How yoga can encourage confident playing

Investigating Stradivari's moulds Life Lessons Maxim Rysanov

# SINCE 1890

MAY 2019 VOL.130 NO.154

thestrad.com

## Shanghai

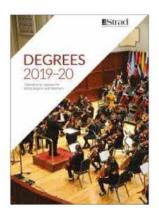
QUARTET

35 YEARS AFTER ITS FORMATION, THE ENSEMBLE CONTINUES TO PROMOTE CHAMBER MUSIC TO AUDIENCES AROUND THE WORLD

### **Contents**

VOL.130 ISSUE NO (1549) MAY 2019





Free
Degrees 2019-20
supplement

EDITOR'S LETTER 7 CONTRIBUTORS 8 SOUNDPOST 10

#### **FEATURES**

#### 30 SHANGHAI QUARTET

Celebrating their 35th anniversary, the members of the pioneering chamber group tell *Charlotte Smith* about China, Beethoven, and their instruments

#### 36 STRADIVARI'S MOULDS

In the first of two articles, *Philip Ihle* and *Andrea Zanrè* present the results of a survey matching up the master maker's violins with the twelve surviving forms

#### 42 SHOSTAKOVICH VIOLIN WORKS

Julia Fischer, Vadim Gluzman and Gidon Kremer discuss the challenges of the composer's two concertos and sonata, in conversation with *Andrew Morris* 

#### 48 SESSION REPORT

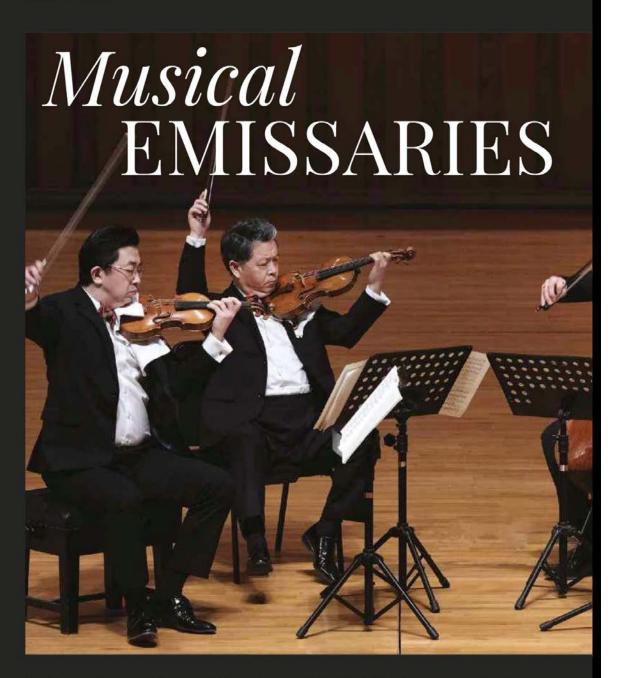
Andrew Mellor speaks to the members of Trio con Brio Copenhagen about their 20th-anniversary project, a recording all of Beethoven's piano trios

#### 50 VARNISH ANALYSIS

By analysing instrument fragments, a team led by *Marco Malagodi* has revealed the secrets of varnishes by Stainer, Maggini, Gasparo da Salò and others

#### 54 YOGA AND STRING PLAYING

Cellist and teacher Ruth Phillips, with colleague Jane Fenton, explains how players can benefit from exercises inspired by the Eastern spiritual discipline



The Shanghai Quartet celebrates its 35th anniversary during the 2018–19 season by performing eight complete Beethoven cycles around the world. The players speak to **Charlotte Smith** about forming at a time when Western chamber music was barely understood in their native China, and about promoting the art form to Chinese audiences and students today



The Shanghai Quartet – violinists Weigang Li and Yi-Wen Jiang, violist Honggang Li and cellist Nicholas Tzavaras – performs at the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing, China as part of its 35th anniversary Beethoven tour

hen we f Shangha 1983 ch in Chin: non-exis

hen we formed the Shanghai Quartet in 1983 chamber music in China was almost non-existent,' says

the ensemble's first violinist Weigang Li. 'Western music had been introduced to the country in the 1920s and 30s, and the first generation of classical musicians included my grandfather, a violinist, who played in a quartet with Yo-Yo Ma's father (also a violinist) before the latter moved to Paris. But most Chinese musicians, even by the 1980s, simply weren't aware of the scope and depth of this fantastic repertoire.'

