

interview conducted & edited by
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*Qin Qian and Kurt Jung perform at Mid-Autumn Festival.
Photo: Joan May Cordova*

Why wouldn't you be learning this?

a conversation with Kurt Jung

KURT JUNG has performed Chinese and other world musics in the Philadelphia area for more than 20 years. In September 2009 he discussed his passion for Chinese traditional instruments, especially those played and learned in a community setting. His main interest is music “of the people,” created by and for “regular people” who love music and learn it from one another, above storefronts in Chinatown or in local parks or living rooms. Kurt’s family, originally from the Guangdong (Canton) area of southern China, goes back several generations in Philadelphia’s Chinatown. He first studied the erhu (two-string stick fiddle) and yangqin in the 1980s, learning from older men in Chinatown. (He also plays Western violin and Celtic harp.) The yangqin, his instrument of choice, is a delicate-sounding stringed instrument like a hammered dulcimer with origins in Central Asia and the Middle East. It likely came to China along Silk Road trade routes. The yangqin can provide both melodic doubling or chordal support for other stringed instruments played in small ensembles.

Discussing his interest in “world music,” Kurt responds: “Why wouldn’t you be learning this?” “World music” is shorthand for folk, traditional, and popular musics from anywhere, as well as non-Western art musics. Kurt’s question prods us to think about what we need to know to be

culturally literate people. This is the question of the century for music education and research at all levels.

Western music has affected almost every corner of the globe. Today, some knowledge of Chinese music in all its historical, regional, and stylistic vastness should be near the top of everyone’s agenda. The global study of music exposes the falsehood of stereotypes about regional or national identities. One discovers that exchanges of ideas and adaptation are the rule and not the exception when it comes to culture. Look below the surface of almost any musical instrument identified with a particular region or country, and you will usually discover that it came from somewhere else—and even that “somewhere else” was never culturally homogeneous. Kurt and his erhu-playing colleague Qin Qian are resources for Chinese music and its history right here in our region.

KJ: I was born in Philadelphia. My parents were living in Chinatown at the time [the mid-1960s]. I’m number four of five kids. They used to have a store. My great-grandfather [Jung Sing Lee] started Hong Fook Incorporated. It was on 10th Street, where the On Lok House is now, the senior home, and the hairdresser, Rainbow. It was like a general store. Back in the old days, in Chinatown you didn’t have the big supermarkets that you have now; it was all tiny little stores.

My grandfather [Jung Kay] sold

vegetables; he had the general store for a little while. He dealt with John Wanamaker. My grandfather would write all the letters [to China] for him. A lot of people used to meet up on the second floor of our store every Sunday to play these instruments, to play this music. Most of them were laundrymen. At that time the U.S. forbade them from bringing their wives over, and they would send money back to the old country because the economy there was so bad at the time. We’re talking right after the Depression.

They used to play a lot of traditional folk songs from what they call the Guangdong area; “Canton” was the British name for the city of Guangdong. Most of the people that came over to the Chinatowns in New York, San Francisco, and Philadelphia are from that area, from the south. That’s why the predominant language is Cantonese among the older generations. A lot of people from Hong Kong came over. It wasn’t till much later that the Mandarin-speaking Chinese came over. And now we’re getting people from Fujian province.

My grandparents, they spoke Cantonese, and my grandmother spoke an off-dialect of Cantonese. I don’t know if you understand how the dialects work in Chinese. It’s one written language, but they say the words differently. The dialects end up having their own flavors.

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The Cantonese-speaking ones and the Mandarin people—they're so off that they can't understand each other. They usually call that "the duck talking to the chicken."

ES: Did your grandfather play music when people came over?

KJ: He actually sang—he would sing the falsetto voices of the Cantonese opera. He used to know a lot. He would come in, they would play mah jong, they would eat lunch, and they would sit around in a circle and play these musics. Some of the people knew how to read the music; others did not. Some of it was done by rote memory. There was one guy that just bought a guitar and restrung it like the Chinese instruments, and was able to play it like that. You kind of just improvise on what you don't have.

