

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC

discussion where no punches were pulled. Each of our subject areas could come freely to the fore – Sondra's on the access of China's minority cultures to such educational advantages, mine on the paucity of contemporary repertoire in the curriculum (a sore point, this!), Ejnar's on the roles of folk-singing and dancing, Vivien's on examination syllabuses, Bunty's on aural training, Vicky's on problems of small hands (a recurrent one for Chinese women), Nina's on piano technique, etc. Then depending on circumstances, performances by young pianists at different levels of development matched by performances on ethnic instruments (which we made a point of insisting on, hearing as much for our own interest as for keeping East and West on an equal footing), sitting in on lessons or, in some cases, giving performances and masterclasses of our own.

What did we learn from all this and what did we hope to accomplish?

What we learned was that, since the 1980s, China has enjoyed an unparalleled explosion of enthusiasm for everything connected with the piano, comparable only to Western Europe in the 19th century. Thanks to imaginative governmental schemes and to the havoc wrought by the Cultural revolution, what used to be available only to the Chinese intelligentsia is now within the reach of common man. But for the driving force we must look to the sociological factor – the governmental banning of more than one child to a family. Now instead of having to eke out the family pittance among a lot of hungry siblings as before, there is more than enough left over for piano lessons. (What odds psychiatrists would lay on the future mental health prospects of a society made up of only children and, what is more, predominantly male as a result of female foetuses being customarily aborted, was not gone into). We also learned that pianists in China have often had to take on the role of "culture heroes" – as in the case of Yin Chengzong who singlehandedly saved the piano in the darkest days of the Cultural Revolution, by mounting one on the back of a truck and driving it into the middle of Tiananmen Square, where he mollified the rampaging Red Guards with his piano transcriptions of revolutionary songs.

As for what we accomplished, some days had to pass before it dawned on us what our mission was to be. The Chinese Communists who turned on their Soviet buddies in 1960, may have got rid of the latter's political and economic strategies but they failed dismally to get rid of much of the cultural conditioning, most conspicuously where piano technique is concerned. After all, it was White Russian refugees who set up the first Shanghai Conservatoire and the Red Russians who moved in to finish the job between 1945 and 1960. Over and over again our ears were assailed with the brilliant-at-all-costs percussive sound quality which comes from a high busy finger action with little allowance for arm- and shoulder-weight in moulding phrases. Articulation is all very well but not when one becomes unpleasantly conscious of the jarring thud of finger against key, with all that entails. This drew attention to yet another shortcoming; the lack of any aural awareness of the sounds being produced. In short, the whole psycho-physiological reflex mechanism, with its aural and tactile feedback, was far from functioning at its optimum and we were not surprised to find evidence of tendonitis among more dedicated students. Because of our visits to arts kindergartens (the selection process for the musically talented begins early in China) we were aware that this kind of technical orientation reached to the very roots of the system, so would not be easy to challenge, let alone change. All we could do was raise the question – our invariable standby – so as to provide our hosts with an excuse for raising it themselves with their superiors when the opportunity arises.

Whatever the antiquated Soviet "finger school", genius has a knack of winning through and one of our most cherished memories was of an 11 year old girl, Wu Qian, at the Shanghai Conservatoire in a shining performance of Beethoven's Sonata Opus 2 No. 3. Curiously enough, I had scarcely got back to London before undergoing a similar revelation on hearing young Connie Yin Zhang, formerly of the

Shanghai Conservatoire, and now studying at the Royal College, when she played the "Waldstein" in the Beethoven Intercollegiate Piano Competition, in which the Musicians' Company has figured so prominently.

Another memory is of our visit to the privately-endowed Shimake Arts Training centre, a gracious building in the middle of slums, where children, denied the opportunity to further their musical studies at the state's expense because of tight selection procedures, come after school to learn Western and Chinese instruments. The Centre has no governmental support and subsists entirely on parental payment of fees along with some sponsorship from the Shimake firm in Macao. An aged "man of the people", who had sailed the seven seas and by the look of it had lost a tooth in every port, acted as our English-speaking compeer for a heart-warming unofficial talent parade, which made up in enthusiasm whatever it may have lacked in finesse. Afterwards Bunty Newport led the revels with her musical games, while Ejnar Kampp (of the Royal Danish Academy of Music) rounded the evening off with a folk celebration in which all could join.

A similar sort of experience befell us in Guangzhou (Canton) where a motherly Madame Zhang led us by the hand up several flights of stairs to her private Hi Ying Piano School, which offers courses to young and old alike at a nominal fee. The fact it is open at all, Mondays to Fridays after school hours and Saturday afternoons, is a tribute to Madame Zhang's selfless dedication and iron determination. A dozen upright pianos are in constant use in the three classrooms, which are all she can afford to rent. During the ten years of the school's existence, we are the first official visitors – the first small token show of encouragement. On our churlishly complaining of the poor quality of the editions from which the performers appeared to be working, we were told that there was no money to buy music and the school had to rely on whatever she could find. So moved were we all by this spectacle of triumph in adversity that we vowed that we would ransack our music cabinets for whatever we could spare in the way of music and other relevant material.

From Guangzhou it was but a few hours in the train to Hong Kong – being regaled the while by cautionary TV tales about upright Communist lads going to wrack and ruin in such capitalist fleshpots. Our last afternoon was spent in the reassuringly "raj" atmosphere of the Hong Kong Academy of the Performing Arts where my friend Tony Camden, now Dean of Music, had invited me to give a recital and to address the Academy assembly on our shared experiences in a country of which they are soon to form a part. After the somewhat primitive conditions of the Conservatoires in the People's Republic, we could only marvel at the pampered life-style of the students here – one or two of whom were actually from China. Most of them were dreaming of post-graduate scholarships in American universities or British music colleges when not of jobs in Western orchestras, with nary a thought to spare of the rude awakening which awaited them in but a year's time. That evening we gazed down over the length and breadth of Hong Kong harbour from the penthouse restaurant of the World Trade Centre, during what was to be the first of two farewell banquets.

What we had been through may not overnight have made us better teachers or performers, but it had made us better and more loving human beings, not only in terms of our own small group of twenty two, but in terms of the whole long-suffering Chinese people of whom we had encountered a cross-section on our travels. It was as if we were trying on garments for size – call them brotherly love or altruism if you like – which had long been absent from our Western wardrobes, where "enlightened selfishness" is the name of the game.

If nothing else, our fortnight in China had taught us that, far from it being a case of "never the twain shall meet", the sooner we temper our Western individualism with a healthy dose of Chinese collective consciousness, the nearer we will be to realising our common humanity in its full potential.