Li is speaking to me at the 2018 Shanghai Isaac Stern International Violin Competition, where he is serving as a jury member. His fellow quartet members are here too, providing the professional element for the chamber music round. The significance of the Stern name is not lost on Li, who in 1979, at the age of 15, was featured in the Oscar-winning documentary From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China. Meeting and playing for Stern was a momentous event for the violinist, who at the time was a student at the Shanghai Conservatory Middle School. Just two years later he was selected for a year-long cultural exchange programme with the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, an eye-opening trip which introduced him to Robert Mann (later a teacher), Nathan Milstein, Henryk Szeryng and Efrem Zimbalist.

Thus, when the Chinese Cultural Ministry announced a chamber music competition for students of the major Chinese conservatoires in 1983 - the prize being the chance to compete in the 1985 Portsmouth International String Quartet Competition (now the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition) in the UK - Li was unable to ignore the opportunity. 'I was a third-year student at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and my brother Honggang Li was also a violin student,' he explains. 'We found a decent violist and cellist with the intention of working hard for a year in the lead-up to the first contest. We had no serious >

#### SHANGHAI QUARTET

ambitions to form a professional group. All we wanted was the chance to visit England - where none of us had ever been - for three weeks! We had no idea how to prepare, so we grabbed every teacher who came through the conservatory. It became more and more serious to the point that we would rehearse for five to seven hours every day. We worked especially on intonation because we realised this was particularly hard to get right, eventually tuning note by note. Looking back, that sounds crazy, but we didn't have any fundamental principles from which to work. All we had was our intuition and relatively good ears.'

The strategy worked: the ensemble won not only the Chinese competition but also second prize at the Portsmouth contest. 'Shmuel Ashkenasi, who was a jury member and later became our teacher at Northern Illinois University, said our Mozart was the best. I was so flattered that a Chinese quartet could play Mozart better than the Europeans! We weren't at all upset with second prize – it was a God-given gift. Winning first prize would have meant an instant schedule of 55 concerts over the next year and we simply weren't ready to become professionals. But winning second stood us in good stead going back to China. All of a sudden we were in the newspapers and magazines because the Chinese had never won any prizes in chamber music before, and they still treated music very much as a sport.'

ow, more than three decades later, the Shanghai Quartet is not only a leading name in Chinese chamber music but also highly respected on the world stage, with more than 30 albums to its name on labels including Delos, Camerata, Naxos, BIS and Warner, and a reputation for working closely with contemporary composers such as Krzysztof Penderecki and Tan Dun. Of particular note is the ensemble's ability to straddle the divide between Eastern and Western music, helped in no small part by second violinist Yi-Wen Jiang's composing and arranging ability. To date, the group's most successful album has been Chinasong (Delos, recorded in 2002), a disc of traditional and popular Chinese folk songs arranged by Jiang for string quartet, but there have also been the complete Beethoven string quartets on six albums (Camerata, recorded between 2005 and 2009) and recordings of Schumann, Dvořák, Brahms and Mozart.

