How far back must we go to find the origins of formal or organized music? Beethoven composed his 5th Symphony between 1804 and 1805, and Mozart’s Magic Flute was composed in 1791, the same year as the composer’s death. Johann Sebastian Bach began composing his Toccata and Fugue in D Minor in 1703, and in 1723, his contemporary, Antonio Vivaldi, was composing The Four Seasons in Venice. At the heart of the Italian Renaissance, in the time of Michelangelo (who sculpted the Pieta in 1497), there were two significant advances in music: the arrival of printed music, which followed on the heels of Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in 1450, and the newly developed viola de gamba, which gave rise to the emerging trend for homogeneous ensembles.

But what music existed before the Renaissance? We know that the Gregorian chants, which began in the 9th century, were early forms of communal music in Europe. But centuries before that, there were the instruments and music of China.

The history of Chinese music must be approached with awe, as there is written documentation of countless forms of music in connection with folk festivals, religious events and in the courts of hundreds of emperors and princes of dozens of dynasties and periods, dating centuries before the development of formal organized music in Europe.

Confucius, China’s foremost philosopher, who lived about 2,500 years ago (or approximately 500 BCE), is credited with setting the tone for traditional Chinese music. He was a prominent music teacher and talented musician who could play several instruments expertly, and he believed that music was an essential part of education:

“To educate somebody, you should start with poems, emphasize ceremonies and finish with music.”

Musical knowledge, according to Confucius, was essential to higher learning and of the six most important areas of study, music was ranked second only to the study of rituals and public ceremonies. Starting in the time of the Zhou Dynasty, which began in 500 BCE, and for centuries thereafter, music played a crucial role as an important pillar of Chinese society. By the time of Confucius, several instruments were already prominent: the Qin (also known as Guqin), a 7-stringed zither with over 3,000 years of well-documented history, as well as multiple varieties of Guqin.
bamboo pipes.\textsuperscript{vi} Other Asian instruments such as the Erhu (a bowed stringed instrument) and the Pipa (a plucked stringed instrument, similar to a lute, with a history going back more than 2,000 years) were introduced in subsequent dynasties.\textsuperscript{vii}

The courts of the Han dynasty (3\textsuperscript{rd} century BCE to 3\textsuperscript{rd} Century CE) divided music into two categories: banquet music (yanyue) and ritual music (yayue.)\textsuperscript{viii} Ensembles of musicians were quite large and sources show that musical life at court included multiple stringed instruments, including the Guqin.\textsuperscript{ix}

The emperors of the Han dynasty greatly increased music. Emperor Wu Di, who lived from 140 to 87 BCE, established and expanded the imperial music bureau,\textsuperscript{x} which supervised court music and military music. Emperor Liu Zhang had 3 orchestras, while Emperor Tai Jhon had ten.\textsuperscript{xi}

The centuries of the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 CE) are filled with formal imperial ceremonies that included large orchestras of bells, stone chimes, flutes, drums and zithers, plus large bands of dancers.\textsuperscript{xii} The Erhu was introduced during the Tang dynasty.\textsuperscript{xiii} The volume of court music during the Tang dynasty is so large that it is generally divided into two types: standing music (performed without strings and usually in the outdoor courtyard) and sitting music (for a full ensemble played inside the palace.)\textsuperscript{xiv}

Copies of paintings from the Tang Dynasty depict large ensembles of strings, winds and percussion. While no orchestral scores have been found, one solo piece for Qin survives, along with 28 ritual melodies for Pipa, discovered in the hidden libraries of the Buddhist caves of Dunhuang.\textsuperscript{xv} Clearly, Chinese musicians had developed a system of musical written notation that pre-dates the musical notation developed in Europe.

While the enjoyment of music began as a privilege of the upper class, the Tang dynasty expanded music to the common people and began the development of several forms of Chinese opera.\textsuperscript{xvi} Many music education institutions were established, and music emerged for popular enjoyment in temple fairs and restaurants.\textsuperscript{xvii} By the time of the Song Dynasty (960 - 1279), music as a public amenity was completely developed and mature Chinese opera began. It was at this time that many instruments were developed and became extremely popular, including the Pipa (lute), Zheng (mouth organ featuring bamboo pipes), various bamboo flutes and the Xiao (or a vertical flute, unlike the Dizi which is played horizontally.)\textsuperscript{xviii}

The Yuan Dynasty (1260 – 1368) saw the emergence of prosperous Chinese opera, with great artists and works that are still performed today.\textsuperscript{xix}

The vast array of instruments used in ancient China can also be traced to the influx of foreign ideas and materials, thanks to the trade route that became known as the Silk Road. For example, the Konghu (harp) can be traced across Central Asia to an ancient kingdom in what is now southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq.\textsuperscript{xv} During the Tang Dynasty, musical ensembles and instrumentalists were brought to China from the Turkistan trade centers, in regions we know today as Uzbekistan, India and Korea.\textsuperscript{xvii}

