An-lun HUANG

PIANO MUSIC
THREE EXCERPTS FROM THE BALLET ‘A DREAM OF DUNHUANG’, OP. 29
THE LITTLE MATCH GIRL, OP. 24: SELLING MATCHES
FOUR LARGE PRELUDES AND FUGUES, OP. 68
TWO PRELUDES, OP. 5

Xing Rong

Includes First Recordings
An-lun Huang at home in Toronto
For many contemporary composers, the art of transcription is a technique they largely ignore, and it is indeed today relatively rare to find a composer – or even a performer – who has mastered this demanding aspect of composition. In earlier times, by contrast, especially with such figures such as Bach, Liszt, Busoni, Godowsky, Rachmaninov and Prokofiev, before the division between creator and recreator opened up, piano transcription was raised to dazzling heights, often with the original composition now transformed into a more sophisticated and complex work.

At its finest, a transcription is more than merely a straightforward transference of a musical score from one instrument to another. The transcriber’s personality may invade that of the original composer, as is often the case with Busoni’s, Liszt’s and Rachmaninov’s transcriptions. Or if the transcriber is using his own music, the transcription may further enrich, or even shed new musical insights into, the original work.

An-lun Huang’s piano transcriptions of his own works are masterpieces of the discipline and put to shame the once prevalent view that any transcription is destined to be a poor imitation of the original, that somehow a major transcription is desecration of the parent work. Among sophisticated musicians, I’m happy to say, this attitude is now largely outdated and disregarded.

Too often when someone prepares a transcription for the piano, it becomes immediately evident whether or not he or she is a real virtuoso. The first few bars of Huang’s Op. 68 transcriptions make it clear to both performer and audience that he is himself a master pianist. The idiomatic feeling for the keyboard reminds the listener of Liszt’s magnificent transcriptions for piano of organ works of Bach – and, indeed, Nos. 2–4 of Op. 68 have their beginnings in organ originals. Again as with Liszt, Huang refuses to clutter up the score with a sea of extraneous notes that would cloud
and obscure the original material, and yet he always keeps in mind what is required for an effective pianistic layout that communicates strongly with the listener.

Huang’s reverence for the music of Bach’s music manifested itself at a very early age and is still evident in the four transcriptions of his Op. 68 from 2008. As he himself writes:

It is something that goes beyond time and region; it transcends individuality and nationality. It is precisely this ‘inspiration’ that motivates all of us who have embarked on the difficult road of music without grudge or regret.¹

It is my deepest belief that what Bach was trying to express belongs to all mankind. By the same token, good Chinese music should convey a similar universal spirituality. Nationalistic music does not diminish this universality – rather, it strengthens and enriches it.²

The ‘Toccata, Chorale and Fugue’ in D minor [6–8], a transcription of a work originally scored for cello ensemble, contains a striking use of the BACH motif, used by such composers as Bach himself, Schumann and Liszt. The Op. 68 set as a whole is is big-boned and emotionally rewarding, and it contains some of Huang’s strongest writing.

An entirely different mood and style is to be found in Huang’s transcription of a number from his ballet The Little Match Girl [15], based on the short story by Hans Christian Andersen. Huang deliberately keeps the piano score relatively uncomplicated, in keeping with the simplicity of Andersen’s original tale. With the charm of Huang’s original music and the lucid elegance of his piano-writing, this transcription echoes Huang’s own words when he writes: ‘It would be such a blessing to retain the purity and innocence of a child forever, but I know it is very difficult to do. I can only promise myself I will try my very best’.³

I am very happy to see here the transcriptions from Huang’s other ballet, A Dream of Dunhuang, Op. 29, since it brings warm memories: when in 1983 I gave the world

¹ Postscript, A New Compilation of the Piano Works by Huang, An-lun, Central Conservatory of Music Press, Beijing, 2008, p. IV.
² Ibid., p. 193.
³ Ibid., p. V.
premiere of Huang’s First Piano Concerto (dedicated to me), a suite from the ballet was given in the same concert, with the Guangzhou Philharmonic, conducted by Lai Tak-ng.

The American pianist Joseph Banowetz, described by Fanfare as ‘a giant among keyboard artists of our time’, was a graduate with first prize of the Akademie für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Vienna; his teachers have included Carl Friedberg (a pupil of Clara Schumann) and György Sándor (a pupil of Béla Bartók). He has been heard as recitalist and orchestral soloist in over 35 countries and has recorded over 35 CDs, resulting in two nominations as a Grammy finalist, for ‘Best Orchestral Soloist’ and ‘Best Chamber Music Performance’. His book The Pianist’s Guide to Pedaling (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1985) has to date been published in seven languages.

