloved friend was a girl, but that her father had arranged her marriage to a wealthy neighbor. She tried in vain to defy her father’s decision. Liang died of a broken heart, and Zhu visited his grave, which she begged might open to her. At the sound of a thunderclap, the grave opened and Zhu leapt in. The two lovers then emerged as butterflies and flew away to their happy future together.

The tale of *The Butterfly Lovers* has been described as a Chinese Romeo and Juliet, so much so that a statue of the pair can be found in Verona, Italy.