Garden of unexpected delights

A cross-cultural chamber music festival opens a door into another world

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John Huie at the Chinese Garden in Sydney

JOHN Huie doesn't work there, but he's giving a tour of Sydney's Chinese Garden as though he does. "I don't mind who does it, but I would like this to become the cultural centre of Australia for Chinese people and Chinese culture," he says.

Crushed between the CBD and Darling Harbour, it's a place that suits whispered conversation, an oasis of calm in the centre of town. Huie, 51, talks earnestly about the paths that snake through the plants, the large orange fish darting through the water, the architecture, and how the whole place was a bicentenary gift from the city of Guangzhou in 1998.

It's a popular spot for weddings, but Huie, a guitarist, composer, promoter and cross-cultural musical entrepreneur, believes it could be much more. "I'm talking to everyone involved in the gardens and constantly trying to push my ideas," he says.

For the moment, his plans are centred on a festival of Chinese chamber music about to take place inside the gardens. The festival — he's quick to label it "three days of peace, love, music and noodles" — is a series of concerts by musicians from China and Australia. The headline act is Xing Lu, an accomplished proponent of the erhu, or Chinese violin. Her performances include the premiere of *Planet Earth*, a trio piece that Huie has written for the festival.

Other Chinese guests travelling to Australia for the festival are Tong Ying, a talented player of the pipa, or pear-shaped four-string lute, and Jin Wei, playing the seven-string guqin.

Huie, the artistic director, has also arranged a traditional Chinese folk song for the occasion, and will be playing guitar on *Planet Earth* with Lu and Australian cellist Patrick Murphy.

Originally from Sydney, Huie was lured back to Australia from Shanghai, where he spent a few years trying to revitalise the city's jazz scene. He says the festival is designed to expose audiences to contemporary chamber music with a distinct Chinese flavour. More broadly, his plans centre on trying to educate audiences about China's cultural diversity.

"When we think of Chinese music, we tend to think of Cantonese opera," Huie says. To demonstrate, he launches into a warbling, high-pitched, note-bending squeal. He laughs and says his wife, who hails from Hong Kong, can't stand the sound. "But it's not just that, there's just so much more out there."

The festival, now in its second year, will be a more modest affair than the inaugural event, which included performances on a floating stage. Funding remains a challenge, with support from several private sources and the Chinese government but nothing yet from the state or commonwealth governments in Australia.

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"We'll be after them next year, though," he says. "We approached them this year but you've got to know the system and I'm a musician, I'm not a politician."

Huie developed a passion for China when he moved to Hong Kong in the early 1990s, almost on a whim. His reasons for choosing China were vague — "It's the biggest country in the world and I knew they spoke English in Hong Kong" — but he was 30 and feeling restless. Looking back, he admits he knew next to nothing about his new home when he arrived.

"All I knew was that the black notes on a piano sounded like Chinese music," he says, referring to the pentatonic scale. "I studied ethnomusicology, of course, but how can you know anything in a classroom with a book? You've got to be there and hear the sounds."

In Hong Kong, Huie's career as a composer flourished. He wrote music for films and documentaries, worked as a lecturer and composed an album to commemorate the 1997 handover of the city from British to Chinese rule.

The Honourable Retreat, Huie says, had a kind of "British Chinese sound", with bagpipes, Chinese flutes and drums among the instruments used.

And while it has been reported that this work was commissioned by the Chinese government, it was in fact an initiative between Huie and a music retailer. Official recognition came later.

"The Chinese government had nothing to do with it, but they played it on the radio and it became the unofficial CD and music of the handover," he says.

Huie stayed in Hong Kong until 2001, when he moved to Shanghai. Again, his motivation was hard to define, even in retrospect. "I thought Hong Kong was it," he says. "I was wrong."

For several years, though, he had been intrigued by hints of a culture that had once thrived on the mainland. He would see a black-and-white poster of a singer, or hear an old recording, and gradually came to piece together the picture that was forming in his mind. It was Shanghai in the 1930s, and the sound was jazz. Huie couldn't get enough of it.

"I decided to deal with my passion for this music by making an album with the new generation of jazz musicians," he says. "They were the people who were born in the 70s, when jazz was allowed back into China." So it was that Hieu took it upon himself to revive the sound of the 30s and, in the process, boost the local jazz scene.

He made two records, *Shanghai Jazz* and *Shanghai Jazz 2*, and presented several concerts in the city. He is reluctant to take too much credit for the revival of jazz in Shanghai, but is happy to point out there are now many more outlets for jazz than when he arrived.

Back in Australia, Huie is also organising a national tour of the Clear Wind Band, a Sydney group featuring a singer from Shanghai.

"The ambition there is to do the same thing [as the chamber music festival], to show the world some Chinese music," he says.

"But all this, it's not just about Chinese music or Chinese culture. I'm trying to get people out of their little holes."

The Chinese Garden Chamber Music Festival, Darling Harbour, Sydney, Thursday to Saturday.