



Far left: New York Philharmonic Principal Trombone Joseph Alessi works with a graduate student at the Shanghai Orchestra Academy in June 2017. Left: New York Philharmonic oboist Robert Botti in a side-by-side rehearsal in Shanghai with Shanghai Orchestra Academy graduate student Yiling Chen, June 2017.

East Meets West Meets East

The New York Philharmonic is in the third year of its Shanghai Orchestra Academy program that trains postgraduate musicians in China. That's just the tip of the iceberg—U.S. orchestras of every description are flocking to China, the number of Chinese orchestras is growing, and Chinese composers are being played by orchestras in both countries.

by Jennifer Melick



Shanghai Orchestra Academy students in a June 2017 side-by-side rehearsal with the New York Philharmonic at Shanghai Symphony Hall, led by departing Music Director Alan Gilbert.

“I would say after the high B-flat, maybe you shouldn’t take a breath,” New York Philharmonic Principal Trombone Joe Alessi is saying to the young trombonist. “It’s the highest note in the phrase, a longer note, and you should sing on it.” Alessi picks up his trombone to demonstrate: a beautifully shaped arc that peaks at a rich, warm B-flat. “If you stop the note, you’re missing a very good opportunity to sing on a note that’s highlighted.” It’s late June 2017 in steamy summertime Shanghai, and we’re in a rehearsal room in the recently built Shanghai Symphony Hall with Huaming Zhang, Xuanyu Wang, and a handful of other aspiring Chinese trombonists. The student trombonist tries it again: a noticeable improvement, more expressive, freer. “Very good!” says Alessi. “It’s like Frank Sinatra—when he sings a high note, he’s going to let it continue. Right? All right.” Alessi looks around the room. “Who’s next?”

These students—postgraduate instrumentalists from throughout China—are participating in the third annual summer residency of the New York Philharmonic at the Shanghai Orchestra Academy. Down the hall from Alessi and the trombonists, Philharmonic Principal Bassoon Judith Leclair is working on intonation and fingering with first-year SOA bassoonist Sihong Zhao, encouraging him to sit up more so he doesn’t lose support, and offering a nonstop patter of tips (“the whisper key most important key on the horn”). Elsewhere in the building, Philharmonic Principal Clarinet Anthony McGill is urging first-year student Yanru Chiu to be more expressive in her Beethoven 8 excerpt (“unfortunately, you’re judged on what you don’t play as well as what you do play”); Principal Tuba Alan Baer is working on valve basics with second-year SOA student Xianquan Mu, advising him not to “play into pain” on his high notes; and Principal Cello Carter Brey is telling first-year SOA student Dunbang You he needs to “have a plan for what’s going on harmonically” to better shape his phrasing.

The Shanghai Orchestra Academy, launched in September 2014, is a partnership among the New York Philharmonic, Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, and Shanghai Conservatory of Music. The two-year program is designed to address



Students from the National Youth Orchestra of the USA and the National Youth Orchestra of China meet in Purchase, New York, for their back-to-back July 2017 concerts at Carnegie Hall.

the need for advanced, post-graduate orchestral training in China, and the main part of that practical training happens through weeklong residencies in Shanghai of professional orchestra musicians. The goal is to help prepare graduates for careers in orchestras in China and elsewhere. The New York Philharmonic is the founding orchestral partner of the Shanghai Orchestra Academy, which has expanded since 2014 to also include weeklong visits to the SOA by musicians from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Germany’s NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra, and Hong Kong Philharmonic, among others.

Expanding Scene

The broader backdrop to the Shanghai Orchestra Academy is China’s intense and deepening interest in Western classical music, which has spurred rapid growth, both in building concert halls and forming new orchestras. This is a country where few things happen without the government’s imprimatur, so many orchestras are government-supported, though a few are privately run. A June 12 article in *China Daily USA*, the country’s officially state-sanctioned news outlet, stated that the number of professional symphony orches-

tras in China increased from about 30 five years ago to 72 in 2016; the current number of orchestras was given as 74. Among the new orchestras, noted *Musical America* recently, are Beijing’s Oriental Symphony Orchestra, the Yellow River Symphony Orchestra (Zhengzhou, Henan Province), Baoding Symphony Orchestra (Baoding, Hebei Province), and the Wenzhou City and Ningbo symphony orchestras (both



