

Orchid Ensemble Puts Twist On Traditional

by Holly Brown
Staff

The Orchid Ensemble features a multicultural mix of music styles and provided a great performance. While I was a little unsure of what to expect before the concert started, after the music began I was continually moved and entertained until the show ended.

The group hails from Vancouver and consists of three talented artists. Lan Tung provided vocals and played the erhu, a Chinese, two-string violin one plays with the bow fixed between the strings. Haiqiong Deng played the zheng, which is a Chinese zither, but with raised strings that allowed her to push them down to raise the pitch after the string was plucked. Jonathan Bernard provided percussion for the group, using a variety of traditional instruments as well as Arabic and Indian drums.

Their varied repertoire definitely kept the show interesting, and while all the pieces were artistically appealing, I couldn't help but pick a few favorites.

"Xiao He Tang Shui," arranged by Lan, was a new interpretation of a well-known Chinese folk song. While at its core this piece is about a woman missing her lover, Lan explained that the lyrics create a sense of ambiguity, focusing on the imagery of the song's nighttime setting rather than the topic of love. This contemplative, dark piece was enhanced greatly by dynamics and Lan's vocals, which created almost a sense of flowing water with their bends and slurs.

Another of my favorites, "El Ginat Egoz" – or "Into the Walnut Garden" – was a collaborative piece between the Ensemble and the Transylvania Choir. The lyrics of this composition were taken from a biblical passage, and the performance as a whole depicted the joy and longing that the writer feels in his communion with God. While there were points when the large choir seemed to overpower the three instrumentalists, overall both groups played off each other well and created a truly gorgeous work. The erhu's part was especially enthralling in this number, giving cries of pain and rapture as nimbly as a human voice.

"From a Dream," was another particularly appealing piece. It was composed as a reflection of the beauty and eternalness of China's Yellow Mountain. The group preceded the performance of this selection with a description of the varied weather at this location, and their performance reflected that instability. At times this piece expressed the calmness of a sunny day, and at others the dissonant tumult of a natural disaster. The erhu was again a key element in expressiveness and at times the percussion created all the clatter of a rainstorm.

The final number, "Bengalila," also presented an enchanting blend of sound and culture. While the piece had strong Indian influences, it wasn't restricted to a definite raga (set of rules for usable pitches that is typical in music from this nation). While this element of freedom was given to the piece, the group did present the tonic throughout the entirety of the composition. This was most obviously featured on the zheng, which was bowed for the only time in this concert in order to create a drone. While the piece started out quite slowly, its gradual progression created a sense of unfolding that soon blossomed into a lively, enthralling number.



(Left to right) Lan Tung, Haiqiong Deng and Jonathan Bernard, the Orchid Ensemble, fuse Asian and Western styles.

With an excellent demonstration of exotic instruments, talented musicianship, and the expression of a multiplicity of cultures, The Orchid Ensemble definitely convinced me that they were worth experiencing. While the group has left Lexington behind for a continuation of their tour, a few of their performances are available for viewing online at <http://www.orchidensemble.com/>.