



*Wu Peter Tang playing erhu. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

**interview conducted & edited by  
Elizabeth Sayre**

*"This is such a beautiful thing to do:"*

## Wu Peter Tang's music

WU PETER TANG, master erhu player, has lived in the Philadelphia area since the late 1990s. He was conservatory-trained in northeastern China and also taught by his father, a well-known specialist in Chinese traditional instruments. The Chinese Revolution altered folk and traditional music education in China in striking ways. Before 1949 the designation of "professional musician" meant that one was a relatively low-status performer for hire; after the Revolution, musicians came to be considered highly trained and respectable artists.<sup>1</sup> The history of the erhu, and Peter's musical history, reflect these changes. The erhu itself is a deceptively simple instrument. This two-string stick "fiddle" apparently derives from instruments introduced into China over the last 2,000 years. Its hexagonal sound box is usually covered with snakeskin. In the past its strings were made of silk, although steel strings (sometimes wrapped with nylon) are commonplace today. In contrast to the Western violin's bow, the erhu's bow fits between the strings, and the player bows horizontally, with one surface of the bow on the front string and the other on the back string. The erhu can, and does, play any type of melodic music from anywhere in the world. As a fretless instrument, it can play in any tuning with all the shading and sophisticated ornamentation that may be required. In September 2009 Peter talked with me about his life in music.

WPT: My name is Wu Peter Tang. I am from northeast China. I am music director for Peter Tang's Chinese Music Ensemble. We have introduced and played Chinese music

in the greater Philadelphia area for the past ten years. I am also the music consultant for the Philadelphia School District, and in charge of the Chinese music program for three public schools: Key, Kirkbride and McCall Schools. My main instrument is the erhu.

ES: Is it true that the erhu was a folk instrument?

WPT: Yes, the erhu is a traditional folk instrument with a long history in China. The erhu became a major string instrument just in the last 300 years. The plucked string instruments were invented first, and then later on—about 300, 400 years ago—the erhu and the string instruments took the leading part. They became the major instruments.

ES: There was a time when people didn't learn the erhu in a conservatory or a school, right?

WPT: Yes, After the People's Republic of China was founded, the government did a lot of preserving. They really put a lot of money into it. The people just love this instrument. Actually, if we talk about how the erhu instrument moved from the street to the Conservatory, we need to introduce two famous musicians. One is Liu Tianhua [1895–1932], a top musician in Chinese music. He also learned Western music. He played almost every kind of Chinese instrument. He wrote famous compositions for the erhu and some pieces for pipa [Chinese lute]. His biggest contribution was to collect many traditional erhu pieces and then rearrange and edit them for systematized music teaching and practice.

The other one was Abing [1893–1950].<sup>2</sup> In China, everybody knows

Abing as a great blind traditional musician who composed some famous erhu pieces. He composed the erhu classic called "Moon Reflection in Second Spring." Abing was an orphan. He was raised in a temple. Someone from the temple taught him a little bit of music and he really liked it. Then he went wandering the streets, performing to make a living. The people loved his music. But it's hard to make a living when you play on the streets. He was really sick and became blind. But his music was so good! Despite all the hardships he endured, he still composed beautiful music. Today, Abing's music is among the best-known music taught in Chinese music conservatories.

ES: So, Peter, how old were you when you started playing?

WPT: I started learning from my father when I was six years old. My father, Yu Bin Tang, was an important person in guiding me into the erhu. He is a highly respected Chinese classical musician, the former Director of the Traditional Music Department of Shenyang Music Conservatory.

ES: Did you learn to read notation from the beginning?

WPT: From the beginning, yes. My father taught me in the same way that other students from the music conservatory learned. It is very systematized. In China right now, they have the same degree examinations as in some Western music. They give you certificates at certain levels. There are nine levels of erhu. I went to music middle school for four years. And then I went to the conservatory for four years. Then when I graduated, I worked for the Beijing Central

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Singing and Dancing Ensemble under the Central Government in Beijing.

**ES:** You worked for them as a musician? For how long?

**WPT:** Yes, as a professional musician for four years. During that time, I toured the country giving performances. Sometimes the group also toured overseas. After that I went to Eastern Europe for a couple of years.

**ES:** Where did you live?

**WPT:** In Romania, for almost six years. I played music, and I had good relations with George Enescu Music Institute. I played with the Radio Symphony of Central Romania. I played the concert to celebrate Hong Kong going back to China in 1997.

**ES:** During your education, did you have to learn other instruments and Western instruments also?

**WPT:** Yes, I learned piano, and also I play the string bass.

**ES:** And you had to learn Western theory, Western harmony?

**WPT:** Yes, in most conservatories we learn the same system. In the Chinese conservatories, we use the Russian system. It's just a little bit different.