Denver Philharmonic Concertmaster Katherine Thayer greets fans at a sold-concert in the Tangshan Grand Theater, Tangshan, China, during the orchestra’s 2016 China tour.

in Zhejiang Province). Even with all the new orchestras, many new halls have open dates to fill, and Western orchestras touring China find themselves performing for enthusiastic audiences not only in the biggest cities, but also in “smaller” cities,

which may have 5 million or even 8 million residents.

The New York Philharmonic is far from the only American orchestra that is a frequent flyer to China. One of the most frequent is the Philadelphia Orchestra, which in 2016 signed a five-year annual performance contract with Shanghai Oriental Art Center. The orchestra has commitments to perform annual concerts at Beijing's National Centre for the Performing Arts and at Shanghai Oriental Art Center, as well as a semi-outdoor performance space near Shanghai's Disneyland. The Philadelphia Orchestra's activities go beyond performing: in 2016 the orchestra visited the Eastman Music Company's string-instrument factory outside Beijing. The factory and the orchestra partnered for the orchestra's Buy One, Give One instrument program to donate instruments to schools in Philadelphia.

The appetite for travel to China involves a wide range of U.S. orchestras. A partial list includes the Detroit Symphony

long tour to China, and within days of their departure the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, the Greater Dallas Youth Orchestra, and the San Diego Youth Symphony headed for China as well.

And it is now a given that visiting U.S. orchestras, whether large or small, professional or youth, go beyond formal concerts by holding side-by-side rehearsals with local or amateur musicians, giving community engagement activities, appearing at hospitals or community centers, and even staging small-scale pop-up concerts in unexpected locations.

Meanwhile, Chinese orchestras are flexing their muscles with tours to the West. In December 2016, the Beijing-based



Jan Rogan / Philadelphia Orchestra

Many U.S. orchestra tours include activities outside the concert hall. Philadelphia Orchestra violinist Richard Amoroso works with a student in a master class at Penn Wharton China Center in Beijing, China, May 2016.

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Orchestra, which performed in Shanghai, Suzhou, Wuhan, Changsha, and Chongqing for its first China tour in July 2017. The Seattle Symphony picked China for its second-ever international tour in June 2016; the Chicago Symphony Orchestra toured China plus Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea in January 2016; and the New York-based Park Avenue Chamber Symphony, an amateur group, performed in Beijing, Qingdao, Dalian, Chaoyang, Jinzhou, Shenzhen, Shenyang and Xi'an in 2011. Two smaller orchestras, the Denver Philharmonic and Pennsylvania's York Symphony (which share the same music director, Lawrence Golan), visited Beijing, Zhenzhou, and Yichun in July 2016. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Cincinnati Pops both toured Beijing, Shanghai, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in March 2017. (The Cincinnati Pops had performed during the 2008 Beijing Olympics.) Then there are youth orchestras: in June 2015 alone, the Santa Rosa Youth Symphony embarked on a week-

China Philharmonic Orchestra, founded in 2000, performed in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. The China NCPA Orchestra—resident orchestra of Beijing's National Centre for the Performing Arts—will perform at Carnegie Hall on October 30 in a program that features pianist Haochen Zhang in the popular 1969 *Yellow River* Concerto, plus a new work by Qigang Chen and Sibelius's Symphony No. 2. The Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and Beijing's China National Opera have both toured the U.S. The new National Youth Orchestra of China debuted at Carnegie Hall this summer—the same weekend as the National Youth Orchestra of the USA's performance there. The National Youth Orchestra of China is modeled directly on the Carnegie Hall Weill Music Institute's National Youth Orchestra of the USA program, launched in 2012.

