ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Music of the East greets the West

In its third presentation, the Chinese Garden Chamber Music Festival brings unfamiliar treats to Sydney audiences, writes **Paolo Hooke**.



On a balmy summer evening in 2008, the Australian composer John Huie walked into the Chinese Garden of Friendship at Darling Harbour and knew the time had come to stage the first Chinese chamber music festival in Australia. There would be no acrobats, dancers, kung fu demonstrations or light shows; just world-class Chinese instrumentalists performing with Australia's finest musicians. And, of course, Chinese food at the interval.

"After attending many of the leading chamber music festivals, I couldn't help thinking there was something missing from this huge, ethnically diverse country that is Australia. Something had to fill what seemed to be an obvious void in Australia's musical repertoire," Huie says.

The Chinese Ministry of Culture helped bring China's best musicians to the festival, and Musica Viva and the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority became involved. In February 2009, Huie staged his first Chinese Garden Chamber Music Festival.

It was a success, and so a festival was held again last year. The third festival begins on Friday.

The festival started as a family affair and remains so. Grace Fung, Huie's wife, became manager and Adam, his brother, installed the floating stage so as not to disturb the goldfish in the garden's pond. Ben, another brother, was the producer, and even John Huie jnr was interpreter at the first festival for the opening by the Governor, Marie Bashir.

Chinese influences on the Australian way of life have become the norm, with the country's food, art and movies all part of Australian culture. Huie says music is next. "At the moment in most suburbs of Sydney, Chinese music is not on the agenda. And why would it be? They've never heard it," he says. "If people do think of Chinese music, it might be squeaky opera singers and loud cymbals or movie soundtracks, but the delicacy and subtlety of Chinese classical music is almost never heard in Australia."

The festival has an underlying philosophy that we should listen to what we have in common, not our differences. "All of us are really the same on the inside, 99.9 per cent. But human animals are born combative; they seek out differences and create tribes, labels, clubs and nations," Huie says. "All of us share the same musical elements, no matter where we are from, and music can show how much we all have in common."

> 'Music can show how much we all have in common.' **John Huie**

The festival will feature Fang Yu, the principal guzheng player in the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra, who has also performed in the US, Europe and Asia. "Even European classical purists will not be able to resist the beautiful sounds Fang can produce from the guzheng," Huie says.

"Like Fang Yu, dizi player Qian Jun is a graduate of the Shanghai Music Conservatory. For people who have not heard these instruments before, I cannot begin to describe the pureness and beauty of their sounds. Just try to hear these masters."

Audiences will also hear erhu player Nicholas Ng from the Queensland Conservatorium and Chow Pei Qian, Australia's finest ruan player.

This year's program features works that combine Chinese and Western instruments, such as *White Snake Story*, to be performed by Qian Jun and the pianist Phillip Shovk, a modern arrangement of a traditional piece. Similarly *Embroiderer*, a folk song from Jiangsu province in south China that has been arranged for piano trio by Huie, combines the piano and cello with the dizi. Huie says his arrangement follows the melody then slightly changes the harmonic accompaniment to suit the instruments without taking away the magic of the original work.

The sheng player and composer Wang Zheng-Ting will premiere his *Duet for Sheng and Cello*, which he will perform with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's principal cello, David Berlin. Wang will also play two of his solo works, *Transition* and *Spectra*.

"Both of these modern compositions show the amazing versatility, dynamics and sheer volume of this ancient instrument, of which Wang is a world authority," Huie says.

The Chinese Garden Chamber Music Festival is on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Bookings: 9240 8764.