Listening to the ensemble perform at the annual Jacqueline du Pré Charity Concert at London's Wigmore Hall in February 2019, one could hear all facets of its craft on fine display. The line-up has changed somewhat since its formation: while the Li brothers remain, Honggang is now the group's violist, a role he

assumed in 1994 when Jiang joined the quarter; US cellist Nicholas Tzavaras, the group's only non-Chinese player, came on board in 2000. The four performed their programme of Haydn, Beethoven and Brahms with an admirable sense of ensemble and a lush Romanticism even in the lighter Haydn work. The brothers Li acted as a counterbalance to this, with a lighter and more delicate tone, which was coolly refreshing against the deep earthiness of Tzavaras's cello. This worked particularly well in the three selections from the Chinasong album in which

violin and viola in a charming and egalitarian arrangement designed to showcase the group's different voices.

melodies are passed between first and second

More than three decades after its formation the quartet continues to play the role of ambassador between Chinese and Western musical styles - as evidenced by the Wigmore audience's delighted response to the folk arrangements. It's appropriate, then, that in its anniversary year the quartet is performing eight complete Beethoven cycles around the world, including in several Chinese cities less accustomed to chamber music concerts. 'We have performed Beethoven in Shanghai and Beijing before, of course,' explains Weigang Li, 'but there the audiences are more familiar with Western classical music. They are growing very fast and becoming more discerning in their demands for quality performances. I was surprised, though, when third-tier cities such as Tianjin, Wuhan and Changsha - still each with three or four million people - said yes to the Beethoven. Ten years ago I would not have been able to programme these cycles anywhere other than Shanghai and Beijing. Even more surprisingly, audiences for each concert thus far have numbered at least a thousand people, which is more than you would play to at a standard recital in America.'

Yet there is still more work to be done, according to second violinist Jiang, who speaks to me over the phone in September 2018 from New York's JFK airport while waiting with his colleagues to catch a flight to Beijing. 'The first time we played Beethoven in China it felt like we were premiering these works. I remember a Chinese composer came backstage after our performance and said, "My God! This music is so wonderful! I don't think anyone else should ever compose after that." The impact was so overwhelming that we wanted to expand our reach for our 35th celebration. My mission is to introduce the greatness of Beethoven. Of course, Western music has taken off in China, but I still think there is only a very small group of people there who really know about the culture of Western music and its philosophy. To this day, the preference is for surface spectacle. Everything has to be an enormous extravaganza – a big opera or

'WE HAD NO SERIOUS AMBITIONS TO FORM A PROFESSIONAL GROUP. ALL WE WANTED WAS THE CHANCE TO VISIT ENGLAND FOR THREE WEEKS!' – WEIGANG LI

32 THE STRAD MAY 2019 www.thestrad.com

a starry maestro. But what, really, do you gain from that? If you don't know the Beethoven quartets, how can you say you know about classical music?'

ith this in mind, the Shanghai members – as guest professors at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and the Shanghai Conservatory – are taking an active role in training a new generation of Chinese musicians. It's still a work in progress, according to Honggang Li, who also speaks to me from the airport. 'Students in the East and West respond differently to chamber music coaching,' he says. 'We are also professors and artists-in-residence at Montclair State University in New Jersey, and even when the kids there are not that strong as individual instrumentalists, they all have an innate sense of how to play chamber music. In China you sometimes see incredibly advanced players who simply don't know how to communicate in a chamber group. However, it is getting better.'

"This new generation of Chinese students is very smart – they can sense straight away what they want,' chips in Jiang. 'They understand what is missing from their daily study and practice, and are eager to absorb everything. But they also want to be soloists and superstars and to "win". They need to understand that even as a soloist, playing a single line, you will have a better understanding of musical textures, colours and harmonies – which will add to your own performance – if you have come from a chamber music background.'

When cellist Tzavaras comes to the phone, he expresses his agreement. 'In the States there is a culture of appreciation for chamber music which has been passed on through the dominance of the Second Viennese School in US conservatoires. In China, chamber music is a part of students' musical education, but it's not at the forefront. The big orchestral concerts with soloists still dominate, and in terms of a career, chamber music isn't really seen as an option — when you do encounter a professional ensemble it's usually associated with a conservatoire. But we are seeing small seeds of growth, particularly in terms of

audience interest. Certainly at the larger conservatoires students are starting to understand the value of becoming a good chamber musician, but it will probably take a generation or two for it to become a dominant musical form.'