ES: Did your parents play music or sing?

KJ: No, my father doesn't play Chinese music. They learned to play Western music. My father plays the guitar. Each one of us, when we were growing up, they had us play different instruments. My sister played the clarinet, I played the violin, and my brother played the sax.

We learned in school. I had private lessons. But I learned all my Chinese music from the Overseas Chinese Association. The older people that were there, they were trying to pass that on to the younger people. The people that I learned from are no longer living. I was in college when I met all these people, and they're no longer here. It was really hard not to have anyone to play these instruments with, but they passed it down through the folk method. They used to have a band, too; we used to have an orchestra here. But all these people are gone.

I started out on the erhu. Everyone starts out with that because it's the easier one; you can get it. I really liked trying something different, though. That's why I moved on to the yangqin, because it's more like a piano, it had more notes to play with, and it was a lot more

fun to play with those instruments. But they go together, the yangqin and the erhu. There's hundreds and hundreds of pieces that were written for those two instruments, and those two instruments go well together for chamber music.

So it really worked out well when I met Qin Qian. Her family is from the Guangxi province. My family's from Guangdong. They're right next to each other, so she can actually speak the dialects that we speak as well as Mandarin. She's very well known throughout the whole world, and in China. Her husband is from Philadelphia. He brought her back. It was just a stroke of luck that we met each other at a concert.

I do know a little bit how to play the moon guitar [yueqin], and the zhongruan—it's mostly a bass instrument. You hit the notes one at a time, and it just keeps the time. Of course, I don't play it as much because we don't have the players to play Chinese music. So most of the time I just concentrate on the yangqin. But I do know how to play the violin, and that was actually my first instrument. And later I took up the Irish harp, the Celtic harp. I always liked the harp. One day I met a man in Audubon, New Jersey, who teaches the Irish harp. I contacted him, and I started learning. We became very good friends.

ES: Did you go to school and high school in Philadelphia?

KJ: I grew up in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. My parents moved out of Chinatown—only because of the housing. I don't know if you know the history of Chinatown, but we're always fighting for housing, and there's just no room. We go back to Chinatown every weekend to visit family. My wife's family lived down in Chinatown, also. I play the guitar at the local Catholic church [Holy Redeemer at 10th and Vine streets] over here every week, and I direct the music there. Mostly it's folk musicians. That's why I was so excited about the FACTS school [Folk Arts – Cultural Treasures

Charter School]. Because in traditional education, you only learn about Western composers: Bach, Beethoven, Mozart. I think I know enough about them, took enough courses in them. I took a course in world music, but I wish there was a little more in schools—I mean, how many African composers, how many South American composers do you know? There's just so much more out there. Why wouldn't you be learning this? We're a country of multiculturals. Why wouldn't you be learning about Jewish klezmer music or some other type of music? I'm glad the school districts are moving away from the Shakespeare type of thing. I mean, it's great to know about Shakespeare, but there's just so much more out there . . .

ES: We should learn about Western music as just one of the world's traditions.

KJ: It's not just Western music; it's a certain type of Western music. We're missing all the Bulgarian music, music from Hungary, Romania, the gypsy music, or Turkish music. There's just so much more out there than what kids are learning in school, and the traditional do-re-mi, the Western scale. I'd rather have my children learn about Latin rhythms and something different. You know? It's like eating meat and potatoes all the time, when there are so many different flavors and foods out there that you could be trying—learning about other people, where they're from, their traditions, their culture, their art.

What about the music of the people? That's what fascinates me. A lot of folk music—it's usually played by people who are ordinary citizens. They aren't musicians who are playing for a living, but they're working in the fields or something. This is their form of entertainment; this is the way they express themselves. That, to me, is so much more than the average composer telling the world,

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“This is how it should be done.”