I began my musical education with my parents when I was five: my father, Feilih Huang, attended Yale University, where he was a pupil of Paul Hindemith, from 1948, and graduated in 1953; he founded the first conducting department of the Central Conservatory of Music in Tianjin in 1956. I became a piano student of the Primary and Middle Schools attached to the Central Conservatory of Music from 1956 until 1968. Then, like most of young China at that time, I lost all chance of an education because of the Maoist Cultural Revolution (1966–76), and in 1969, along with my classmates, I was sent to the countryside as a labourer. For those ten years, all universities were shut down and their students sent out into the country; many teachers were jailed and some even killed. Of course, no music student had access to a piano during that period of madness but, cutting a long story short, after a hard and complicated hard struggle, in 1971 I finally did obtain permission to have a piano in my rural exile. It was an invaluable opportunity to re-start my musical life and I continued my education on my own.
Once the Cultural Revolution had blown over, the success of a number of compositions led to my appointment as composer-in-residence of the Central Opera House of China in 1976. I became a member of the China Musicians’ Association in 1979. I then came to the west to complete my musical education. As a first step, I enrolled in the Faculty of Music of University of Toronto in 1980 before continuing to Pittsburg University in 1983. Finally, after enrolling at Yale University in 1984, like my father almost four decades earlier, I received my Master of Music degree, with the Alumni prize, in 1986. Since then I’ve made my living as a freelance composer, based in Toronto. I’ve not sought any university or other positions – although I have been composer-in-residence of the Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra since 2010.

From the start of my life as a pianist, I was aware that the piano is a western instrument. Would it sing in Chinese? Vice versa, would Chinese piano music make sense to western ears? Those two questions have accompanied my development as composer and performer; in fact, my first attempts date from the very beginning of my composing career. As an example, there’s a piece, entitled ‘Dui Hua’ (‘Dialogue in Song’), No. 1 of my Op. 1, composed when I was fourteen, which imitates the Chinese bamboo flute. Using a lot of the grace notes typical of that instrument, the music uses western harmony (indeed, I’ve been told that its pentatony evokes the music of Scotland). I myself played it for a school recital, and it is still being played 50 years later. To bring these two worlds together has been a long process, requiring the deep study of both two traditions. Initially, I was concerned that the results might be ‘too western’, or the other way around, but eventually I told myself that, if I kept trying and really sang from my heart, success would come.

The Two Preludes, Op. 5, are drawn from an early set of twelve preludes which began their lives during the hard times of the early 1970s after I had been sent to work in the ricefields. These two preludes were the first pieces I composed after the launch of the Cultural Revolution, once I managed to obtain access to that piano. At that time, at the age of 21, I was a genuinely enthusiastic young student, and the pieces express my mood and emotion directly. Prelude No. 1, in C major \[1\] was dedicated to my close friend, the pianist Cui Shiguang, and the music draws a picture of the sea where Cui’s home
is located, the coastal city of Qingdao (where the famous Tsingtao beer is produced). I’m not ashamed to say that this first prelude was rather obviously composed under the shadow of Chopin. But with Prelude No. 2, in C minor \[2\] – dedicated to my girlfriend of the time, who later became my wife – the Polish Romantic disappears, allowing its Chinese composer to show himself more clearly.

In the middle of the vast wastes of the Gobi Desert in western China lies the oasis of Dunhuang, situated in what today is Gansu Province. From the time of the Western Han dynasty (202 BC–8 AD), Dunhuang was an important trading and cultural centre on the famous Silk Road, the ribbon of communication which fostered the historic ties between east and west; in the east was China, the source of treasured trading commodities such as silk; and in the west the road went on to Venice, and branched north to what is now Russia. In the fourth and fifth centuries AD Buddhist monks dug some thousand caves out of the sandstone rock at Dunhuang, and since the rediscovery of this extraordinary site around a century ago, its cave art has gradually been recognised as one of the wonders of that age. Those magnificent images provided the inspiration for a full-length (one-and-a-half-hour) ballet I composed in 1979, *A Dream of Dunhuang*. I am pleased to say that in 1993 *A Dream of Dunhuang* was selected by a major committee, the Chinese National Cultural Promotion Association, as one of the ‘Masterpieces of Chinese Music in the 20th Century’. Since this distinction, the entire ballet has been staged in Taiwan and in Russia, and selected numbers have been performed, back home in China and internationally, in both orchestral concerts and in the piano transcriptions heard on this recording, and have been warmly received.

In view of the chain of successes the ballet enjoyed, I arranged three dances from it for piano solo, the *Three Excerpts from the Ballet ‘A Dream of Dunhuang’*, Op. 29. The first, ‘Feather Men’ \[3\], takes an image from Dunhuang art, where the spirits dress themselves in feathers in an unsuccessful attempt to keep incoming strangers away from their hidden world. The second is ‘Persian Dance’ \[4\]: Persia was an important stop on the Silk Road, and the amorous ‘Persian Dance’ is one of the highlights of the ballet. Finally, in ‘Celestial Musicians’ \[5\], in another image from Dunhuang cave art, celestial musicians, dancing with various Chinese instruments, float down from the fresco.
A painting of musicians from the caves at Dunhuang
One day in 2006, I was invited to be an adjudicator of the Fifth National Piano Competition in Xiamen. During this period, a fellow adjudicator, Professor Yang Jun, a well-known Chinese pianist, suggested to me: ‘Why don’t you compose some piano-solo fugues? We need badly fugues in the Chinese repertoire!’ That was the stimulus for my *Four Large Preludes and Fugues*, Op. 68 – although I have written many fugues in other pieces. In 2008 I therefore chose four fugal works in other formats and recomposed them as works for piano solo.

