

# WHISPERS FROM THE

By Assistant  
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For three decades our only acquaintance with Chinese pianism has been through a few voluntary exiles such as Fou Ts'ong. Now with the political opening of their country to the West, young Chinese pianists are beginning to come forward in ever-increasing numbers. Connie Yin Zhang of the Royal College is only one example of this new wave. Recently a member of our Court, Malcolm Troup, Emeritus Professor of the City University, was in China as head of a "People to People" delegation of pianists and piano teachers, sponsored by the US-based Citizen Ambassador Program. The following are some of his impressions of a country where the piano is generating enthusiasm as never before.

**AFTER A PUNISHING THIRTY HOUR FLIGHT**, my first impression of the People's Republic of China was not a reassuring one. On enquiring if anyone had come to meet me, I was at first taken to be a plain-clothes policeman, one of many en route to the Interpol conference in Beijing. On learning that I was a mere pianist, I was hastily brushed aside in an airport which, like the hotels I was afterwards to stay in, was aswarm with Americans all desperate to "get in on the ground floor" – to pour their money into a country which promised such undreamt-of markets to those with venture capital to burn.

But all was not lost. Out of my travel-weary eyes, I saw a rejuvenative sight – a svelte young Chinese woman holding a sign aloft with the one word "Troup" on it. Restraining any impulse to press her to my heart, I allowed myself to be guided unresistingly to a waiting car and thence into the Beijing night. Liping was to be our guide, interpreter and ministering angel rolled into one, during the whole of our official visit to the People's Republic. And "People's" it is – the feeling of classlessness, informality and utter naturalness in human relations soon made me aware how stilted we Westerners must appear to this amiable race, on whose lips laughter is never far away – only our gartered and belted aristocrats come anywhere near capturing this gloriously laid-back attitude.

The hotel was palatial – more a city than a hotel – and in this it had the precedent of the Forbidden City, the term used to describe the former imperial palace, to go by. A shiny black (or white) grand piano on a central dais is a standard feature of Chinese five star lobbies, as are the encircling boutiques selling everything from ginseng to cultured pearls. But I was more of a mind to be swallowed up Jonah-fashion in my white marble whale of a bath than to swallow any such tourist bait, however alluring.

Morning brought a rude awakening from these indulgences. In China, everything begins betimes. Looking down groggily from my window at break of day, I could already see the citizens of Beijing limbering up with tai-chi or other Buddhist keep-fit exercises in the grounds of a nearby temple. These are now open for prayer and meditation as never before. My first meeting was over a gargantuan breakfast at 7.30a.m. in an outside dining hall with a self-service table running its full length, on which were displayed everything from scrambled eggs to dim sung. Then it was time for a first encounter with all the twenty two international delegates who had elected to join this pianistic voyage of discovery. I was impressed at how no-one tried to pull rank, each introducing himself or herself in plain English (there is no gainsaying its universality!) with a pithy but self-deprecating tone, which made us take the speaker at once to our hearts. As one good soul remarked, even if we never strayed further than that meeting room, we would emerge enriched by what we had to learn from, and communicate to, one another. The thought of countless Chinese lying in wait for us 'out there' did nothing to daunt us in our purpose, but rather served as an extension of our newly-gained mutual trust.

We were all agog to have the overall plan of action explained to us by the emissary of the US-based Citizen



Professor Troup (behind board) with some of the delegation.

Ambassador program which, together with the Chinese International Cultural Exchange Centre, had put together a challenging itinerary for our benefit.

Everything was to be subordinated to giving us the most exhaustive experience of the role of the piano in present day China – from the arts kindergarten level through to the Beijing Normal University; from the private adult education institutes to the pre-professional Conservatoire courses; from teacher through to composer; from music publishing to the factories where the actual instruments were being mass-produced. For in China, as we were to discover to our surprise and delight, culture is not peripheral but central in the estimation of the rulers. Indeed, power is not considered plenary unless validated by culture, so that the capacity to win international competitions is a sign both regime and country are on the right road. Just as Stalin reputedly found time to give a "masterclass" to Prokofiev and Shostakovich on the music they should be composing, so did Chairman Mao, on one famous occasion, liken the activity of a good Party apparachik to "playing the piano"; (for his actual words, please see my editorial in the forthcoming issue of "The Piano Journal".) And the piano in itself has been one of the most potent symbols in China since the "Liberation" – not only (as in the West) as the notorious status symbol of the bourgeoisie, but as a symbol of modernisation as against the feudal associations of China's traditional instruments, or cosmopolitanism in the sense of opening up the country to the West, and of scientific advance.

For us, being sent on such a pianocentric mission seemed nothing short of a nine-days' wonder (it lasted in fact fourteen days) – almost an aberration on the part of a People to People program more accustomed to dispatching high powered scientists, technocrats and captains of industry to remote corners of the globe. For the Chinese, on the other hand, it seemed the most natural choice in the world – giving importance where importance is due. As you can imagine, China (this country of freshwater pearls) was to be our proverbial oyster!

The coming days would follow the usual round – boarding the coach at crack of dawn to be whisked off to the centre of town in journeys of anything up to two hours at a stretch – such is the lordly scale of Chinese town-planning, not to speak of the solid wall of traffic where everything on wheels, from bicycles to tanks, is to be found. On arrival at our destination – (let us assume it to be a Conservatoire), we were ushered into the largest hall where, around an imposing table, had been laid out bottles of mineral water and teacups with covers, to keep in the warmth of the endless supply of green tea. A speech of welcome in Chinese recounting the past history and present strengths of the establishment and introducing the personnel, with frequent pauses for instant translation on the part of our ever resourceful Liping, would call for a reply from myself as official spokesman. With this out of the way, we could begin the real business of the day in the form of a round-table