

Notes on the Program

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

Gift

Zhou Tian

Zhou Tian was born into a musical family in Hangzhou, the capital of China's eastern province of Zhejiang, not far southwest of Shanghai. He grew up at a time when China's engagement with the Western musical tradition was growing colossally. He embraced this international spirit, pursuing his advanced musical education at the Curtis Institute of Music, The Juilliard School, and University of Southern California, where he earned his doctorate. In the course of these studies he was a pupil of such eminent American composers as Jennifer Higdon, Stephen Hartke, and the late Christopher Rouse.

In 2016 Zhou joined the faculty of Michigan State University College of Music, where he is associate professor of composition. He previously held posts as composer-in-residence at Music in the Loft (a Chicago chamber-music incentive), the Green Bay Symphony Orchestra, and the Reno Philharmonic Orchestra. This season he is composer-in-residence with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra; *Gift* was composed as a salute to that orchestra's 140th season. It performs eight of his pieces this season, including two commissions: *Gift*, and a violin concerto (his second), which is set to be premiered at the 2020 Isaac Stern International Violin Competition in August.

Many of Zhou Tian's scores develop out of the American sound of the 20th century; certainly at least some of his musical DNA traces back to Copland and Bernstein, particularly in matters of rhythmic vigor, "great open spaces" harmonies, and vibrant symphonic sound. Still, as a 21st-century composer, he brings a global outlook to his music. In *Gift*, one hears occasional melodic

contours or figuration that might suggest the composer's Chinese origins — for example, an aching lyrical section some three minutes in, where woodwinds and harp trace elegant wide-ranging arches of sound, up and down, against a forward-thrusting statement in strings and brasses (or is that a hint of Debussy's *La Mer*?). Some of his other works take a more overt multicultural stance — for example, *The Grand Canal*, a large-scale work for two traditional Chinese instrumentalists (on erhu and ruan), a Chinese opera singer, and a full symphony orchestra with chorus; it was performed during a nationally televised celebration of the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

Zhou's music has been recognized with notable honors, including a Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary Classical Composition in 2017 for his Concerto for Orchestra, commissioned by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and its music director Louis Langrée. He has also written music

In Short

Born: December 22, 1981, in Hangzhou, China

Resides: in Royal Oak, Michigan

Work composed: 2019, on commission from the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, Long Yu, music director

World premiere: September 27, 2019, at the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra Hall in China, by the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, Long Yu, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: this performance, which marks the US Premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 8 minutes

for film and dance, and his jazz-inspired works have received honors from the Julius Hemphill International Jazz Composition Awards and the Henry Mancini Institute. His score for *Eternal Beloved* was widely praised at the 2009 Shanghai International Film Festival. In 2019 he was named Artist of the Year by the Beijing Music Festival.

Recent premieres and commissions include his Cello Concerto, *Flowing Sleeves* (introduced by cellist Jian Wang this season); *Trade Winds* (introduced by the vocal ensemble Chanticleer); *Trace* (premiered by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra conducted by Mei-Ann Chen); Violin Concerto (for violinist Caroline Goulding); *Viaje* (commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts); *The Palace of Nine Perfections* (which Osmo Vänskä conducted with the Minnesota

Orchestra); and the most recent of several works for wind ensemble, which was commissioned by a consortium of leading American university ensembles. His *Transcend*, premiered last spring, was commissioned by a group of 13 American orchestras and institutions, including the Utah Symphony, Stanford University, and Michigan State University, commemorating the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, orchestra bells, snare drum, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, bass drum, harp, piano, and strings.

In the Composer's Words

I considered *Gift* to be something of a homecoming. As I began a residency with the Shanghai Symphony, I wanted to create a reminder of the joy of music-making, and along the way explore my own musical identity after 18 years of living abroad. The piece is shaped around a folky four-note motif, which rises and falls against a large orchestral palette throughout its eight-minute duration. In a nutshell, this is my gift to fellow musicians.

— Zhou Tian