**ES:** How do you think things were different for you as a musician than they were for your father? Do you have different taste in music than your father's generation? Are there different things that you like?

**WPT:** Each generation's music is different because the society is always changing. The erhu music has been changed and improved in a very dynamic way in its playing technique, music arrangement and performance. Before, they would have to sit down to play the erhu. But now people could be standing up, and they move and play at the same time. It's the same with the other traditional instruments. Young girls are playing and dancing at the same time. Before, on the stage you just interpreted the music. Now they also try to have more communicating with the audience. They try to influence the young audience.

**ES:** Tell me a little bit about the Chinese orchestra.

**WPT:** It's a really big group. The bigger ones can be the same size as the Philadelphia Orchestra. Chinese instruments are divided into four categories, and the whole orchestra system—the Chinese traditional music system—is very mature: the plucked

strings; the bowed strings, like the erhu; the woodwinds and the percussion. When you say “the bowed strings,” it's not only erhu we're talking about. There's gaohu, which is higher pitched. And also there's zhonghu, which is lower pitched. In the string family, they have all different kinds. But most are related to the erhu. The erhu is the major one. I think one difference is that in the Chinese orchestra, they have the plucked strings, but the only similar thing in Western music is the harp. They do not have the same kind of plucked strings. It's like you press the string, and then you vibrate it. The Chinese orchestra also uses a string bass—the same as the Western bass

The percussion section includes traditional Chinese drums and cymbals as well as other different kinds of percussion. And, then, of course, the woodwinds are the bamboo flute and the sheng [a multi-pitched set of bamboo pipes with reeds]—the traditional Chinese woodwind instruments. They are made out of natural materials. The scale is pretty much similar, but the instruments are totally different. It's all Chinese traditional instruments. The Chinese instruments were passed on for generations and generations. There are some Chinese people who have wanted to alter them, but once they did that, it never sounded the same. You just can't change it.

**ES:** What kind of changes do you mean?

**WPT:** For example, the long bridge instrument, the guzheng [board zither], has a pentatonic tuning. That's a beautiful instrument. But it's very hard to change keys. For example, a piece of music I may decide to play in G, and in the middle we change to D, and in the end we go to E major. But the guzheng only plays one key. A lot of people have tried to do something with this, like with the harp.

**ES:** Create something so you can change keys quickly?

**WPT:** Yes. But for Chinese musical instruments it's very difficult to change anything. The tone color is changed. People say: what the ancestors pass along to you, you just can not change it.

**ES:** What's some of your favorite music, your favorite compositions, or your favorite styles of Chinese music?

**WPT:** There are many different styles of Chinese music, My favorites are “silk and bamboo music” (Jiangnan sizhu) and Can-

tonese music which uses the higher-pitched erhu (the gaohu). Silk and bamboo music is a famous musical style from China. “Jiangnan” means the area around Shanghai. “Si” is silk. “Zhu” is bamboo. If you say “Jiangnan sizhu,” I think most Chinese people, they know what you are talking about. Cantonese music is Guangdong yinyue. “Guangdong” means Canton. “Yinyue” is music.

**ES:** You came to New York first, in '99, and you came there from Romania. Tell me how things were for you in New York.

**WPT:** It's the same problems as any people coming to this country. All the culture shock and difficulties, and how to make a living being a musician. I tried to think about how I could make a living in this country. When I would go in the subway, the train station, I saw a lot of musicians. Some of them are really professional musicians, I can tell. They make a living. They take everything people give them, and they play wonderful music. Even American musicians—it's hard for them to make a living. I'm very lucky to have moved to Philadelphia area. People have started to recognize me, and they love my music, and my group is getting bigger. I have a lot of performances each year. In 2004, I received the Pew Fellowship in Arts.

**ES:** When you were in New York, did you do other work besides music?

**WPT:** Yes, I was learning to make Japanese food, sushi. I had to pay to learn; you even had to pay for lunch. They call it sushi school, but actually you just work for the restaurant. And they teach you. But that's OK! My first job was as a Japanese sushi chef. They make food more like art. My hands are pretty skillful but the only thing I was worried about was that this kind of job involved using the knife very often—and if I cut my fingers then I could not play the erhu anymore!

