

on the road



Connection in the Middle Kingdom

An old-world sensibility, rediscovered in the new

By Jenny Lin

GROWING UP IN TAIWAN in the 1970s, when I first began tapping on the ivory keys, China was a mysterious land just a hundred miles across the Taiwan Strait. Long after departing Taiwan for Vienna, Washington, D.C., Geneva and ultimately New York City, I continued to view mainland China as an estranged neighbor with a daunting presence.

In 2009, all those places and thirty-some years later, I undertook a seven-city concert tour in China, the land known as the Middle Kingdom. My journey was coming full circle in some way, landing me in a place seemingly close. But culture shock came on several

levels. I speak Chinese, but I was an anxious foreigner in a newly foreign land.

China is not big; it is immense. Intensely overwhelming in landmass, population and diversity of cultures, its immensity demands attention and fascination. Huangshi, southeast of Wuhan, in Hubei Province, is considered a small town. It is home to three million people. It also has one old but still-smiling theater with cold interiors and three hundred seats, each requiring a facelift. Inside I found a three-legged gem—a beautiful Steinway D, the top of which was inscribed with a Lang Lang autograph. In Huzhou, in Zhejiang

Province, on the other hand, a petite piano of unknown brand sat cooly on the grand stage of the twelve-hundred-seat Huzhou Grand Theatre. And the Shanghai concert, which came with photo sessions for a few key fashion magazines, took place at the flashy Shanghai Times Square. The tour employed practically all modes of transportation—planes, trains, automobiles; I reached a concert in Zhoushan, in Zhejiang Province, by ferry.

In city after city, with the possible exception of Shanghai, I experienced the complaints I had heard other classical musicians make about performing in China. During performances, people were noisy and got up to walk around freely. There were sounds of candy wrappers and interjections of “Wow!” when a fast passage was played. Once, a man from the audience walked on stage with a video camera in the middle of a Chopin Ballade.

For one particular encore, I opted against a popular Chinese folk song transcription and made an impromptu decision to play Federico Mompou. Befuddled at first, several people shuffled their feet, ready to leave.

Then came the ultimate moment of surprise in a trip of oh-so-many anxious surprises. The noises soon faded to complete silence, and that silence endured through the final note. They were receiving the message, or at least the music of some Spaniard named Mompou. In past years, I had played that Mompou selection in the United Kingdom, in New York and in Paris. And in the shadow of my three-decade-long curiosity, China—in one modest moment—became similarly attuned to the unadorned sounds of a rich music. This once strange land was no longer so distant for me, its affinity for music reawakened in my musical world—and perhaps soon, too, in the musical worlds of a few more. ■

Jenny Lin's latest album is Silent Music—Mompou's Música Callada (Steinway & Sons).