I'd like to see if I could pass that on. There are some Chinese music programs within the city now, but it'd be nice to teach kids who really want to learn. And there are things in the folk traditions they don't do in the classical traditions. There is such rigidity, especially in Chinese music. There's the village music, and then there's the music that came out of the imperial court, which was so rigid, and you have to play it a certain way.

I've got a lot of friends in the different venues; I go for different types of music. I play with a string quartet. An old violin teacher of mine called me up and said, “Do you want to play?” We performed at a couple weddings, and that was really nice. Then I have another set of friends who just play Irish folk music. We would go to the Irish Center [in Mount Airy], and just play Irish folk music, or play at the ceilis [informal gatherings of Irish musicians, dancers, singers, and storytellers]. I have other friends who play Appalachian music and bluegrass, and they meet in a little gazebo in Medford. Anyone can go to these things. You bring your instrument, and you start playing. They go around the circle, people pick out songs, and they just play. Other than that, we play in our homes. Sometimes we play colonial music—every once in a while, I'll play harp at the old City Tavern. Then, the whole Chinese world, where I play with Qin Qian. I'm usually very busy, along with my church music. It's become all-consuming, but it keeps my fingers going. Now that I have kids, it's a little harder.

ES: When you were learning the traditional Chinese instruments, who were your most important teachers?

KJ: The president of the Overseas Chinese Association at that time was Johnny Kuo. I don't what his Chinese name was—everyone knew him as Johnny. He was the type of person who wouldn't charge you any money. It wasn't like taking lessons.

You'd call him up, and say, “Can I take lessons?” And he'd say, “No, no, come on over, I'll show you.” And he'd show you, and you'd sit there. He would start out with the most simple of traditional melodies, and you would just listen, and you'd do what he did. You'd go back and forth. Eventually he started giving me sheet music and I'd learn from that. It was a traditional style of teaching.

ES: Have you gone back to China?

KJ: Yes, I have. I have a set of first cousins over there. My father's oldest brother had a family in Hong Kong, which is now China. They decided to stay after the takeover in '97. That's where I get my supplies from—it's really hard to get a lot of the things here. But I did get my instruments I have a collection of them at home.

ES: When you were over there, did you get a chance to see some performances?

KJ: Everywhere we went, they'd have these little bands. For some reason, whenever they saw Americans, they would start playing “Auld Lang Syne.” I don't know why they'd do that. I just laughed! There's so much good Chinese music out there, and they're playing “Auld Lang Syne.” I must have gone to three different cities where that happened to me.

I went over to them and said, “Can't you play something a little different? Play some Chinese music!” Then they played some stuff. But I did go see an opera, Peking opera. That fascinated me. The opera musicians are not like your classical music musicians. They're as folk as you get. They know the opera; there's no written music. They all learn by ear. They know the whole opera, and they play it on these different-size string instruments. They're similar to the erhu, but they're smaller. The instruments would mimic the falsetto voice. It wasn't till I understood what was going on that it became very interesting. It's like Italian opera. Most people listen to it, and think, “Oh, this is boring!” But when you

really understand the libretto, you understand what's going on, you understand what they're trying to do—then you start to hear certain sounds, and you look for certain things that most people don't look at. That really did fascinate me. I love the Chinese opera.

It's only the older generation that really enjoys it. The work that it takes to put together an opera, just to get the costumes, to get the faces painted, and get everything done, it takes a long time. It's not easy to do. My father-in-law loves it; he'll sit there for hours and watch Chinese opera. But the younger generation—they would never listen to that. That'd be very uncool to listen to.

There was a history [of Chinese folk music], at least in Chinatown. There are still some groups out there that play on their own. There are people who play in their houses. There's a man who owns a pharmacy up on Arch Street. I knew the lady that used to live above him. She would hear the Chinese instruments going at nighttime, so she knows that he plays. But they don't perform; they play for themselves at home.

ES: Among the Chinese folk musics that you play, do you have favorite songs or favorite styles?

KJ: Look in my book [Traditional Chinese Music for the Western Musician]. There's one piece that we play all the time. It's called “The Butterfly Lovers.” That is more of a modern piece. That was composed for Western orchestra.