The first panel in this tetraptych, the ‘Toccat, Chorale and Fugue on BACH’, in D minor (1986), was the last work I wrote during the time during my time (1984–86) as a student at Yale University. Originally for cello ensemble, it was commissioned by and dedicated to the Yale cello professor Aldo Parisot, who premiered the work with more than sixty young cellists at the Banff Art Center, in Canada, in 1987. Recomposed as a piano solo featuring a degree of complexity – melodic, harmonic and contrapuntal – that then was new in Chinese music, it consists of three sections: the first is a virtuoso Toccata, the second a Chorale and the third is a double Fugue in five voices, where the secondary theme is formed by the letters of Bach’s name. (I realise that here I may seem to be stretching the accuracy of the title of Op. 68, in that these Four Large Preludes and Fugues in fact open with a toccata and chorale, but perhaps those two sections can be understood as together forming a kind of enormous prelude to the following fugue.)

The second piece, a Prelude and Fugue in G minor, is a piano version of the organ Sinfonia from my second large-scale choral work, *A Psalm of David*, a setting of Psalm 22 (the largest choral composition in the Chinese repertoire, as it happens), premiered in Toronto in 1987. Consisting of a prelude with a powerful double fugue, the work was written in an overtly Baroque style, which I felt best suited the context: a sense of foreboding about the last moments of Christ, set in the English of the King James version of the Bible.

The next Prelude and Fugue in my Op. 68, now in F minor, began life as the Sinfonia of my third large choral composition, the oratorio *Revelation*, Op. 54, premiered under
my baton in Hong Kong in 1999; it is sung in Mandarin. A disturbed prelude \[11\] is followed a grand triple fugue in five voices \[12\].

The Prelude and Fugue, in D major, which close Op. 68, originally took the form of an organ solo, the Sinfonia of my fourth large-scale choral work, the cantata *Glorious Church*, Op. 60, a commission from the Hong Kong Baptist Church for its centenary celebrations in 2001; it is sung in Cantonese. In both incarnations, it opens with a powerful prelude \[13\], which is followed by a substantial fugue in four voices \[14\].

By way of an encore, this album closes with a transcription of a scene, ‘Selling Matches’ \[15\] from my ballet, *The Little Match Girl*, Op. 24, premiered by the Beijing Chinese School of Dance in 1977. (I am happy to relate that, in a visit to the School, no less a figure than Margot Fonteyn was recorded as saying that I had ‘composed very, very, very good music for this ballet’!) The action is based on the original Andersen short story: a poor little girl, selling matches in the dark and freezing street on New Year’s Eve, dies of cold and hunger. The music of the scene transcribed here suggests the poverty of match-selling, with no one paying any attention to the little girl, who in her loneliness hums a song for her dead mother.

The brilliant young Chinese virtuoso pianist **Xing Rong** has won several major prizes in competitions, among them the Chinese Pieces Competition held in Tianjin in 1997, the Beethoven Piano Competition in Hainan in 2004, and the Hong Kong Piano Asia Open Competition in 2007. In 2012 she was invited by the Hong Kong Pianists Association to serve as a juror of the seventeenth Hong Kong Asian Open Piano Competition. Then in 2015 she was a prize-winner in the American Protégé International Piano Competition and made her United States debut in Carnegie Hall in New York City. A year later she was designated silver medallist in the American Fine Arts Concerto Competition, where she again performed in Carnegie Hall. This appearance was immediately followed by her Russian debut in a performance of the Liszt Concerto No. 1, with the Kostroma Symphony
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Orchestra conducted by Pavel Gerstein. Since then she has remained active both as soloist and chamber musician.

Xing Rong’s background of study has included work at the Cleveland Institute of Music with Antonio Pompa-Baldi, the Boston Conservatory of Music with Jonathan Bass and Alexander Korsantia and study at the University of North Texas for the Doctor of Musical Arts Degree in piano performance with Joseph Banowetz.
AN-LUN HUANG  黄安伦 Piano Music

_Two Preludes, Op. 5 (1971)*_  
1 No. 1 in C major  
2 No. 2 in C minor  

_Three Excerpts from the Ballet_  
3 Feather Men  
4 Persian Dance  
5 Celestial Musicians  

_Four Large Preludes and Fugues, Op. 68 (2008)_  
No. 1, Toccata, Chorale and Fugue on BACH in D minor  
6 Toccata  
7 Chorale  
8 Fugue  

No. 2, Prelude and Fugue in G minor  
9 Prelude  
10 Fugue  

No. 3, Prelude and Fugue in F minor  
11 Prelude  
12 Fugue  

No. 4, Prelude and Fugue in D major  
13 Prelude  
14 Fugue  


Xing Rong, piano  

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