The future of the Chinese and East Asian musical past

What do we know about the great traditional music of East Asia, past or present? Why are faithful renderings or reconstructions of such music so seldom heard on today's concert stages? What can be done to bring back to life or to preserve their sounds? International experts will discuss 'the future of the Chinese and East Asian musical past' in Brussels from 18 to 22 November.

Frank Kouwenhoven

Fig. 1 (above) and Fig. 2 (below) Daoist musicians in Yulin, Shaanxi, northwest China. Daoist music in China has generally survived the onslaughts of modern times remarkably well. Photographs courtesy of the CHIME archive.

SOME ONE HUNDRED MUSICOLOGISTS, music historians and musicians will gather in Brussels in November 2009 for a conference on traditional music in China and East Asia. Issues at stake are the development and preservation of musical instruments, the reconstruction of historical musical genres and methods of study, documentation and archiving. The meeting, organised by CHIME (the European Foundation for Chinese Music Research) and hosted by the Brussels Musical Instruments Museum (MIM), will cover a vast range of musical regions and historical periods. Key questions include: what is there still to discover about genres of music or musical instruments which have disappeared, or are on the brink of disappearing? How do traces of former musical genres survive in contemporary East Asian music? And how can the material heritage of traditional music – instruments, scores, recordings, people's memories – best be preserved and guarded?

Lost and found

Of course, a great deal of music from East Asia's past is irretrievably lost. But even if few scores and (obviously) no sound recordings are available, it is often possible to speculate meaningfully on how certain musical genres of past centuries sounded, or were structured. Sometimes, complete pieces can be successfully reconstructed. Many ancient zither scores and court ensemble pieces have been brought back to life. Even very ephemeral repertoires such as folk songs sometimes turn out to be open to some historical reconstruction. New discoveries in music archeology and music history and new research methods have made it possible to solve pieces of the historical puzzle. Scholars have established a closer rapport with an impressive variety of genres, from ancient ceremonial bells to lutes and zithers played in the 18th century, from Korean court music to Laotian temple drums, from Mongolian chant to Malaysian teahouse music. Some local traditions which survive today, such as Chinese 'silk and bamboo' *(sizhu)*, or the mysterious southern Chinese balladry *nanguan*, can now be more meaningfully linked with other regional genres or with specific musical traditions of the past.

Unravelling the past is not just a matter of inspecting historical artefacts. Some musicologists also feel the need to establish better links with present-day musicians, music educators and cultural policy makers in Asia. A more active interest in older music traditions on the part of musicians and politicians could make a big difference in the prospects for learning more about traditional musical realms. In this respect, 'the future of the past' still leaves a lot to be desired: cultural preservation policies in countries like China, Japan an Korea are beset with problems and misconceptions, and professionally trained musicians in state educational institutions in East Asia often have scant knowledge about the history of their own instruments or of the music they play.

Reconstruction in China

For example, the vast majority of professional musicians in China show little interest in revivals of early music based on historical study or factual analysis. Even the performance practices of 50 or 60 years ago are already *terra incognita* for most young urban musicians in this country. *Pipa* (lute) players today generally have no idea how very different their steel-stringed instrument would sound if played with silk strings, as was common only half a century ago. Historical recordings of this are available, but they are rarely consulted. Generally speaking, the gap between historical scholarship and practical performance is enormous: what is being presented on Chinese concert stages today as 'early' or 'ancient' music is largely newly composed repertoire, played on modern instruments, and most of it is a product of fantasy, without any recourse to historical data.

The instrumental ensemble suites from the Chinese Tang court that have survived (mainly) via Japanese Togaku manuscripts include great music, but are rarely performed in China. Musicians and instrument makers have also made little effort to reconstruct historical instruments. Copies have been cast of such prestigious objects as the Zheng Houyi bronze bells from the Warring States Period (2500 years ago) – and these are played in an a-historical fashion in tourist shows at the Hubei Provincial Museum in Wuhan and elsewhere – but historical lutes, fiddles, drums and other instruments are mostly consigned to museum display cabinets. True enough, one early pioneer, Zheng Jinwen, made more than 160 replicas of old Chinese instruments as early as the 1930s, but his collection was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and his work is all but forgotten in China. The reconstructions of Tang music by Laurence Picken (Cambridge) and by Western and Chinese fellow musicologists now mainly gather dust on Chinese library shelves. A number of reconstructed instruments especially made for a concert of Picken's Tang music in Shanghai in 1991 were returned to the instruments factory in Suzhou after the concert, and were never re-used in public.

