

Ge Ganru's *Fairy Lady Meng Jiang*: the Chinese Premiere

On November 1, 2013, Patricia Spencer performed the Chinese premiere of Ge Ganru's flute concerto, *Fairy Lady Meng Jiang*, with the Shanghai Philharmonic, conducted by Zhang Liang. She describes the work, its composer, and her experience preparing for this performance.

by Patricia Spencer

Patricia Spencer with the Shanghai Philharmonic, shaking hands with conductor Zhang Liang, and taking her bow—alone and arm-in-arm with composer Ge Gan-ru.



A flute concerto that is a tone poem? Surprising. And that is just the beginning: the phantasmagorical sonic images that tell the story are legion—comprised of lustrous expressive and traditional style phrases, as well as air sounds, quarter tones, and more extended techniques—all skillfully interwoven to give both musical and theatrical coherence.

Ancient Legend

The story of “Fairy Lady Meng Jiang” is an ancient Chinese legend from the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE). Two lonely old men, neighbors, discover one day that a beautiful girl has been born from an enchanted gourd between their gardens. They argue vehemently over which of them will have the privilege of raising her, finally taking their argument to court, where a judge rules for joint custody.

They share her upbringing happily, and when she becomes of age she is married to a handsome young man. However, shortly after the marriage her husband is abducted, forced to go and build the Great Wall. She waits longingly for his return—in vain. Finally she sets out to find him and reaches

the Wall, only to be told that he has died. Beside herself with grief, she weeps and weeps and weeps.

The crescendo of her weeping becomes so powerful that a portion of the Wall collapses, revealing the body of her husband. She is then able to give him a proper burial, and afterward throws herself into the sea. The legend resonates across the ages, with its portrayal of the power of a spirited young woman's grief in the face of the seemingly unassailable wall.

Legend's Musical Contrasts

Ge Ganru's concerto, in four movements, takes full advantage of all the contrasts depicted in the legend. The first movement, *Savage Land*, shows the wild desolation of the scene of the wall's construction, contrasted in the middle section with deeply expressive, mournful outpourings, especially in the exchanges between the solo flute and the concertmaster. The composer is a master of intense build-ups, used very effectively in both the wild and the mournful sections.

The second movement, *Gourd Girl*, is all lightness and beautiful gardens and birdcalls and trills. The birdcalls are water

warblers, played by the percussionists. Once again, intense compositional build-ups abound, but this time they are joyous.

The third movement, *Abduction*, takes us to a world of fear and trembling, with accelerating tremolos and flutter-tongue, in response to an extended threatening, jagged motif from the lower strings and winds. In a remarkable penultimate section of this movement, the flutist improvises slow and expressive phrases of fear and grief over an ominous rhythm, building from lower strings to fully scored climax, then receding, getting softer and softer (but always grieving). The slow improvising is done with just the headjoint—giving indefinite pitches, slides, and piercing, haunting, overblown glisses. The movement recaps the earlier jagged motif of fear and trembling, then ends with a brief, soft return to the ominous rhythm.



The improvised section is particularly memorable, and prepares us both theatrically and musically for the fourth movement, *Crying Down the Wall*. The movement opens with a long orchestral build-up, with *sul ponticello* chromatic triplets and triplets with semitone trills and glisses. Perhaps these depict the arduous journey by the young Fairy Lady Meng Jiang. The flute enters, weeping. This is accomplished once again with just the headjoint. Here, the headjoint sounds are combined with the flutist's voice, improvising weeping sounds—at first very soft, then gradually higher and louder, punctuated by ever louder and higher and faster explosive statements from the orchestra, climaxing with the flutist weeping with the voice only, at the top of her range, then very gradually receding.

The collapse of the wall is depicted by the orchestra—a huge fortissimo, trilled glissandos and clashing, crashing downward sextuplets. The concerto ends with a flashback to the mournful themes of the first movement, followed by a brief haunting memory of the birth of the “gourd girl” and plaintive bird calls played by the flute.

China's First Avant-Garde Composer

Ge Ganru is described in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* as “China's first avant-garde composer.” As an 11-year-old in China at the onset of the Cultural Revolution, when all the schools were closed, Ganru practiced the violin for long hours—muted and behind sealed windows because Western music was prohibited. By a stroke of luck, when he was sent to a labor camp at age 17 to be “re-educated,” he found there a fantastic violin teacher. In addition to working in the camp's fields, he played in an ensemble that entertained the other workers with revolutionary songs.

In his 20s, Ge Ganru attended the Shanghai Conservatory, and upon graduation became an assistant professor of com-



position there. He subsequently completed his doctorate in composition at Columbia University—the first Chinese composer to be invited into its program.

Ge Ganru has had performances all over the world and is composer-in-residence with the Shanghai Philharmonic. *Fairy Lady Meng Jiang* was written in 2008 for Sharon Bezaly and recorded by her with conductor Enrique Diemecke and the Orquesta Castillo y Leon for the Bis label.

