

Musical Encounters in the Wide Alley

Erik Griswold and Vanessa Tomlinson

In the inner suburban ring of Chengdu lies “The Wide Alley” — or *Kuan Xiangzi* — one of two historic laneways dating to the Qing Dynasty (AD 1644-1911). In the ten years since we first visited The Wide Alley, we’ve watched it undergo a vast transformation from neglected treasure to major tourist destination. Similarly, we’ve witnessed (and indeed, taken part in) a resurgence of interest in traditional Sichuan music. Issues of modernisation, authenticity, neglect and recovery of culture have coloured all of our experiences in China, and influenced the ongoing collaborations between Clocked Out and musicians and dancers from Sichuan Province. We conceived our latest project — titled “The Wide Alley” — in 2007 when the street was being disassembled brick by brick, in preparation for the makeover. After touring the work in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, The Wide Alley will now return home for a series of street performances in February 2011.

The Wide Alley (TWA) is a musical and cultural meeting of five Australian and five Sichuan musicians. Commissioned by the Queensland Music Festival in 2007, and supported by the Asialink Foundation, it builds upon a series of collaborations and exchanges dating back to 1999. Earlier collaborations include “Chengdu Streetsongs” (1999), a quartet of Zou Xiangping, electronic musician Harry Castle, and the authors; and “Sichuan Fantasy” (2002), a vastly bigger project of seven musicians, four choreographers, fifteen dancers, elaborate costumes, lighting and backdrops at Chengdu Arts Centre. Each of the collaborations have involved research into a variety of Sichuan musical traditions, and creative recontextualisation into new hybrid works. Many of our first impressions of Chengdu have made it into TWA, evolving over several years of workshopping and collaborative performances in Chengdu and Australia.

The ten musicians in the ensemble all bring unique skills in a variety of traditions, including Sichuan Opera, Qin Yin, jazz, and free improvisation, and all have some

previous experience with intercultural collaboration. Trumpet player Peter Knight and Trombonist Adrian Sheriff have both lead intercultural ensembles in their own right; bassist Robert Davidson, leader of contemporary music ensemble Topology, has been influenced Indian classical traditions in his own work. The Chinese musicians, vocalist Tian Linping, bamboo flautist Shi Lei, erhu (Chinese two-stringed fiddle) player Zhou Yu, and percussionist Zhong Kaizhi are all leading specialists in their own traditions, but also bring their experience with improvisation and western music to the project. Composer Zou Xiangping is well versed in both

traditional Chinese and contemporary western music, and the authors have been engaged in the process of intercultural study and collaboration since their meeting.

Each partner in the cross-cultural collaboration acts as a mirror, reflecting aspects each other's culture. With the help of Zou Xiangping as our intrepid guide, we've been able to reflect our outsider impressions of Sichuan culture back to the local people, and at the same time play a small part in preserving and disseminating the local traditions to an international stage. While we created a link to contemporary western traditions of contemporary music, jazz, and free improvisation, Zou Xiangping guided us into the worlds of Sichuan Opera, Chengdu street music, and Jinqian Ban.

In TWA, aim to create a dialog between Western and Chinese music. The performance is a collage of elements: individual pieces sound like Chinese-inflected jazz, jazz-inflected Chinese music, or new, experimental hybrids. In some pieces there is a layering of textures: Chengdu street soundscapes blur into jazz improvisations; Chinese folk themes become enveloped by clouds of textured sound. While in other pieces, approaches from one form are used to structure the performance of another: Sichuan Opera conducting techniques guide free improvisations, or Chinese folk material is placed into jazz song forms.

If the juxtaposition of Chinese music and jazz seems odd, consider the close parallels between traditional Chinese and early blues styles: both focus on pentatonic scales, highly intricate ornamentation, and flexible metre which follow the text. Jazz' emphasis on improvisation and individual interpretation make it well suited to cross-genre and cross cultural collaboration. In a jazz performance, what is valued most is each instrumentalist's individual sound. Accompaniments, arrangements, and compositions are built around the individual strengths and capabilities of the performers. Though perhaps not yet established as a genre, nevertheless there are a number of innovative artists who have explored interconnections between Chinese and jazz forms, including Fred Ho, Liu Sola, Jon Jang and others.

With TWA, we wanted to create a work which would pay homage to the disappearing traditions of Sichuan music, reflect our personal take on the music, and also capture the feeling of bewilderment and wonder of our first encounters with Sichuan culture.

The urban soundscape of Chengdu was a revelation. On our first visit, in 1999, we were immediately struck by a variety of unfamiliar sounds: the gentle tapping of hammer on bricks as thousands of labourers dismantled buildings by hand; the myriad

tonal inflections of night market vendors barking through cheap megaphones; and most of all a sea of bicycle bells and car horns washing through the city streets.

Zou Xiangping shared an interest in the street music of Chengdu, and he introduced us to traditional street songs and signature sounds of tradespeople, such as the metallic “di der ka” of the hard candy vendor, or intriguing twang of the ear cleaner. In the course of research undertaken with musicologist Emma Zevik, Zou also amassed a colourful collection of historic street songs used to sell all manner of wares—lard cakes, soy sauce. Even rat poison! Many of these sounds and street calls have been woven into the musical textures of TWA.

In *Bicycle Groove*, for instance, we create a shifting collage of soundscape, Chinese folk and original material. Seas of bicycles awash through the city streets has remained a vivid image from our first trip to Chengdu. That image evolved into the slow, loping rhythm underpinning “Bicycle Groove”. Using a combination of found sounds from the urban environment (bicycle bells, horns, and brake drums), prepared piano and modified drum kit, we try to recapture the initial impression. To the gentle rhythm the Chinese performers add a chorus of street calls and songs, from mundane calls of

“Shou *feiping/Rubbish* collection!” or “Huaxi *dusee bao/Newspapers!*” to the poignant and a wistful morning song “You *gao/Cakes!*”. From there urban and folk elements become entangled in a creative interplay of musical textures. a muted trumpet improvises over a Tibetan folk theme; a soaring bamboo flute completes a sweet jazz ballad.

