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GREG STEPANICH

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August 21, 2007

'EMPTY MOUNTAIN' A COUP FOR CHAMBER GROUP



Earlier this year, I wrote about Project Copernicus, a South Miami-based group of young chamber orchestra musicians who finished up their first concert with the Erwin Stein reduction of Mahler's Fourth Symphony, and did a fine job of it.

This Sunday afternoon, the group brings an Asian-inspired concert to West Palm Beach, and they're managed to land something of a coup while doing so. The four pieces on the program ([for details, click here](#)) include *Empty Mountain*, *Spirit Rain*, by the Chinese-American [composer Angel Lam](#) (pictured above).

Lam's piece will be played Saturday at the [Lucerne Festival in Switzerland](#) by none other than Yo-Yo Ma and his [Silk Road Ensemble](#), which commissioned the piece and premiered it in 2006. As a Barnes & Noble tie-in, the Silk Road group's newest album contains a bonus track featuring *Empty Mountain*, *Spirit Rain*, and the group will introduce it to audiences across China in October.

And West Palm audiences at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church will hear a version rescored for Western flute rather than the shakuhachi, the Japanese bamboo flute for which it was originally written.

Also on the program are pieces by Copernicus' resident composer, [Steve Danyew](#) (*Lhotse*, an evocation of the face of Mount Everest not far from the summit); *L'ours Chinois* (The Chinese Bear), a violin showpiece by [Randy Wong](#), a Hawaiian bassist and arts educator now resident in Boston; and GEN, by the Japanese-born composer Ryojiro Sato.

All four of the composers are under 30, which raises the cutting-edge stakes. The whole program is called *From the Land of the Buddha*, and I'm hoping to make it Sunday afternoon.

It is often said that music is a universal language, and in a wide sense that's true in that all civilizations I can think of have music of some kind. But the music of the East has different fundamental qualities and listener expectations than the music of the West, and that's why I always try to listen more intently to Eastern music — so I can try to understand what it is saying beyond its surface attractiveness.

Still, there are barriers that it's hard for Westerners to really cross. I am reminded of a remark made by Zhang Yimou, the film director, as he sat with composer Tan Dun during a rehearsal of the latter's opera, *The First Emperor*. The Metropolitan Opera showed a bit of that rehearsal during the intermission of their movie theater simulcast of *The First Emperor* during the past season.

At one point, as a musician on stage began to play the ancient Chinese zither known as a zheng, Zhang turned to Tan and said, approximately: "Hear how she plays that zheng? It pierces the heart!"

No doubt it did his, but as a Western listener, it was hard for me to hear the emotional weight of what she was playing. (It also helped persuade me that Tan's opera was really Chinese first, Western second, and not the other way around, as many critics would have had it.) There was something speaking there to two intensely artistic Chinese men, but it escaped me somewhat, and I'm not ashamed to say so.

And yet it pushes me to try harder next time when listening to be alert to the music even while not completely understanding it. Music itself is not quite a universal language, though the appreciation of its many forms appears to be, and that at least helps bridge the culture gap between East and West, as Sunday's concert will try to do.

Posted by [Greg Stepanich](#) at [August 21, 2007 11:57 PM](#)

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