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Orient express

East meets West in a music festival

Ancient and modern Chinese works get an airing alongside Ravel and Brahms, writes **Marguerite Winter**.

In a rare alignment of propitious dates, the lunar new year and Australia's national celebrations fell on the same day this year, and among those who saluted this twinning was Sydney-based composer John Huie.

Huie's 18-year sojourn in first Hong Kong and then Shanghai got him the commission to compose something for the Australia Day celebrations near Sydney's Chinatown, organised by the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority to mark both events. And SHFA, along with Musica Viva, is Huie's co-presenter in a much more substantial East-meets-West musical offering over four days next month.

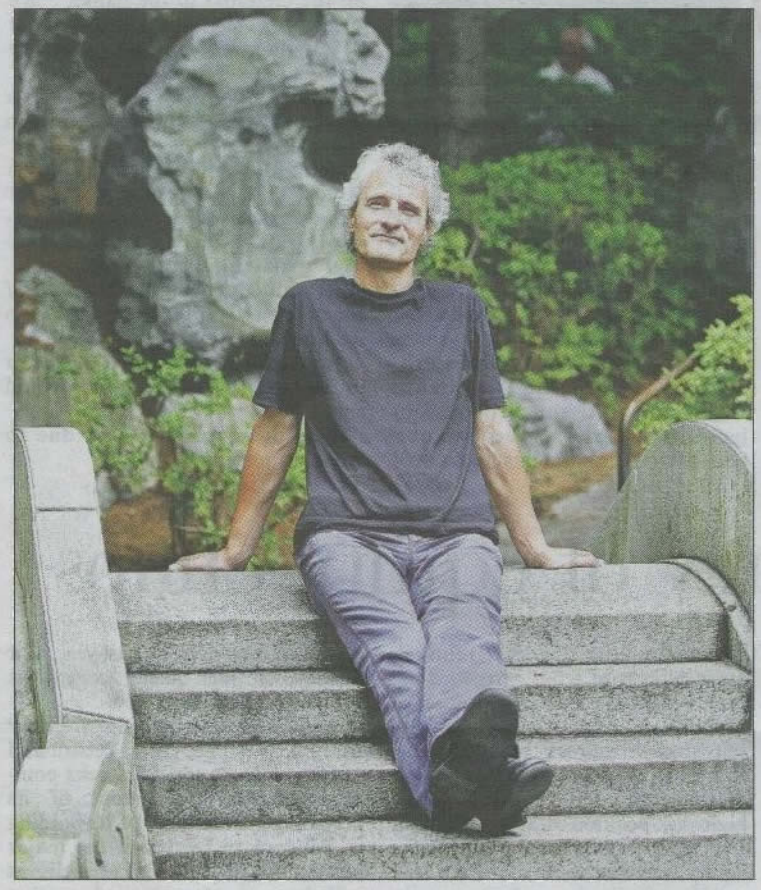
Huie regrets that while Australia, like the rest of the Western world, has had wide exposure to the blossoming of the visual arts in contemporary China, it gets little opportunity to experience first-hand the music of the People's Republic. So he's convened a festival of music-making to address that lack.

The stamp of difference on this chamber music festival begins with its setting: the enchanted space of the Chinese Garden of Friendship, a collaboration with Sydney's sister city Guangzhou in 1988 that features pavilions, tea houses and water features in a walled garden setting.

Ancient and modern works from all over China, together with a smattering of Ravel, Debussy, and Liszt performed "to reveal a flavour of the Orient", will echo through the gardens from February 5 to 8, performed by 28 musicians from China and Australia for an audience of about 1500.

"It's the Chinese Gardens Chamber Music Festival, not a Chinese chamber music festival, so we are able to play anything we want, but a majority of the program leans towards China," Huie says. "About 70 per cent of it is Chinese music but, for instance, Christian Chong will be playing Brahms and the reason he's playing Brahms is because he's known for playing Brahms and he's very good at it."

The East-meets-West theme is apparent right down to such matters as the hospitality. "It's a four-day concert festival in the evening with a Chinese dinner at interval," says Huie, for whom the festival is something of a homecoming.



John Huie is bringing the music of China to Sydney.

"Just like the West, China has a tradition of small ensemble music in intimate settings. Basically, the Western perception of Chinese music is pretty standard — you mention Beijing Opera or Cantonese Opera and they just don't want to know about it. They have the impression that it's not pleasant to the Western ear, but there are other forms of the Chinese musical repertoire, like chamber music, that are lovely and they should be heard."

The program provides the opportunity to get to know individual instruments of the repertoire such as the guzheng, a member of the zither family of stringed instruments and the parent instrument of the Japanese koto. Guzheng virtuoso Fang Yu, principal of the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra, is one of the star attractions coming from China for the event.

Australian-based Chinese instrumentalists include Wang Zheng Ting on the sheng, a mouth-blown reed instrument of vertical pipes, and Changning Chai on the dizi (flute). Both musicians will give pre-concert talks on Chinese music and instruments.

Performances by The Chinese Australian Chamber Ensemble includes the pipa (lute), erhu (fiddle) and yangqin (a hammered dulcimer).

Tony Wheeler, one of the very few Australians to have mastered the instrument, will perform on the zhong ruan (another kind of flute).

A modern interpretation of traditional Chinese works will come from the pianist Julie Simonds. Huie has also programmed pieces based on provincial folk songs from Jiangsu province and traditional Uyghur music from Xinjian in western China.

Then there are performances of modern Chinese percussion works by Karak Percussion and Claire Edwards, including the premiere of Huie's own *Rabbit on a Shovel*, an ensemble piece inspired by Chinese gold diggers in 19th century Australia.

"I've also got a trio based on the *Butterfly Lovers* concerto, which was written in 1958," Huie says. "It's a very special tune and probably one of the most famous Chinese melodies — in the West anyway."

The unusual venue of the Chinese Gardens brings with it a few logistical challenges.

For all the West's reservations about Chinese opera, Huie is not shirking the genre. "Of the many types of Chinese opera, Suzhou 'pingtan' is my choice, as it is more accessible to the Western ear," he says. The Suzhou Opera Troupe performances include the traditional piece, *Hong Lou Meng (The Red Tower Story)*.

As might be expected, the unusual venue of the Chinese Gardens brings with it a few logistical challenges for staging such an event.

"SHFA has contributed hugely. They are looking after the stage, for instance; and it is really a huge feat to get a piano in there and onto the floating stage in the pond," he says.

"Musica Viva has done the ticketing, which is terrific because we wanted to target their traditional following for classical music as a core audience. And then I wanted to get to the Chinese community; there's a huge Chinese diaspora in Australia who would love this sort of thing. And they don't usually get it."