

Liu Ching-chih, *A Critical History of New Music in China*, Caroline Mason translation, Hong Kong, Chinese University Press, 2010, xxviii+911 pp.

**David Francis Urrows**

Liu's *A Critical History* is an English translation, with some updating, of his *Zhongguoxinyinyueshilun* (Taipei, 1998.) In this massive tome of close to a thousand pages, he sets out to document what he identifies as 'New Music', "music composed by Chinese musicians using European compositional techniques and musical idioms" (p. 3.) To this end he has employed *xinyinyue* in a historically recovered sense, given that in Mainland China the terms "modern" or "contemporary" are often used instead to describe what Liu here calls 'New Music', and sometimes 'New Music' refers specifically to the works of the post Cultural Revolution wave of contemporary composers of the 1970s and 80s.

Liu goes on to explain three impulses which led to the present study. First, the history of 20<sup>th</sup> Century China and its contentious relations with Taiwan and Hong Kong had led by the early 1980s to a position of mutual rejection of any serious consideration of each other's musical life, largely on dogmatic political grounds. Thus, Hong Kong, "free but undemocratic", was nevertheless a place where "attitudes towards academic research were relatively objective and neutral, [and] there was much more acceptance of conflicting opinions and things could be expressed which no music historian in Mainland China or Taiwan would dare to say" (p.3.) Secondly, Liu reflects on the paradox of Chinese musicians emulating and adopting Western musical forms and devices. These, he says, were "based on Christian traditions, but [were] also influenced by the post Renaissance spirit of humanism", and notes that "[t]he religious and humanistic spirit was...precisely what communism and socialism opposed", and he sets out here to examine a "conflict of principle[s] that are hard to resolve." (ibid.) His third stated aim has to do with the dichotomy, principally though not exclusively within Mainland Chinese music institutions, between the New Music and traditional Chinese music: he criticizes the "absolute indifference displayed by most of them to any musical culture but their own" (p. 4) and suggests that through this study they may be offered a means of reconciliation and a chance to learn something from each other.

The book is laid out chronologically in ten chapters, which move from an analysis of theoretical foundations of New Music in China (Ch.1) to a study of some origins of New Music (brass bands and 'schoolsong', Ch. 2), to Music in the May Fourth Period (Ch. 3), the Anti-Japanese War Period (Ch. 4), and the Chinese Civil War and the years from 1949 to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 (Ch. 5, though the Civil War effectively predated 1945.) The second group of five chapters continues with a very detailed look at the *yangbanxi* ("model works", the 'revolutionary' operas and ballets) and other musical activities during the Cultural Revolution (Ch. 6), the post Cultural Revolution period when conservatories were gradually reopened and a 'New Wave' of composers emerged in the relatively open atmosphere (Ch. 7), followed by a look at New Music composers in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau (Ch. 8). Chapters 9 and 10 are mostly summary: first a "review and reflection" on the century between 1885 and 1985 and the "Sincization and Modernization of New Music"; and

finally an addendum covering Chinese composers in Mainland China, Overseas, Taiwan, and Hong Kong between 1996 and 2006. There is a substantial set of appendices including texts of vocal works with English translations; almost 90 pages of references; a Glossary; several useful charts of the history concerned; and separate indices of names and subjects.

The size of the book alone makes for daunting reading. But its undoubted value is first and foremost as a reference work, and for the many pages of translations of documents hitherto only available only in Chinese. Given Liu's extensive background as a translator, his greatest contribution to scholarship is presented here in making these writings accessible worldwide. The references alone can be considered a gold mine for future study and research. The biographical details of the numerous composers, songwriters, and musicians are an immensely useful addition to the accounts which have appeared in Western languages up till now. Plenty of musical examples add interest and as with most examples, save even more explanatory text. Many of these works, even in this fragmentary state, have probably never been available outside of Mainland China. The word ground-breaking is quite appropriate here.