The big thing in China now—there's a change, the merging of the two instruments [erhu and violin]. Yo-Yo Ma with the Silk Road Ensemble—I don't know if you ever heard any of the stuff that he does, but he's merged them. That's going on with Chinese music: the merging of the two sets of instruments to create different sounds. They are also teaching Western and Eastern music in schools in Taiwan and China. You'll have a band with a cello, a pipa [lute], a guzheng [board

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*I combs her hair
Most every night.*

*In the full moon I dreams
That I's a hoodoo.
And I takes dem fallen
 strands and winds a trick
That makes her set me free.
But still I combs her hair
Most every night.
Gently I ease the tangles.
Gently I combs her hair.*

*I wears her scent
From chin to foot.
Serving all day the white folk
Seeps in my every root.
I wears her scent
From head to toe.
Blind man to tell between us
For him be hard to know.
I wears her scent.
I wears her scent
From head to toe.*

*When I be's wid my man
He treats me cold.
He turn his head away
And say I smells like
 massa's hound dog.
On a stormy day,
I scrub my limbs 'til knuckles fray*

*But missy's scent
No missy's scent
Don't go away.*

Reflections

Joyce Wilkerson: I think one of the struggles working with the President's House and wanting to focus on the lives of the enslaved Africans, was trying to figure out what they thought— why they did what they did. And so, for me, this is very powerful, because you know you don't know. And to have people actually go into their lives and think and try to figure it out is a real gift. We've worked with the historians and just have the tiniest bit of real, hardcore, documented evidence. So it's a gift to have you really explore it for us.

Dottie Wilkie: I mean, the last song you sung, I know you put me there. It put me there. You know, I felt that. And the last piece that he did, the last song, "Destiny," I feel that also. And the music— "I'm free, but am I free? Where am I?"

Joyce Wilkerson: And then, with John's artwork—there's the role of place, and how important is

the foundation? And is it the end, or is it just a jumping off point for understanding what actually happened at the house? And so, to have it filled in kind of puts the place in perspective. Having John just use the place as a starting point, and filling in some of what happened is very powerful.

Germaine Ingram: That's one of our motivations here— that giving people this additional window, the window of art, as a way into this topic, will inspire them to learn more, to think more, to consider what their individual responsibility is with regard to this significant body of history that was covered for so long.

Bobby Zankel: We're all abstract artists. And on the one hand we have the responsibility to tell a story with integrity, but yet, it's not going to be a period piece or a historical drama. We hope that the emotions and the feelings and the content will create and generate a feeling. It might make you just want to go and read a book about it, just because you might've loved the piece. You didn't know what it had to do with the President's House,

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zither], and a trumpet, or whatever. When the Chieftains went to China, they took Irish instruments and played along with the Chinese instruments. They realized that they were the same—the two sets of instruments had very similar timbres, and they played the same keys, D and A. The erhu, the two strings are the D and A strings; it's the two middle strings of the violin.

ES: The contemporary music conservatories in China are relatively new, aren't they? I mean, 50 or 75 years ago, you didn't go to conservatory to learn erhu, did you?

KJ: It depends. There was formal education in music in China at one time. Under the communist rule, when they destroyed everything they

thought was bourgeois, the fancier instruments were considered the instruments of the rich, and they destroyed them. Had it not been for Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, where a lot of musicians escaped to—they preserved that culture...

ES: Especially the court music, would you say?

KJ: Yes, the court music. So the more expensive instruments, the one that Anna Chan plays, the guzheng—that's a court instrument. That was originally developed by monks and brought into the imperial court very early. There's a little bit about that history [in my book]. The erhu was not in the imperial court during the earlier times. As a matter of fact, they thought it was a toy [laughs].

