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Critic's notebook: Echoes of Chinese homeland

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As a student arts journalist far from my home in the Hunan Province in China, I have been experiencing many aspects of American culture that are new to me.

For instance, I never imagined combining shrimp and ground corn mush before I came to Charleston and ate this amazing dish — shrimp and grits! Likewise, I never knew there could be fabulous chemistry between Western and Chinese instruments until I came to Spoleto Festival and listened to Huang Ruo's "Flow I & II" heard last week in the Spoleto Festival's Chamber music series.

In this work, Ruo incorporated the pipa, a Chinese instrument that originated in the Qin dynasty (200 BC), with Western instruments, the cello and violin.

Images came to my mind as I listened. The first section (pipa and cello) was like a dance between a Chinese ancient dancing girl and a Western gentleman. In a light silk gown, the girl is spinning, with fringe flying out. She moves with feline grace. And the gentleman is escorting her with steady steps. They are looking at each other fondly. The fire is flaming.

In the second part, the man's sister (violin) joins them. The sister is dancing in tune with her brother. The Chinese girl is so shy that she lightly follows them. The three people move in great harmony.

When you hear the music, you would feel like the rippling stream is flowing over stones. Along the stream, a soft breeze is stirring bamboo leaves. China, this oldest of nations, is slowly unfolding before you.

The sound of pipa is like a refreshing stream, coming from the mysterious Eastern country and flowing into your heart. It lets you approach Chinese culture, understand it and appreciate it. China might still be mysterious to you, but at least you find something intriguing about it, something you never knew before.

In a recent interview, Huang Ruo told me that as a Chinese-born musician he feels duty-bound to innovate, using his inheritance of Chinese culture and the arts. The combination of Chinese and Western elements makes his music distinctive and relatively different to the ears of Western audiences.

When "Flow I & II" ended, the whole audience stood up, clapping. The woman sitting near me told me this is the best music performance she has heard in the past six years of the Spoleto Festival. I felt very proud that Chinese arts and artists can excite Western audiences. And I am also very glad about this new fusion of Eastern and Western culture during our time of globalization.

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