Chinese composers are finding their way onto American orchestra programs with greater frequency, one example be-

ing Tan Dun's epic *Water Passion*, which Symphony Tacoma performed in March 2016. Works by established composers like Tan Dun and Bright Sheng are no longer rarities here, and pieces by younger composers like Wang Jie, Du Yun, and Chen-Hui Jen are regularly programmed. Many of these composers have been educated in both China and the U.S. Du Yun, a Shanghai native who won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her opera *Angel's Bone*, will curate a three-day festival at National Sawdust in Brooklyn in March, entitled "The Velvet Revolution: Pan-Asian Sounding Festival," featuring her own musical *Dim Sum Warriors* as well as music by Claire Chase, Pauchi Sasaki, and others to be announced. In January 2018, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra's Winter Festival concerts will include not only the NJSO Chamber Players in Tan Dun's *Eight Colors for String Quartet* but also the full orchestra in *Ge Xu* by Chen Yi, a composer born and raised in Guangzhou and a product of Beijing's Central Conservatory of Music—led by NJSO Music Director Xian Zhang, a graduate of the same conservatory. The Juilliard School's annual Focus! festival of new music in 2018 will be "China Today: A Festival of Chinese Composition," and will feature pieces by composers Shuci Wang and Liu Sola, during what is billed as a week of programs in "a large range of styles and four generations of composers," with Chinese conductor Chen Lin leading the Juilliard Orchestra. Oh, and the Juilliard School has broken ground on its new campus in Tianjin, scheduled to open



Young musicians from the Greater Dallas Youth Orchestra (red shirts) during a side-by-side rehearsal with musicians from the Hangzhou Youth Orchestra, during the GDYO's 2015 China tour.



David Bernard leads a local ensemble during the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony's 2011 tour of China.

in 2019. Taken broadly, all the cultural exchange and interplay between the U.S. and China can assume added importance during politically turbulent times.

At the Academy

Twenty instrumentalists are admitted to the Shanghai Orchestra Academy each year through competitive auditions. Selected Philharmonic musicians, mostly principals and assistant principals, serve as faculty, traveling to Shanghai for residencies throughout the year. The SOA is embedded within the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where students are enrolled in the master of music or artist diploma program. Students come from all over. Violinist Aolie Wu, whose parents are from Xinjiang in far northwest China, was one of four Academy musicians in 2016 to be invited to New York to rehearse and perform with the Philharmonic during its summer parks concerts.

Violinist Renchao Yu, a first-year student in the program who goes by the nickname “Carlos,” is a native of Shanghai who before attending Shanghai Conservatory of Music went to Shanghai Nanyang Model High School, where 92-year-old conductor Cao Peng runs a respected music program. This year, four young women in the program from Taiwan—flutists Fangyu Huang and Iling Ho, oboist Yiling Chen, and clarinetist Yanru Chiu—ended up as roommates in Shanghai. Others come from Beijing, Kunming, Guangzhou, and elsewhere.

During the ten-day residency of the teaching New York Philharmonic musicians in Shanghai in June and July, it wasn't just lessons and masterclasses. There were chamber music sight-reading sessions for brass, woodwinds, and strings, plus side-by-side rehearsals of Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 (“New World”) and Brahms's Symphony No.

3 with Philharmonic musicians, led by departing Music Director Alan Gilbert. There was a panel discussion on what it takes to be a concertmaster, with Philharmonic Concertmaster Frank Huang and Shanghai Symphony Orchestra Co-concertmasters Pei Li and Guillaume Molko, moderated by Shanghai Classical FM radio host Chao Gu.

Sometimes, a New York Philharmonic teaching residency at the Shanghai Orchestra Academy coincides with other Philharmonic events and programs in Shanghai, as was the case this year. During the June/July residency, Jon Deak, artistic director of the Philharmonic's Very Young Composers Program, and Philharmonic Vice President of Education Ted Wiprud flew to Shanghai for work sessions with young composers selected for a Chinese offshoot of the main Very Young Composers program in New York. One of the composers, fifteen-year-

The Santa Rosa Youth Symphony, pictured here in Beijing, embarked on a weeklong tour to China on June 17, 2015. Within days of their departure three other groups—the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, the Greater Dallas Youth Orchestra, and the San Diego Youth Symphony—headed for China as well.



Rosalee Abbott

Western orchestras touring China find themselves performing for enthusiastic audiences not only in the biggest cities, but also in “smaller” cities, which may have 5 million or even 8 million residents.



