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The Prodigy Market in China

By **BARBARA JEPSON**

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Thirty-two years after the end of its Cultural Revolution, China is buzzing with once-forbidden Western classical music activity, building world-class concert halls and expanding its conservatory facilities. According to Chinese music-industry executives, more than 40 million youngsters are currently studying the piano or violin. "The joke in some cities," says pianist Gary Graffman, former president of the elite Curtis School of Music in Philadelphia, "is that if you see a kid on the street who is *not* carrying a violin case, it's because he or she is studying the piano."



David Gothard


Not surprisingly, this burgeoning prodigy market is of great interest to the leading international conservatories, which are always jockeying for the best students. Faculty members have long functioned as informal talent scouts as they travel around the world performing concerts, giving master classes or serving on competition juries. "They meet these young artists and are enthralled with their playing," says Joseph Polisi, president of the prestigious Juilliard School in New York. "In certain cases, they try to find the means to bring them to Juilliard."

But the size and caliber of China's talent pool has led some American music schools to go further, enhancing their ties to that country in various ways. The highly regarded Juilliard Orchestra gave the opening performance of its seven-concert tour in Beijing this past Friday, its first appearance in China since 1987. (The final concert is tonight in Shanghai.) Last November, Juilliard signed an exchange agreement with the eminent Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

In 2005, violin pedagogue Kurt Sassmannshaus founded the Great Wall International Music Academy in Beijing with the help of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, where he heads the string department. Some students chosen for the academy's four-week summer program ultimately apply to the College-Conservatory. "The academy is a logical effort to establish the conservatory's global presence," Mr. Sassmannshaus said in an email. Other music schools send their admissions directors on recruitment tours to leading Asian cities, including Beijing and Shanghai; prescreening auditions are held on the spot.

For Chinese students, studying abroad has multiple advantages. "One of the main reasons American

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conservatories can attract our students," says Zhang Xianping, vice president of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and a longtime faculty member, ". . . is that they offer them more in scholarships than we do, not just tuition but living expenses. However, the most attractive element for our students is the opportunity to feel the atmosphere, to learn Western music in Western countries."

While European capitals offer more historical surroundings, American conservatories are noted for their expressive freedom. "The education here," says 15-year-old pianist Peng Peng, who left a coveted spot at the Shanghai Conservatory's music middle school at the age of 10 to study at the Juilliard Pre-College, "leaves the right blanks for students to express their own feelings in without hesitation."

Winner of a Piano Prodigy Prize at the age of 6, Peng Peng is one of three students featured as soloists during the tour by the 93-member Juilliard Orchestra, two of whom were born in China. (The other was 23-year-old bass-baritone Shen Yang, a student at the Shanghai Conservatory, who joined the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program after winning the 2007 BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition.) Concerts in Beijing, Suzhou and Shanghai, led by Zhang Xian, associate conductor of the New York Philharmonic and a graduate of Beijing's Central Conservatory of Music, included tributes to China's recent earthquake victims and a friendship event that was part of the cultural activities leading up to the Olympics. Faculty members have offered master classes in piano, violin, oboe and woodwind quintet. Musical scores of works by the dean of American composers, 99-year-old Elliott Carter, were presented to the Shanghai Conservatory at an earlier concert.

Admissions directors in the U.S. report that applications from China to their schools increased gradually after 1976, the end of the Cultural Revolution, but virtually disappeared in the wake of the crackdown that followed the slaying of protesters at Tiananmen Square in 1989. During the mid-1990s, applications resumed at higher levels, particularly around 2001, when it became easier for students to obtain visas.

Several factors are fueling the explosion of musical talent behind that upswing. China's booming economy and one-child policy have created a rising middle class with a passion for education. "Parents have become intensely focused on their child," suggests Mr. Polisi. "The areas they work on are the sciences, math and music; the musical experience is seen as an important element in the child's intellectual and social upbringing."

Indeed, parental involvement is vital for the development of talent. "In Asian societies," notes Yoheved Kaplinsky, head of the piano faculty at Juilliard and artistic director of its Pre-College division, "the kids are much more disciplined and geared towards achievement from a very young age compared to the average American or European child." She also theorizes that, because of the subtleties required in reading calligraphy, Asian children develop visual acuity to discern details in musical scores at an early age. Those who speak so-called "tonal languages" like Mandarin Chinese, where fluctuations in vocal pitch help determine meaning, may also benefit from this form of ear training.

The work ethic is evident at the highly selective music middle schools affiliated with the conservatories in Shanghai and Beijing. Conductor Hu Yongyan, artistic director of the EOS Orchestra at the Central Conservatory and music director designate of the three-year-old Qiangdao Symphony, says that children who win admittance to these boarding schools practice six hours a day and are groomed to enter the college-level conservatories. Unless they leave to go abroad, of course.

Is there concern about a talent drain in China? Mr. Zhang and Mr. Polisi note that many of those who

study abroad return to teach or perform in their native country, enriching its music scene. But it will take another decade or so to build sufficient audiences in China to fill classical music concerts on a regular basis. In the meantime, many Chinese musicians will find more lucrative jobs in their adopted lands.

Mr. Hu, a Central Conservatory graduate who earned a master's degree at Juilliard, ponders the brain-drain question. "On the one hand, if they go to a conservatory like Juilliard, that's a blessing," says the conductor. "On the other hand, the People's Republic of China spends a lot of money to have a young music student go from middle school to senior high. By the time the student is ready to become a young star at the college level in China, he or she may be a star at Juilliard instead."

Ms. Jepson writes about classical music for the Journal.

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