The appearance of the original Chinese-language book in 1998(itself based on a long series of shorter studies published in the 1980s and 90s) stirred up a good deal of understandable controversy. Liu's judgments can be harsh at times, though often he is on the mark. He has famously criticized Mainland authorities for elevating tunesmiths and songwriters such as Nie Er (1912-35, composer of the current national anthem, *March of the Volunteers*, 1935) and Xian Xinghai (1905-45, composer of the *Yellow River Cantata*, 1939) to the level of Beethoven-like proletarian demigods, instead of more objectively valuing them for their modest though memorable works. One sub-section of his chapter on music in the Cultural Revolution is headed "Symphonic Music Unworthy of the Name" (a criticism of the "revolutionary symphonies *Shajiabang* and *Zhiqu Weihushan*", p. 465.) Just what is unworthy? That they are "devoid of contrast and development" in comparison to the European symphonic tradition of the 18-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which was "predicated on a particular musical form and particular structures, harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, and melodies" (p. 466.) Similarly, the *Yellow River Concerto* "is not a true concerto, and should by rights be described as a piano suite" as "it consists of a combination of several independent tunes, which do not form an organic whole" (ibid.) So far as nomenclature goes, I can agree with this. It's fair to point out objectively the misuse of descriptive terminology; but there is a strong additional element of valuation (often, a *devaluation*) of the subject in Liu's discussions. Jiang Qing's team of composers were "musical hacks" (p. 451), the words of 'quotation songs' (settings of aphorisms of Mao Zedong) are "sickening"(p. 468.) It is not surprising that the book has often sounded a sour note in many ears. Admittedly his harshest comments are reserved for the years of the Cultural Revolution, and this raises the question, is this mere opportunism? For example, he also castigates the British administration in Hong Kong for being slow to build performance spaces: "it was only when the British were preparing to hand Hong Kong back to China that they took active steps to improve the musical and cultural life of the colony's inhabitants" (p. 590.) Maybe so. But six pages later, he claims that "[t]he pace of change [in musical life] was greatest from the mid 1970s to the

late 1980s, the period when Hong Kong's economy really started to grow", a much more plausible explanation for the proliferation of theatres, concert halls, and multi-purpose venues, mostly built at government expense during these years, most of them connected with the expansion of the New Towns.

Despite its many excellences, the extent – in particular the depth – of revision in this English version is open to question. Some research of the past twenty-odd years has been overlooked or even (it seems) not considered. In the extensive references (including books, articles, scores, recordings, and videos) there are few citations of non-Chinese sources (Sheila Melvin and CaiJindong's *Rhapsody in Red: How Western Classical Music became Chinese* (2004) is conspicuously absent, though Richard Krauss' *Pianos and Politics in China* (1989) makes the cut.) Considering the many nugatory figures Liu mentions, there is at least one strange omission: Ma Geshun (b. 1914), the distinguished nonagenarian Shanghainese conductor and composer of choral music. And some historical assumptions simply do not stand up to scrutiny. To take one salient point, Sir Robert Hart's band (est. 1885) is offered at the very start (p. 24) as a *terminus post quem* for the introduction of Western ensemble music to China and to Chinese listeners. Hart's military band was justly celebrated, but it was hardly the first such ensemble to which Chinese listeners had access. A town band was established in Macau in the 1820s, and noted by such figures as the diarist Hariett Low. Brass band music acquired a popularity of sorts in coastal Chinese cities during the late 1850s/1860s, after British and French troops, brought in at the end of the Second Opium War, were accompanied northwards from Shanghai by their military bands. But even so, a brass band had already been established in Shanghai in 1856/57 by François Ravary, s.j. (1823-91), a talented musician who imported up-to-date saxhorns from Paris and Brussels, and taught his students and seminarians at the establishments of Zikawei and Dongjiadu to play to a near-professional level. A Municipal Band was established in Shanghai between 1879 and 1881, and a similar *fanfare* was established in Beijing by French Vincentians at the Bei Tang (North Cathedral) a few years later. Hart's band, then, might be better seen as a highpoint in a growing trend which stretched back a full half-century. Admittedly, the 19th Century is not the historical period which concerns Liu in this study: but with assumptions based on limited background material, consequent premises about later developments might be called into question.

Approaches to Romanization and translation of Chinese bedevil this sort of undertaking. Despite the translation's strong points, there are a few noticeable problems. Sometimes it appears that the translator has followed the Chinese text to the letter (or character), resulting in grammatically correct, but lexically incorrect citations. For example, Hong Kong Baptist University (my home institution) is correctly cited in Liu's *Prologue* (p. 5), but appears later laboriously rendered as "the Baptist University of Hong Kong" (p. 653). More seriously, the *yangbanxi*, *Haigang* (海港) is discussed under the title, "The Harbor" (p. 399.) This is certainly a correct translation of 海港: except that it has always been known in English as "On the Docks." This is the title of the English libretto --1972 script, which is the one discussed by Liu in Chapter 6 -- published in Beijing in 1973 by Foreign Languages Press. (None of the English-language libretti of these works are cited in the References.) As a consequence, one

searches in vain in the index for the widely-circulated English title. Liu mentions a very extensive vetting and editorial process, including “two sinologist’s valuable and insightful comments on the content and organization of the English version” (p. 6.) A close critical proof-reading of the book by two musicologists with knowledge of the figures and repertory covered here would have caught these and perhaps other slips of this kind, increasing the utility of the work. It’s probably inevitable that a study of such length and with such broad aims will occasionally be found wanting.

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