

Bridging East and West

Fusing American pop with traditional Chinese beats is erhu player George Gao's forte

Akshita Nanda

Erhu player George Gao has gone from playing propaganda songs during the Cultural Revolution to fusing traditional Chinese music with Western folk song and jazz. He shows off his signature sound in his debut concert with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) on Nov 2 and 3 at the SCO Concert Hall.

"I accidentally built a bridge between East and West, I didn't do it on purpose," says Gao, 47, on the telephone from China, where he is a guest professor at the Shanghai Conservatory.

He is referring to the fact that his music evolved with his life, as he moved from China to Canada to make a living.

Gao headlines a string group named the George Gao Ensemble and is a regular soloist with orchestras in North America and Asia. He teaches at conservatories from Taiwan to Japan and will play a Chinese New Year concert with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra next year.

Next week's concerts are his first public performances here, though he has made prior visits and also played overseas under the baton of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra's conductor Shui Lan.

Gao's concerts here include a rendition of Liu Xijin's double erhu concerto Hymn Of Wusuli, with the SCO's erhu associate principal Ling Hock Siang. He also performs two original compositions: on the first night, his Capriccio No. 2 for Erhu and Orchestra - Mongolian Fantasy, a trippy, tribal melody with a touch of North American folk rock.

A day later, he presents Capriccio No. 4 for Erhu and Orchestra - Gobi Fantasy, a nouveau Qinghai tune commissioned by the 29th Spring Shanghai International Music Festival.

Gao plays on an erhu he designed and had custom-built. Called a shaoqin, it has a wider range than the traditional two-stringed Chinese violin and also provides a fuller sound, easily audible to the audience. It requires chutzpah to tinker with tradition, but he says with a laugh: "Instruments are like our voice, they are only a tool."

Now a Canadian citizen, Gao was born in Shanghai during the end of China's Cultural Revolution. His white-collar parents were sent to work on farms in Gansu province, on the border of Inner Mongolia, and desperately sought a better future for their son. "Usually, when kids grew into teenagers, they had to work as farmers, but if you knew some instrument, you could join the local troupes and perform as propaganda tools for the government," he explains. "I didn't have choices as for musical instruments. The erhu was cheap. I had never seen a piano."



George Gao (right) headlines George Gao Ensemble (above) and plays as a soloist with orchestras in North America and Asia. PHOTOS: SINGAPORE CHINESE ORCHESTRA

A natural with the erhu, he performed to army troops until China re-opened its educational institutions in 1978. A year later, when only 12, he won a place at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

On graduating in 1988, he worked in Beijing's Central Chinese Orchestra, but they performed only three concerts a season and his salary of US\$7 a month was barely enough "for a meal at a nice restaurant". He had to perform pop music in bars to survive. He headed to Canada instead in 1991 to study piano at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, but found he was a one-instrument musician. "My piano is terrible. I can play the erhu for hours, no problem, because I grew up with it."

He dropped out of the music programme and studied traditional Chinese medicine instead. He even built up a decent practice while keeping his musical ear in tune with string ensembles and folk music festivals.

The medical practice fell by the wayside as his musical career took off in the Noughties. Performances with the Royal Conservatory of Music Orchestra and Toronto Symphony Orchestra brought his fusion style to a larger audience and landed him composition jobs for television. His work appears in the 1997-2002 science-fiction series Earth: Final Conflict and the 2010 Oscar-nominated documentary of pollution in China, The Warriors Of Qiugang. But what he loves most is making music in public, especially with wife Jenny who lends pop vocals to his traditional string. They have a son.

"I love the melody of the East and the rhythms of the West," says Gao. "I find it very interesting that different cultures perceive rhythm differently. I love the sensitivity of both."

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Book it

A NIGHT WITH GEORGE GAO I & II

Where: SCO Concert Hall, 7 Shenton Way
When: Nov 2 and 3, 8pm
Admission: \$25, \$35, \$45 and \$55 from Sistic (go to www.sistic.com.sg or call 6348-5555)

PRE-CONCERT TALK: A NIGHT WITH GEORGE GAO

Where: Singapore Conference Hall, Exhibition Hall
When: Nov 3, 6pm
Admission: Free

CONCERTS

A NIGHT WITH GEORGE GAO I & II

Erhu master George Gao from Shanghai joins Singaporean erhu player Ling Hock Siang to perform Liu Xijin's double erhu concerto Hymn Of Wusuli and more. See Page D11.

Where: Singapore Chinese Orchestra Concert Hall, 7 Shenton Way, Singapore Conference Hall
MRT: Tanjong Pagar **When:** Nov 2 & 3, 8pm
Admission: \$25 - \$55 **Info:** www.sistic.com.sg