



Lan Yuan Dunedin Chinese Garden



Charlie and the Èrhú 二胡

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Communication without words.

With a history ranging back 4000 years, the erhu is one of the most important Chinese instruments. Although it has only two strings, the music can convey a wide range of emotions.

While the erhu has been called the Chinese violin, it differs from the western instrument in many ways. It is played vertically, resting on the musician's lap, it has no fingerboard, so the player's fingers must hold and vibrate the strings by pressing only against the strings themselves, the bow, made from horse hair, is already fixed between the two strings, and the bow is either pushed forward or backward to catch a string. Music resonates from the instrument's wooden drum which acts as a natural amplifier. Intonation is one of the instrument's greatest challenges as different positions and degrees of pressure can dramatically change the free-floating strings' pitch.

The erhu is incredibly expressive, capable of imitating sounds from chirping birds to neighing horses. Its melodies can be tender, sonorous or stirring and somber, a quality suitable for conveying the grand pageant of China's history and the emotions of its people.

We are delighted to have Charlie Yu coming from China to the Garden and sharing his talent with us over the next few months. Every year he and his wife spend time with their daughter and her family here in Dunedin. While he's here, he likes to spend time in the Garden (often a whole day!) practicing his Erhu and interacting with us and our visitors. It is a real pleasure having him around.

He also is a very talented painter, sometimes bringing his Chinese

brush paintings along. We weren't aware that he is also very good at Tai Chi until we saw him practicing with a visitor one day! He is a man of many talents and such a lovely person. While his English is limited, his creativity and lovely nature have taught us that through music and art there is a way to connect to people.

We do hope that you'll be able to see him and his erhu at one of your next visits to the Garden. Feel free to have a chat with him and sit and listen to his wonderful music.

Interview with Charlie

Q: Can you tell us something about the instrument you are playing? What makes it unique from all the other musical instruments?

Charlie: Erhu has over 1000 years of history, which starts from the Tang Dynasty. It was called Xi Qin and originated from a minority located in the north of ancient China. It has two strings, regarded as a two-strings fiddle.

The erhu is always tuned to the interval of a fifth. The inside string, which is nearest to the player, is generally tuned to D4, and the outside string is tuned to A4. This is the same as the two middle strings of the violin.

The erhu is used as a solo instrument as well as in small ensembles and large orchestras.

Erhu is one of the traditional Chinese folk instruments. The sound is quite unique; it makes mellow sounds, light and sweet sounds, relaxing and calm. It seems that each rhythm has its own breath to

express the emotions. For example there is a a song called Grassland Festival. The song describes Mongolian nomadic people assembling to celebrate their festival by singing and dancing, looking forward to a bright future.

Q: Is it hard to learn? How long did it take you to learn before you can play a tune?

Charlie: In my opinion, it's not hard to learn, but it's difficult to be a master.

The playing technique is, you can see, the bow with slackened hairs which are made of horsetail woven between the two strings. The right hand is used to hold the bow and create enough tension to stroke the strings properly by pushing and pulling. The left hand technique includes the placing of fingers and sliding and pressing on strings for various tunes, vibrato and pizzicato.

Generally, it takes a few months to play a simple tune or simple songs.

Q: Is erhu a common instrument to play in China?

Charlie: Erhu is a common instrument in Chinese folk music performance as a solo instrument, in small ensembles, and in large orchestras. The erhu is the most popular of the hu qin family of traditional bowed string instruments. It's a very versatile instrument, used in both traditional and contemporary musical performance, such as in pop, jazz, and even rock. It makes a calm sound.

Q: When did you start learning the instrument? How did you fall in love with it?

A: When I was 13 years old, my dad took me to a concert. I suddenly fell in love with the melody and the sound of erhu, and it was haunting in my mind for a few days. From that time, I started to learn erhu. I have been playing erhu for over 50 years. The erhu always accompanies me. It's a part of my life.

Additional information sourced from [here](#)