That particular instrument came out of the folk arena. If you go to China, you'll see people—the only way I can describe is by comparing it to a guitar—you'll see people in the villages there, sitting in the park, with one erhu playing and people singing along with it. I also saw that in Beijing. That certainly didn't come from formal education on that particular instrument. But it eventually entered into the imperial court, and that's when you got the blend of the folk and the slow imperial court music. The instrument I play didn't enter in until the 1600s. That's pretty late for

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Chinese history. It actually came out of Persia and the Middle East. I don't know if it was a folk instrument—I guess it would have been because they brought them through the Silk Road.

The instrument I have is a full concert-size yangqin. The ones they used to play are much smaller. Those are the ones they used to play above the store, these tiny high-pitched instruments.

A whole set of music was developed for all the instruments. Now there's more formal education. In Taiwan they have formal training. I don't know how long ago it started, maybe 20 years ago. Not too many people were playing those instruments, though, even in China. In China, most of the focus was on the Western instruments, but there's been a revival. Everyone wants to go back to that root now. You see a lot more people playing Chinese instruments now and having formal training. But the communists had to put the universities back together and try to invite the people from Taiwan and Hong Kong to teach there. A famous artist here in Philadelphia—Shen Li—was asked to go back to China to teach, but he's just so embittered because they killed off all those painters that he wouldn't go back. He's one of the last to teach that particular style of painting. Some musicians went back and did teach because they wanted to preserve the culture. If they didn't, they knew that it wouldn't survive in China.

You hear the orchestras now playing a lot of Cantonese folk songs. They're just grabbing a lot of different music, anything, just to get something different out there. You can even see it in the recordings they're putting out now. Maybe 20 years ago, no one thought about putting that music out; they were considered folk songs. Most people were putting together the particular classical pieces that are associated with each instrument. The erhu has a whole set of music that's associated with it. The guzheng has a set of music associated with it, and the yangqin, same thing. But now you hear them playing different

versions of it. What used to be played on the erhu, they'll play it on the yangqin now, using that same theme and melody, and doing some different things. Otherwise, you would have the same recording over and over again, like the same people playing the same classical music over and over again. I noticed that in the recordings I got back in the early days when I was learning about all this stuff, you would just hear some of the pieces that were very classical—that's it, that's how you play it. Now it's all over the place.

ES: The erhu seems so versatile. It seems like you could play anything on it.

KJ: Every once in a while Qin Qian goes out to the jazz clubs. She starts playing jazz on erhu. Her husband happens to be Jewish; she would go to the synagogue and play Jewish music there. On the erhu. She plays Irish folk music, Irish jigs and reels, on the erhu too. But that's what makes it a lot of fun to play along with her, because she's able to cross those boundaries, whereas other players are more classically oriented. They play the music one way, and that's the way it is. She has the nerve to bring her erhu and start playing along. We've done some things together too. I would get my harp out, and she would just say, "Here, teach me how to play this."

ES: What is it like playing Chinese music for different audiences?

KJ: In Chinatown they will know if you're playing a wrong note or not. They will know, or they will know if it's a variation, so you can't fake your way through it. Whereas an audience who doesn't know the music, if you hit a wrong note, they don't know the difference. But those people in Chinatown—we make sure we practice really well so it's all there, especially in the more classical type of pieces. A lot of times, over at our church, we incorporate the Chinese instruments into the services. Some people are shocked. It's a Chinese Catholic church—it's all Chinese. We have Masses in Mandarin, in Cantonese, and in English. I don't play for all the services, just for the English

one. It's a different type of music; even Chinese religious music is different.

Half of my family's Protestant, and the other half's Catholic . . . the other important part is traditional Chinese folk religion. My in-laws follow the traditional Chinese folk religion. So we get exposure to all of them. A lot of these traditions from the folk religion are now incorporated into the Mass and into the Catholic tradition. As long as it doesn't go against the teachings, they don't care. We do all those things, like the ancestor veneration.

ES: How do you incorporate the Chinese traditional instruments? Do you play European-style hymns?