Another recontextualisation of street music occurs in *Cotton Man*. This singular tradesman travels from neighbourhood to neighbourhood just prior to winter, to repair people’s old doonahs before the cold season. This he accomplishes in an extremely unusual way, using a giant gut string bow to fluff up the doonahs, producing an absolutely amazing rhythmic twanging. In our homage, four live performers (trumpet, trombone, contrabass, and percussion) play in careful rhythmic unison with a video of the Cotton Man, underscoring the fascinating musicality of his work.

Sichuan Opera Percussion was another revelation that has influenced our work in China since 1999. In our first encounter, we attended a “tea house” opera (a small, unstaged version held in local neighbourhoods), where the director led the percussionists through a myriad of intricate cues — from gentle rolling rhythms to explosive cacophonies. We watched with amazement as he coordinated minute inflections of voice, stage action, and percussion using a highly detailed sequence of stick, hand and finger cues. It was a truly complex juggling act of rhythm,

gesture, and smoking paraphernalia. If the music was fast paced, he puffed a cigarette in time; if it was slow enough, he lit up his pipe!

Sonically, Sichuan Opera Percussion features a sophisticated layering of metallic timbres (comprised of gongs and cymbals of varying size), along with skin drums and the piercing pulse of the conductor's wood drum. Sichuan Opera is known for its characteristic gao qiang style (one of five main percussion styles) of using percussion and voice with no other accompanying instruments. To our ears, trained in con-

temporary western music, gao qiang style sounded quite avant garde, reminding us of Luciano Berio or Stockhausen.

Needless to say, we were deeply infatuated with the Sichuan Opera Percussion's melodious resonance and wide range of colours from the beginning. At the same time we were intrigued by the tantalising possibility of adapting its structures and elaborate cuing system to other musical materials. We envisioned a John Zorn-style structured improvisation making use of its modular, building block mechanisms.

To pursue this end, in our subsequent visits to Chengdu (2001–2, 2004, 2007), we took up studies with master Zhong Kaizhi, who patiently introduced us to the – quite unorthodox — playing techniques and lead us slowly through the list of cues which make up the language of Sichuan Opera (numbering in the hundreds). Though we have fallen well short of mastering the tradition, our studies have led to three new works, using a range of collaborative approaches, and displaying a range of styles from traditional to avant garde.

In the “Sichuan Opera Overture”, Zhong Kaizhi and Zou Xiangping have created a medley of opera themes which demonstrate the range of colours and moods expressed in Sichuan Opera Percussion. To the traditional gongs, cymbals, erhu, and bamboo flute, they've added the western instruments (trumpet, trombone, contrabass, piano), introducing fresh tone colours to the material. Similarly, in “The Way,” an original jazz composition is given a fresh colour through the use of a traditional Sichuan Opera rhythmic pattern. In the most innovative cross-fertilisation of genres, “Brick by Brick,” the cuing system of Sichuan Opera is used to “conduct” the ensemble through a wild free improvisation. Master Zhong performs the traditional cues, while the ensemble reacts to his cues in unexpected flurries of improvised sound.

The third revelation from our early visits to Chengdu was the *Jinqian Ban* (“Money Sticks”) itinerant storytelling tradition. We were very fortunate to work directly with its last living master, Zou Zhongxin, whose amazing energy and

vitality belied his then 78 years. At the time we met, Zou Zhongxin was living in relative obscurity, known only to a few music insiders, including our friend Zou Xiangping (no relation). The older Zou expressed his enthusiasm for our project of combining contemporary forms with traditional Sichuan music, encouraging us to incorporate *Jinqian Ban* in our work, instructing us and the younger Zou in the technique of the bamboo money sticks and collaborating with us on the 2002 piece *Concerto for Jinqian Ban*.

Jinqian Ban has continued to play a part in TWA, in our piece *Di Da Kwa* — the title an alliteration of the money sticks' three basic tones. In *Di Da Kwa*, we combine authentic folk material from *Jinqian Ban* with original material and improvisation. Beginning with a nostalgic piano solo, framing the piece as a fading memory, the bamboo money sticks establish a driving rhythm. The band picks up a fragment of the piano theme with the bass driving forward with a funky syncopation until the whole ensemble suddenly erupts into a vocal call and response “*Di da kwa! Di da kwa!*”; “*Kwa! di da Kwa! di da*”. Echoing the youthful energy of master Zou Zhongxin, a childlike melodica solo takes off, propelling the piece into its climax: a rendition of the traditional song “12 Month Story” taught to us by master Zou, and sung by the younger Zou Xiangping. Our goal again is to pay homage to the tradition while at the same time re-contextualising and by placing it alongside our own musical impressions. Since our work with master Zou Zhongxin, we are happy to report that he has been named as a National Treasure, and his tradition is now being archived.

While TWA was strongly directed by *Clocked Out* with input from Zou Xianping, we now hope to develop new material with creative input from all of the musicians. As we have continued to tour TWA — it has now been presented at Queensland Music Festival, Sydney Opera House, Auckland Festival, Vancouver International Jazz Festival, Victoria Jazz Fest, and Ottawa International Jazz Festival — a strong group sound has developed. Pieces have evolved as individuals have taken chances on stage, moving the music into new directions. Although verbal communication is not always straightforward, the hybrid musical language we've created together will hopefully lead us to deeper cultural understanding.

Musical encounters in The Wide Alley