This change in attitude is being spearheaded by the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and its conductor Long Yu, who has set up a formal partnership between his orchestra and the quartet musicians. Since 2009, all four members have served as guest principals of the orchestra for between four and six weeks every year. The collaboration serves not only to broaden the musical experiences of the quartet members, but more importantly to lend a chamber approach to the performing style of the full-time orchestral musicians. 'We play full-scale orchestral concerts with them, but also smaller chamber concerts with members of the string and wind sections,' explains Tzavaras. 'We have even done some conductorless chamber concerts with the string section, which is very exciting. Long Yu understands, I think, the value of orchestral musicians thinking as fine chamber players. The better the player as a chamber musician, the better they will be in an orchestral setting, because a symphony should be treated as a large-scale chamber work.'

As long-term chamber musicians, the Shanghai players have appreciated the 'eye-opening' opportunity of playing in full-scale orchestral concerts in a broad range of repertoire and 'of learning from wonderful conductors and their different colour palettes', according to Tzavaras. Equally rejuvenating has been a special anniversary partnership with Beare's International Violin Society, which has loaned the group a number of fine instruments for their Beethoven-cycle tour and beyond – currently Weigang Li has the 1714 'Kneisel, Grün' Stradivari violin, Jiang a 1769 G.B. Guadagnini, Honggang Li a 1700 Matteo Gofriller viola and Tzavaras a 1710 Giuseppe Guarneri 'filius Andreae' cello.

For Tzavaras, who usually performs on two contemporary instruments – one from the US and one from China – the change has been striking. It think an older instrument has a lot of class and there's a particular sound that comes with it – a burnished  $\triangleright$ 





#### 'WE ARE ABLE TO TRAVERSE THE LANGUAGE OF CHINESE FOLK MUSIC AND EQUALLY TO CONVEY THE DIALECT OF WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC, IT'S AN ASSET THAT SEPARATES US' – *NICHOLAS TZAVARAS*

quality that I don't think can always be recaptured by a recently made instrument,' he says. 'I feel I am able to produce more colours with this instrument, but I'm still a big fan of modern instruments as well.' Weigang Li agrees: 'This Strad has a clarity of sound that I have rarely experienced from any instrument. That sound of your favourite violinist that you try to recreate in vain? It's right here in this instrument! It allows me to cut through the texture of the quartet without too much volume.'

The loans are due to come to an end in December 2019, having already been extended, but for now, the instruments with their famous names are helping to attract audiences to the quarter's performances, particularly in China, where Tzavaras likens their attraction to that of 'driving a fancy car'.

o where does the quartet go to from here? There's a possible Bartók cycle in the pipeline on the Camerata label, further collaborations with contemporary composers, and the recent publication of 38 Chinese folk arrangements by Jiang (including those from *Chinasong*) in sheet music form by the

Hucheng Company, meaning string players from both East and West now have access to these popular tunes in a classical-friendly format. If any group can make the case for popularising these works it's the Shanghai players, as Tzavaras points out: 'We are able to traverse the language of Chinese folk music and equally to convey the dialect of Western classical music. Musically and aurally, it's an asset that separates us.'

Furthermore, the ensemble remains committed to making the case for the works of many and varied composers without arrogance or ego. 'Once you put yourself ahead of the composer, it's over,' says Weigang Li. 'You may hear well-performed music, but it won't be from the heart. We strongly believe in serving the composer; in being the medium to convey great works to an audience.' It's a philosophy directly at odds with the cult of the 'star' that thus far has dominated Chinese classical music, yet one which has served the group well throughout its professional life. As the Shanghai Quartet's influence continues to be felt, a new generation of young players may well follow in its footsteps.