**ES:** When did you start teaching in the Philadelphia schools?

**WPT:** The Chinese music program in Philadelphia School District started in early 2005. The purpose of the program is to let the young kids know about not only Western culture. We also wanted them to be exposed to different cultures and values as well. Through learning about music, they can fulfill this goal. We started with two schools at first; then later McCall School has joined the program too. It was

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very difficult to set up at the beginning. We opened the doors to all kinds of students interested to learn. Most kids, they never saw this kind of instruments before, never even heard of it. The first day when I tried to introduce those instruments, they said, “What’s this? Those are instruments? For music?” But after some period time of learning, the students are able to have the chance to participate in many community performances, such as the Asian American Heritage Festival and Chinese New Year Celebrations each year. One of my students Daniel Jiang, was awarded the first place in his instrument category in the 2009 After School Talent Show at the Kimmel Center, in a program organized by Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative. I feel very happy when my students are able to achieve. I am very grateful to the School District’s Music Department to be able to have such a meaningful program for the students. And the school principals and staff have also been giving me great support.

**ES:** Other than their not being familiar with the instruments, do you feel there’s any difference between teaching American kids and teaching Chinese kids in China?

**WPT:** It’s a lot different because the educational style is different. Chinese people, when they make a decision to let their kids learn something, they really want them to be number one, to be professional. But in America, people care more about the experience rather than becoming professional. For example, I saw that my students carry a lot of things on the same day: Chinese violin, Western violin, flute, and drumsticks. Oh my God, how many things do they learn? You have to practice. You have to go back home and practice. In America, they don’t do it that way. I guess the mentality is different. Chinese parents really want to emphasize the principle, the discipline of the kids. They think that when you learn music, when you learn something, it’s also that you’re learning how to be a person. It’s not only playing. Your

teacher is like another father. They teach you not only the skills of music, but they also teach you values, how to be a human being, how to have good discipline, and all those things. With the public school students another thing is very difficult. They make their own decisions about learning Chinese music. If they don’t want to learn, nobody can push them. So I try to have good relations and encourage the students. It’s also the lack of practice that makes it difficult, because they can’t bring the big instruments home. In learning music, the beginning is interesting. In the middle, it’s boring and hard.

**ES:** And then later it gets interesting again.

**WPT:** Yeah, yeah. But kids are kids.

**ES:** Tell me about your group.

**WPT:** It’s the Peter Tang Chinese Music Ensemble. I feel very lucky that I have met other professional musician friends and that we have a chance to play together. These musicians have given me a lot of support. Some are my coworkers from Beijing, the top musicians from there. We made a CD together after I got the Pew Fellowship.

**ES:** Have you done any new types of collaborations with other ensembles or other musicians?

**WPT:** I have played some Chinese violin with Western violin. We played a Western piece, like the Czardas.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes for the school programs we have to do a combined piece. We use Chinese instruments to play Western music. Sometimes Chinese musicians play with a Western group. I have tried this a lot. I played “Moon Reflection” with Central High School’s orchestra from Philadelphia. It’s a Western orchestra and they used my erhu as the solo. I also did a pre-concert series for Tan Dun’s visit to the Philadelphia Orchestra. He has a very famous concerto, *The Map*. When the Philadelphia Orchestra played *The Map*, we did a pre-concert series at the Kimmel Center. Now I am much more into teaching. I want to pass on my skills and specialties to

the younger generations in America. In order for me to do that, it’s good to learn more about the education system here, and about music.

**ES:** The Chinese, or Chinese American, students here—do you feel like they have a special relationship to the music? Are they interested in learning about their heritage?

**WPT:** Yes. And a lot of times their parents like them to play because that will bring back their memories. They don’t want their kids to adopt 100% Western culture. They want to distinguish their traditions as well, so they really like that.

**ES:** Tell me the three schools where you’re working.

**WPT:** Kirkbride, McCall, and Key School. Philadelphia is a special area, especially for culture, and also for multicultural arts and I felt very lucky and grateful that many people have been giving support to me and to Chinese music. But I have a dream for the future. Now China has become an important country, with relationships with the United States, and I think a lot of people want to know about Chinese culture. Maybe we can make a Chinese music school. There are a lot of kung fu and language schools. I think if we added Chinese music school it would be such a beautiful thing to do. I would say it’s a good thing to pass it on...

## Resources for further exploration

Lau, Frederick. 2008. *Music in China: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Stock, Jonathan. 1996. *Musical Creativity in Twentieth-Century China: Abing, His Music, and Its Changing Meanings*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.

Wu Peter Tang’s website:  
[www.easternmelody.com](http://www.easternmelody.com)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lau, *Music in China*. Pp. 22-27.

<sup>2</sup> See Lau, p. 26-27, 48-49, who points out that scholars differ regarding Abing’s story. Also see Stock.

<sup>3</sup> A composition for violin by Vittorio Monti, based on the Hungarian national dance.