Musical instruments in the Chinese tradition are vast and divided into 8 categories, known as bayin,\textsuperscript{xx} based on the materials used in the construction: silk, bamboo, wood, stone, metal, clay, gourd and skin. Silk instruments are mostly stringed instruments, as the Chinese used twisted silk for strings. Chinese orchestras commonly use woodwinds, percussion, bowed strings and plucked or struck strings. There are multiple instruments in each category.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

Woodwinds: there are approximately 15 different woodwind instruments in China, and the term generally refers to bamboo instruments such as Dizi (side-blown bamboo flute with finger holes and a membrane), Suona (double-reed wind instrument with a wide metal bell at the end), Guan (a cylindrical double-reed instrument made of hardwood or bamboo), Paixiao (or Pan pipes), Hulusi (a free-reed wind instrument with three bamboo pipes
Prelude

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Instruments

inserted through a gourd; one pipe has finger holes and the other two are drone pipes, much like the bagpipes) and Zheng (free-reed mouth organ made with bamboo pipes with finger holes, inserted into a chamber.)

Percussion: there are over 75 different percussion instruments in Chinese music, and are made of wood, stone, metal, skin, clay and gourd. Several more popular examples include Paigu (a set of 3 to 7 drums played with sticks), Luo (a flat, circular metal disc which is hit with a mallet) and Cymbals (concave brass plates struck against one another or struck separately with a stick, much like the cymbals used in western music.)

Bowed strings: there are roughly 50 different bowed string instruments in China, and just a few examples are the Erhu (a two-stringed fiddle), the Zhonghu (a low pitched two-stringed fiddle), the Banhu (a two-stringed fiddle with a coconut resonator and wooden face), the Jinghu (a high pitched two-string fiddle), and Gehu (a four-stringed cello-like bass instrument.)

Plucked and struck strings: there are 20 different plucked or struck stringed instruments and the most popular are Guqin or Qin (a 7-stringed zither), Yueqin (a plucked lute with a wooden body, a short fretted neck and four strings, tuned in pairs), Yangqin (a hammered dulcimer), Guzheng (a 16-26 stringed zither with movable bridges), Ruan (a moon-shaped lute in five different sizes), Konghuo (a harp), Liuqin (a small plucked lute, fretted, with a pear-shaped body and four strings), Pipa (a pear-shaped fretted lute with 4 to 5 strings), Zhu (a zither similar to a Guzheng, but played with a bamboo mallet) and Sanxian (a plucked lute with a snakeskin-covered body, with a long and fretless neck.)

As you listen to The Butterfly Lovers at our Masterworks concert, featuring soloist Sirena Huang, listen for the distinctive breathless sound of the Erhu that she will recreate on the modern violin. We hope this piece will introduce you to the vast body of Chinese music waiting to be explored and enjoyed.

Ancient Chinese Notation

Please join

the HSO

for The Butterfly Lovers, plus Stravinsky’s The Firebird and selections from Carmen. This is a concert filled with beautiful and romantic music that befits a Valentine’s weekend celebration.
INTERESTED IN HEARING OTHER EXAMPLES OF CHINESE MUSIC?

This basic video will introduce you to Chinese classical instruments:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyoi1MCwiEg

This video invites you to learn about four different Chinese instruments: the Guzheng, Guqin, Pipa and Xiao:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxeAKt_b86Q

Listen as a traditional Chinese orchestra performs Heavenly Home and see if you can name the instruments, based on what you’ve learned in this Prelude:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XODBpMvJGo

Enjoy this sample of music featuring a virtuoso Erhu musician and small ensemble:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIEHm_IPD7I

If you’re curious about the Erhu, this video will serve as a further introduction:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJ2O7vQfeiE

WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC WILL SOUND?

Try HSO’S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you’ll hear on our concert stage – and more!

Please enjoy The Butterfly Lovers performed in 2011 by the Yale Symphony Orchestra:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9H59w1hkBbs

Here’s your chance to hear Stravinsky’s Firebird performed by the Vienna Philharmonic and conducted by Valery Gergiev at the Salzberg Festival in 2000:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZkIAVGlfWk

Love opera? Listen to this full performance of Carmen by Bizet:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_VkflthWHo
Want the best recordings of the pieces you’ll experience on the concert program? **Coleman Casey**, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

There are many wonderful recordings of orchestral selections from Bizet’s **Carmen**, but the most exuberant features Charles Dutoit and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, captured in beautiful sound (DECCA).

Stravinsky’s **Firebird** is spectacularly interpreted and recorded by Pierre Boulez and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (DG).
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