Meeting the Concerto's Challenges

The flute world can rejoice in this concerto. It calls into play a number of the flute's strengths: its expressive potential, its wide spectrum of colors, the brilliance and piercing wildness of the fourth octave, the sweetness available in the middle/upper registers. It also calls for techniques that will be a stretch for some: quarter-tone glissandos, dramatic air sounds, singing through the flute headjoint, and more.

I have known Ge Ganru since shortly after his Columbia days. In 1988 he wrote a lovely flute and piano duo for me, titled *Hao*, which I played in recital and on concerts with the

Da Capo Chamber Players. When he was writing *Fairy Lady Meng Jiang*, he consulted with me, asking about various air sounds and glissandos. When he asked me to play the Chinese premiere, I immediately listened to Bezaly's new recording (which is fabulous!)—and was ecstatic with the anticipation of learning such a compelling, exciting piece.

As I began in earnest on this 40-minute work, I knew that I wanted to play it from memory, to have that extra security that comes from the thorough knowledge, the deeper awareness of the musical architecture, that are part of memorization. Details of techniques for memorizing would be too lengthy for this article. But one method I found especially helpful was to practice short overlapping bits from memory right from the start, becoming accustomed immediately to relating more specifically to the sound and less to the visual symbols on the page. This must be combined with playing the whole passage, looking at the music, because one must also practise the longer structures.

Transitions present a major challenge. In the first movement, the flute plays harsh, dramatic air sounds, third octave quasi-glissandos, quarter tones, and lots of flutter-tongue for two minutes. This is followed by just two beats of rest at quarter note equals 60, after which one of the most luminous, lyrical phrases follows, requiring a beautiful tone, perfect smoothness, and the ultimate in expressiveness. The technique I have found best for learning such transitions is to master the smooth lyrical phrase, then precede it with just one measure (or even one beat) of the previous contrasting section. Repeat, gradually adding bars from the prior section, proceeding to the full smooth, expressive phrase.

Another helpful method is to put fermatas on the two rests and play the smooth phrase only when the breath, lip, and head position are balanced and ready, after the previous section. Then gradually shorten the fermatas. Also, since transition challenges are musical and conceptual as well as technical, the technique of “thought-practicing,” i.e. really hearing the change and feeling the physical changes in your head without playing or moving, is very helpful.

The challenge of the “weeping” section—the climax of the piece—is vocal. It begins with voice mixed with flute head-joint tones, and as it gets higher and longer shifts to just voice. This section is quite strenuous! I feel fortunate that many pieces I have played in the past (Stockhausen's *Kathinkas Gesang als Luzifers Requiem* and others) have required some vocal training; thus I have a collection of vocal warm-ups that prepared me for this.

Interaction with the Composer

Rehearsing with a composer is one of the quintessential benefits of playing music of our own time. It gives an unparalleled opportunity for expanding musical understanding. That said, there are cautions to observe. Composers sometimes change things! For *Fairy Lady Meng Jiang*, I was out of the country for the initial stages of my preparation, so I emailed Ge Ganru my questions. Did he want the glissandos in the first movement to be “pure slides” or chromatic? He replied that he would like “pure slides,” so I developed a rather elaborate set of sliding fingerings, using harmonics and such to deal

with some rather tricky glissandos (sometimes resorting to four fingerings between each half-step, meanwhile wondering whether I might be able to master the piece on time if I purchased one of Robert Dick's glissando headjoints).

However (to my inner dismay), when Ganru heard the glissandos more than a month later, he decided the “pure slides” didn't work and asked if I could do articulated quarter tones instead. The quarter tones worked much better, so I was relieved, but they still needed adjustment because the

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number of attacks was now too many. Thus the “final” version was settled only about 10 days before the performance. Naturally this was stressful! But it gave me a privileged glimpse of one aspect of the mysterious composition process.

Not every section of the piece required the same intense experimentation as the first movement. Working with Ganru was a rich musical experience, especially as he often sang the phrases (and very expressively) to demonstrate his concepts. Not many composers sing for demonstration, either from vocal limitations or choice. His singing was vibrant, communicative, and very helpful.

Shanghai Philharmonic

The Shanghai Philharmonic gave a superb performance not only of the flute concerto (a Chinese premiere) but also of a world premiere by Ge, titled *Ghost Suite*. Conductor Zhang Liang elicited exciting crescendos and accelerandos (very much a part of the language of both pieces) and was wonderfully flexible to work with. The members and staff of the orchestra were extremely friendly and collegial. Joy Shi, Director of the Performance Marketing Department, deserves enormous credit for her superb management. Everyone I met was welcoming and helpful; the Chinese seem to have a tradition of extending unlimited warm hospitality.

The concert hall of the Oriental Arts Center in Shanghai is strikingly beautiful, with an elaborate ceiling design that in itself creates an atmosphere of high expectation. The audience response to the concerto was tremendously gratifying. Many listeners told me (in English or in sign language) how much they enjoyed it. And Joy Shi told me that she overheard an audience member commenting that a number of listeners were crying during the piece. *

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