Among China’s many new concert halls are (above, left to right) Shanghai Symphony Hall, Shanghai Oriental Art Center, and Suzhou Poly Grand Theatre in Suzhou. Opposite page: Qintai Concert Hall in Wuhan, where the Detroit Symphony Orchestra performed during its first-ever China tour in July 2017.

old Shuya Feng, had her piece *Memories of Marnyi Stone* performed in July by the New York Philharmonic at Shanghai Symphony Hall, along with *Aye Ni Ilu (Life Is a Rhythm)* by Very Young Composer Isai Rabiou, a twelve-year-old New Yorker who traveled to Shanghai with his family for the occasion. Translators were occasionally needed, but many activities during the Philharmonic’s residency were conducted in English—a testament to the prevalence of English-language education in Shanghai. The rest of the New York Philharmonic arrived partway through the residency for two full-orchestra performances, with repertoire ranging from Copland’s *Quiet City* to symphonies by Brahms, Mahler, and Dvořák. During the same week, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra joined the New York Philharmonic for the first Asian performance of Wynton Marsalis’s *Symphony No. 4 (“The Jungle”)*, and there was the concert of works by members of the Very Young Composers Program.

On the sidewalk outside Shanghai Symphony Hall before the first of the Philharmonic’s two concerts—Dvořák’s “New World” Symphony and Brahms’s Piano Concerto No. 2 with soloist Yefim Bronfman—ticket seekers waited, hoping to get into the concert hall. Inside, the majority of the attentive audience appeared to be well under age 40, with lots of families in attendance. When you go to

a concert in Shanghai, one striking thing is that people are really into the music, hungry for Brahms and Dvořák and Mahler. And in this mega-city of 24 million residents, there are presumably lots more who are eager to hear it.

In China, 120 million people are studying music, “a little less than one-tenth of the population,” said Doug He, Shanghai Orchestra Academy’s executive director, when we met this summer in Shanghai. “Everyone’s children are studying violin, piano, and so on—in Shanghai, Beijing, provincial cities, everywhere,” he says. “This has happened in the last 20 to 30 years.” Beginning in the late 1970s, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, says He, “A lot of good things happened. People were thinking, what should we pass on to our children? Do something meaningful. So a lot of families invested in a piano, a violin, to get them started. In the 1970s and ’80s, when they became parents, they educated their children to be musicians.” However, says He, many advanced students in China have a limited understanding of “the whole philosophy of Western music—structure, harmony.” This stems from the traditional Chinese focus on solo performance, not ensembles—a repeated refrain heard from New York Philharmonic musicians teaching at the Shanghai Orchestra Academy. This means Chinese musicians can have difficulty becoming orchestra players, and

that is something the Academy hopes to change.

From his perspective, says He, “New York Philharmonic musicians have brought a lot of innovative thinking to our students, not only artistically, but also how to take care of yourself when practicing, Alexander Technique, those kinds of things.” The SOA actively recruits musicians from regions far distant from the bigger cities, and one of the program’s goals is to “help musicians from provincial cities with few educational and artistic resources.” He points out that unlike musicians in China’s more developed eastern cities, those from the inner provinces of western China might be “very passionate about music, but lack guidance. So I think this is our responsibility, to be able to lead, raise their standard together.”

He is a native of China who trained as a double bassist at Juilliard and returned to his country in 2010, first to launch Shanghai’s Music in the Summer Air (MISA) festival, then to get the SOA up and running. Since that time, he says he has already “witnessed many positive changes” but notes ongoing challenges. One of them is that China lacks a standardized system for its orchestras: “When our conductors go around China, we have different librarian systems and bowing markings. It makes things so crazy.” He says that conductor Long Yu, founding music director of the Shanghai Orchestra Academy, “wants to establish a protocol, so everyone should speak same language, everyone should be able to understand each other. This is not happening yet in China, although we have so many orchestras.”



Donald Dietz



Donald Dietz

Detroit Symphony Orchestra Music Director Leonard Slatkin chats with some of the 50 monks and nuns from the Tiantai Temple and Buddhist Music Academy who attended the DSO's concert this July at the new Qintai Concert Hall in Wuhan, China (top photo).