KJ: No, no, no, they're all Chinese hymns. They were written in China. I guess you could play European-style hymns with Chinese words. We do sing those things. But now they're actually composed by Chinese composers. Some are from back before the communist government took over. They still sing those hymns. The church was persecuted. It's still persecuted over there at this point. They held on to a lot of those hymns that were written either by the missionaries or by the Chinese—but it's interesting that they still play those, and then they have the more modern ones that are written now. They use the Chinese scale. So the music is different; you can hear the Chinese scale.

They actually go to a seven-note scale now. The pentatonic scale was the original scale that they used in the imperial court system. They ended up going to a seven-note scale, but there's a flatted seventh, so it's just a little different. And you hear the fourths and thirds that you don't hear in Western music. You would say, "Boy, that does sound Chinese." The melody is very Chinese. And then they're mixing some of the Western scale in there—what would make sense in a Western scale. We sometimes use Chinese

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instruments as well as the organ, or we use the Chinese flute or that type of thing.

ES: How old is that church?

KJ: [Holy Redeemer] was started in 1941. The story goes that Cardinal Paul Yü Pin was kicked out by the Japanese. He was the bishop of Nanking. He was very good friends with Cardinal Dougherty, who was the bishop of Philadelphia at that time. Yü Pin had nowhere to go; there were all these Chinese people here; and they said, “Why aren’t you converting all these people?” In honor of Cardinal Yü Pin, Cardinal Dougherty gave his 50th Jubilee money to build our church. The original church was modeled after a Chinese mission church. The stained glass windows all have Chinese saints, and everything has to do with China. The Christ figure that’s in there is Chinese. Unfortunately, it’s not the way it looked originally. I don’t like the fact that they changed it so much—I sort of like that old feel, you know?

My parents still go back there. The Chinese Christian Church, the local Protestant church, is the one that the other half of the community goes to, so we have a choice. We also have two temples in Chinatown. There’s a temple over on Race Street, and there’s one on 10th Street, but you can’t tell because it looks like a regular house. Monks live at the one on Race Street. That is an interesting set of music, too. It’s this meditative hum, and they have these different cadences. Probably some people feel that it’s

boring, but I find it to be fascinating.

Chinatown’s very small in Philadelphia—we’ve been boxed in. Politically, we haven’t been able to expand. We only have about 200 votes in the city elections, so they don’t really care about us. But amazingly, with only 200 votes and very little political clout, we’ve been able to ward off certain things just by the mere pressure we’ve exerted and the mere publicity of certain injustices. That’s how it’s done. AAU [Asian Americans United] has done an excellent job where most Chinese people would just shut their mouths. They’ve actually transcended that culture and were able to speak up and say, “This is wrong!”

It all started with the city trying to put [the Vine Street Expressway] through the church—our church. And we fought that off. They compromised by putting it underneath. When they built the Gallery, they cut us off in the south, so we couldn’t expand that way. They also cut us off by the Metropolitan Hospital, east, so we couldn’t build out that way. The other side is the Convention Center, and we can’t build out that way, so the only way to go is north, and they were going to put the stadium north, to box us in. But we fought that off. The original federal prison was supposed to go up in Chinatown too, so we fought that off also. Chinatown has a turbulent history of dealing with the city.

It’s sad. But they’re also doing it to other communities, too.

Resources for further exploration

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Online:

The Wesleyan University Virtual Instrument Museum is a source for all the instruments mentioned in this interview and more: <http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/>

The Grinnell College Music Instrument Collection is another resource, for example, see Erhu: http://finearts.grinnell.edu/FMPPro?-db=world_music_room.fp5&-lay=entry&-sortfield=name&-sortfield=inventory_id&use_on_web=yes&collection=world&category=c_hordophone&-max=10&-skip=18&-find=&-Format=/instruments/format_files/world/inst_record.html&-max=1&-skip=18# (Or: <http://tinyurl.com/ydv88j3>)

Philadelphia Chinatown’s history: <http://www2.hsp.org/exhibits/Balch%20exhibits/chinatown/chinatown.html>



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