

Above: The Australian-born, Shanghai-based composer John Huie founded the 12-member Yellow Music Ensemble. Right: Huie and *guzheng* player Feng Yu.



In 1930s Shanghai, "Yellow Music" was all the rage, but critics sniffed that it was decadent sinified jazz with Chinese folk elements. Now the East-West Yellow Music Ensemble tries to take the sound where no one has gone before. Hear it free tomorrow, says Wolfgang Zaeh

Yellow Music fuses East, West



"Yellow Music" was the sound of the Chinese jazz age, a kind of urban pop blend of American jazz and Chinese folk with dashes of silver screen. Shanghai was the home of the new sound of the 1920s and especially the 1930s.

It was disparaged by Shanghai's music establishment as "Yellow Music." Critics labeled as "decadent" the strongly jazz-influenced works by composer Li Jinhui.

However, Li broke new ground and opened new vistas for many musicians with his Yellow Music, combining Western musical ideas and Chinese folk music.

It marked a significant and exciting chapter in Shanghai's music history — continued today.

The Australian-born, Shanghai-based composer John Huie has committed himself to "expand the vocabulary and possibilities of music" by progressing on the path that artists like Li once opened. Guitarist Huie becomes passionate when he talks about the fusion of Chinese and Western music and the playing of instruments from different musical cultures.

That's why Huie founded the 12-member Yellow Music Ensemble, including Huie himself — all highly qualified musicians. "The aim is to realize the ideas of the last years and to do something no one has ever done before."

The musicians have just released their first CD and are staging a free concert tomorrow at the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra Hall.

Except for composer Huie and a pianist from the United States, all the musicians are Chinese.

The 48-year-old Huie hardly speaks Chinese but says "the communication is

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Fortunately the instruments speak only one language although they come from different countries."

This cross-cultural communication has led to the ensemble's first album, "New Shanghai."

The composer has brought Chinese traditional instruments into the contemporary jazz arena. They include *guzheng* (zither), *pipa* (lute), *suona* (oboe), *yueqin* (two-stringed lute) and *dizi* (flute).

But jazz also means drums, a bass, a guitar or a piano — and they are also part of the arrangements. So are cello and violin.

The diversity of instruments as well as the mixture of traditional Chinese music and jazz in terms of melody, harmony and rhythm make this recording a special one.

With "Suite 1421" the journey through uncharted musical territory begins, and the listener gets to hear what the artist's musical mission is about.

A sound environment has been created that opens new perspectives. Huie has dedicated the four movements in the suite to "the voyages of Admiral Zheng

600 years ago" — an interesting and many say plausible premise.

Next comes "Butterfly Lovers," the only popular theme on the album, but at first you might not recognize that this track contains the well-known theme. "Just sing the melody over the music and you'll see that it works," Huie recommends.

The father of two dedicated another song called "Tiger Jack" to his nine-year-old son. Here the music is further removed from jazz and tends a bit more towards mainstream than any other song on the CD. But in the following "Guzheng Trio," a song written for live performance, piano and cello vie for the favor of *guzheng*. Jazz comes unmistakably into play again.

The 10 tracks are united by Huie's hope of being "the beginning of a new Shanghai musical movement" Huie says. "That's also the reason I chose this name for the record."

Date: April 7, 5-6pm
Venue: Shanghai Symphony Orchestra Hall, 105 Hunan Rd
Admission: Free