

World Journal

TAN Longjian Performing in the Bay Area, Promoting Chinese Classical Music “Xiansuo”

Reporter: Richard Lee

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Gordon Lee, TAN Longjian, and LIN Ling. Photo by Richard Lee.

Photo provided by Tan: Tan Longjian studied from the sole successor of the “xiansuo” tradition—Aisin Gioro • Yuhuan, the 5th generation descendent of Emperor Daoguang.

Professor TAN Longjian, the specialist of the “study of xiansuo” at China Central Music Conservatory, along with the zheng professor LIN Ling, is visiting the Bay Area this week. They have come to perform at the closing ceremony of the 4th International Aimusic Festival. Professors Tan and Lin have stated that in the Qing dynasty there was the “xiansuo” school, or the study of xiansuo music. This music can be considered the “classical music of China.” This type of music was passed down in the court, but after the democratic revolution in 1911, it has largely faded into oblivion. Today, not many people know about it even in China.

As described by the Aimusic Festival program: in the Ming and Qing dynasties, there was the imperial “xiansuo school” specializing in string ensemble performance employing both plucked and bowed instruments. This music was created for accompanying the songs of monthly verses. Including the leap month, there are thirteen suites total. These suites were later brought out of the palace and became popular among the blind performers in the capital. In 1814, a scholar named Rongzhai compiled the scores of these ancient tunes in the Chinese notation system, titled *Reference Collection of String Music (Xiansuo Beikao)*.

TAN Longjian is a Chinese sanxian virtuoso, educator, music theoretician, and senior professor at Central Music Conservatory. She has held over 30 sanxian solo concerts in China in recent years, in addition to almost a hundred performances of works ranging from traditional to modern in various formats in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Germany, France, Finland, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Estonia, Great Britain, Iceland, the US, and India. LIN Ling is a renowned zheng virtuoso, a professor at China Music Conservatory, and was acclaimed as “a top-notch zheng performer” by the Hong Kong newspaper Wen Wei Po.

Starting in 1984, Professor Tan spearheaded and organized the research and performance of the nearly lost classic *Xiansuo Beikao*. She performed the collection live twice in its entirety with three other musicians at the 13 Xiansuo Suites Concert in 1986 and 2009. She studied under Aisin Gioro • Yuhuan, the sole successor of this xiansuo tradition, the 5th generation descendent of the Qing Dynasty Emperor Daoguang (1782-1850), and re-notated the Sanxian parts of these 13 ensemble suites. Her efforts have saved this precious part of Chinese cultural heritage from being eternally lost.

“What we perform this time is the Qing dynasty court music from 300 years ago. In fact, what China is missing is our own classical music.” Prof. Tan commented that what most people identify as Chinese classical music is not really what has passed down over the hundreds and thousands of years in China, but is rather imitations of such, or even music with added Western elements. Since the establishment of her team, for 25 years they have been searching: “We have never stopped searching—what is the real Chinese traditional music?”

The director of Aimusic Festival, Gordon Lee, indicated that the International Aimusic Festival was launched with the goal to promote Chinese music overseas, and Professor Tan can be considered a Chinese classical musician of national treasure status, specializing in the endangered Xiansuo Beikao tradition. With the presentation of Professors Tan and Lin this time, he hopes to let the audience meet the real “treasure.” Although the topic of Chinese classical music does not generate a lot of excitement easily, “we still must persist, or it will all be gone.”