Solo vs. Ensemble Playing

Two topics came up over and over in conversations with Philharmonic faculty at the Shanghai Orchestra Academy: encouraging deeper musical expression and teaching students to listen more actively to the whole orchestra, not just their own parts. “If I had to generalize,” says Philharmonic Concertmaster Frank Huang, “in Asia—not just in China—I feel like the focus is very often on technical proficiency, developing your technical abilities to the point where you can win an international competition or something like that. But I’m not sure how much awareness these musicians have of the meaning of the music, character, expression, timing, all of these more intricate ideas. The technical level is amazing. But it doesn’t do anything if it’s just a technical art. There is a bigger picture. Music should reflect life. You should have moments where you’re feeling like you’re on top of the world, but equally there are moments when you feel vulnerable or alone, or are thinking about something serious in your life. Those reflective

moments in music need to be equally moving and captivating.”

Michele Balm is director of the New York Philharmonic’s Global Academy, which in addition to Shanghai Orchestra Academy has also included partnerships with the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, California, and Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music in Houston, Texas. Every year, Balm solicits feedback from students. Bassoonist Hui Zhang, a 2016 participant in the Shanghai Orchestra Academy who is now a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, says she “learned a lot about how a professional orchestra operates and interacts” and felt “much more confident in my orchestral playing and much better prepared to audition for/play in an orchestra.” Each year during the Academy, “They get two mock audition opportunities,” says Balm, “and they’re

not just normal mock auditions. They are mock auditions with a representative of every section. They play mock auditions when they first arrive and get immediate feedback. Four or five days later, they do the exact same thing, but in the hall, with a screen, before those same people. They get no feedback until it’s all done, and then they get called in through the whole process. When I ask in surveys what was the best part, it’s really the mock auditions that are the most valuable, because normally they never get feedback for their auditions, it’s come and go, ‘Sorry, we didn’t like it, that’s it.’”

And the Philharmonic musicians who are doing teaching residencies: what’s in it for them? In Frank Huang’s case, it’s simple: “I love teaching,” he says. As someone who as a youngster was initially resistant to the idea of training to become a professional violinist, Huang says, “If I can inspire someone to pursue this as a profession the way that Don [Weilerstein at the Cleveland Institute of Music] inspired me, it’s quite meaningful.” Bill Thomas, the

Philharmonic’s executive director, has been on multiple tours with the orchestra over his many years with the organization. He says for the musicians one of the appealing factors of a residency, as opposed to a straight tour, is the opportunity stay in one place and really get to know the concert hall and the local musicians. When he sat in on Carter Brey’s cello masterclass this summer, he enjoyed watching students who had been focusing mainly on becoming soloists learn “all about being with an ensemble. The musicians are so responsive, they’re well trained, but we’re here to enhance that. There is no greater satisfaction when you’re teaching, to see that you’re getting through, to see lights going off: ‘Oh, I get it!’” Judith Leclair says she “would have been happy to have spent more time working with students this summer,” and is looking forward to her next weeklong residency in March 2018, working with what she calls “the cream of the crop in China.”

For the young musicians in the Shanghai Orchestra Academy, the benefits are clear: help in experiencing what it takes to perform in an orchestra in China or elsewhere, improving one’s prospects as a working musician, getting personalized training from professional orchestra musicians without having to leave China. SOA Executive Director Doug He says, “China now has about 70 orchestras, and the number is obviously going to go up in the next decade. My dream would be to see our Academy students become leading musicians in most Chinese orchestras. But I would be most happy to see them win an audition such as New York, or any European major orchestra.” Student Aolie Wu—one of that group of four Academy students who traveled to New York in 2016—described the trip as “amazing. Not only the performance but also the rehearsals with the New York Philharmonic. You can get the feeling of sitting in the orchestra, of many great musicians. You can see, and also feel the music.” Less than a year after Wu visited New York, as he was nearing the end of his two years at the Shanghai Orchestra Academy, he won a section violin position in the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. Chances are there are more like him in the wings. **S**

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