Living traditions

To stay with China for a bit longer: solo repertoires for plucked lutes and zithers like *pipa* and *qin* include numerous hidden and unexplored treasures, but they are rarely given the chance for authentic reproduction on concert stages. Playing on steel strings (as most performers in China currently do) and with amplification destroys the historical sense of the music, and most of the roughly six hundred *qin* pieces which survive (documented in some 3000 scores) are never heard in performance. Audiences in China must live under the impression that the entire *qin* repertoire consists of some 20 'famous' pieces. Fair enough, a handful of *qin* players in China (notably in Hong Kong and Taipei) and one Westerner (John Thompson) try to re-dress this, and investigate the impressive corpus of *qin* manuscripts on a basis of historical criteria.

Splendid recordings of traditional ensemble music from the 1950s (such as that from the Zhihua temple musicians), as well as the continuing living music practices of numerous rural *shengguan* bands, temple orchestras, story singers and local opera groups in China provide us with exciting clues about past practice, but such clues are rarely taken up by urban musicians. Professional performers from the state conservatories in China show little interest in doing musical fieldwork in their own society, although the country possesses one of the biggest and most magnificent music backyards in the world. Folk music could be a major inspiration and source of knowledge for early music enthusiasts (as European folk music has become for early music experts in the West).

The painstaking and impressive historical scholarship of scholars like Yang Yinliu, Cao Anhe and their followers, such as Ye Dong and Chen Yingshi provides the basis for early music research in China today, but unfortunately their work is being ignored in concert halls. Real acknowledgement of the achievements of these scholars has been slow to arrive, and early Chinese music today remains the domain of a relatively small group of theorists. One aim of the conference in Brussels is to raise new debate on this situation, by inviting to the meeting not only music historians but also some 40 practicing musicians from China.

Discoveries

The musico-archeological record for East Asia is rich, but also very scattered, and it usually provides only tantalising glimpses of specific genres played in former ceremonial court contexts. A great deal of folk and rural (and even court) musical culture remains almost 'invisible', because it has left practically no traces. Surviving scores are open to many different interpretations, especially where rhythms, tunings and temperament are concerned. Nevertheless, progress is being made in a number of areas. Western scholars have long been hesitant to subscribe to Chinese scholars' views about the ancient roots of the southern balladry genre *nanguan*, since no sources documented that genre earlier than the 16th century, but new research proves the Chinese scholars right. Musicologists are now mapping this genre more accurately, also charting its relationships with regional opera genres. Another example: The bells of Marquis Yi were the first documented instance in world history of a chromatically tuned musical instrument (some 1700 years before the rise of the Western keyboard). Robert Bagley of Princeton University and others have argued that the chromatic tuning of the bells was never intended for playing chromatic tunes, but mainly for producing five-tone melodies in different keys (meaning that the bells were suited for playing together with other instruments with variable tunings). Bagley suggests that the tuning of the bells was not reached on the basis of refined calculations and precise casting methods, but empirically, by trying out combinations of different sizes of bells until a suitable chromatical series emerged.

Cultural intangible heritage

Until now, many results of historical research have little or no bearing on performance practice. This could change if scholars, instrument makers and musicians in East Asia join forces in exploring the musical past. There are some cautious steps in this direction, also in setting up joint research projects concerning living traditional music.

Only a few decades ago, appeals for the preservation of rural and local folk music were rare in most parts of East Asia. In recent years, cultural intangible heritage organisations and a number of (private or state-guided) preservation and documentation programmes have been established. 'Rescue' projects in China, Japan and Korea have been undertaken, with mixed results: as long as local instruments are repaired, scores copied, or repertoires recorded and documented, such projects probably serve their objectives. In Yunnan Province in China, ancient *dongba* rituals were successfully reintroduced in Naxi ethnic minority areas. Youngsters in Yunnan are taught about the merits of protecting and supporting rural traditional music culture. However, such developments are counter-balanced by the less positive side-effects of some other forms of cultural promotion. The Centre for the Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Peking (founded with support from the Chinese Government and UNESCO) awarded grants to a number of rural folk musicians, which caused great envy, sometimes even serious rows among their fellow villagers. In other instances, local folk musicians were practically turned into professional stage artists, and village musical ceremonies transformed into commercial tourist shows. What is 'rescued', in such instances, is perhaps the economical basis of some musicians, but probably not their rituals or their music. The many intricacies of cultural protection laws and preservation programmes in countries like China and Japan will be discussed in the Brussels meeting.

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For more details on the programme and the (many) concerts in the CHIME conference, see http://home.wxs.nl/chime.

Frank Kouwenhoven
European Foundation for Chinese Music Research (CHIME)
chime@wxs.nl