



Actor David Wang tells the story behind each song's creation and its relation with Chinese poetry and culture. — Ti Gong

A showcase of Chinese poetry in Western classical music

Yao Minji

Austrian composer Gustav Mahler's masterwork "Das Lied von der Erde" used German adaptations of French and German translations of ancient Chinese poems as the source of the text.

One such translation by Judith Gautier mistakenly interpreted Li Bai's (AD 701-762) "Banquet to Tao's Family Pavilion" into "Le Pavillon de Porcelaine." The Chinese character *tao* denotes both the family name and porcelain.

For years, the mistranslation had made it challenging for academics and musicians to trace the original poem behind the Mahler's third movement "Of Youth," but famed bass-baritone Shen Yang enjoys such incidents of cultural exchange.

"Some people, including academics, say that classical music inspired by Chinese poetry fails to catch the ambiance or spirit of the original prose," Shen told Shanghai Daily during a recent interview.

"I disagree. That's the fun of such cultural exchanges, where we can find lots of examples when we learn about foreign culture through translations."

Last week, Shen held a concert "Variations of Jade — The Journey of Tang Poetry," in which he sang 17 songs inspired by Chinese poetry in seven languages. The concert also featured

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Shen Yang
Chinese bass-baritone singer

engineer-turned-pianist Zhang Yiming and actor Wang Yaoqing who told the story behind each song's creation.

Shen, who came up with the idea of this concert 10 years ago, chose the 17 songs from more than 500 that he has discovered over the years. Most of these songs were created by European composers between the 19th and 20th centuries, thanks to the publication of several translations of Chinese poetry.

Gautier's "Le livre de Jade," which

includes the mistranslation of *tao* into porcelain, was among the publications that made a lot of impact and led to many musical creations. About half of the concert's program are songs inspired from poems in this translation.

"Das Lied von der Erde' is very famous, but many people don't know that Mahler wasn't the only one, or the fact that many composers around that time created works that used Chinese poetry as text sources," Shen explained.

"Many were performed and then forgotten, that doesn't mean they are not great works, or that they don't deserve to be brought to stage again. Often-times, whether a piece of work can be remembered is pure luck. Many masterpieces that we know so well today were forgotten for decades or even more than 100 years."

About 90 percent of the songs in the concert are performed for the time in China, and are also rarely performed abroad, posing a challenge for the pianist who basically has to learn many new songs. It also poses a challenge to both musicians to deliver such new sound to audiences.

Shen invited his friend David Wang, a famed Taiwan actor, to help tell the story of how the songs were created, hoping that will bridge the gap with audiences. Many of the songs have touching stories that are not widely known.

For example, some of the last songs

composed by Czech composer Pavel Haas (1899-1944), who was murdered during the Holocaust, were a set of "Four Songs on Old Chinese Poems."

"Just imagine this," Shen said, pointing to "Far Is My Home, O Moon" in the concert program, No. 3 of the set. "In the last days of this Czech composer in the concentration camp, he resonates with this Chinese poem."

It is one of the most famed ancient Chinese poems. The first two lines have been used or adapted in many Chinese novels or songs.

"The bright moon shines over the sea, and from far away we share this moment together."

It is the most famous poem of Zhang Jiuling (AD 678 or 673-740), who served as a minister. He could not have imagined that some 1,200 years later, a Czech musician resonated with his poetry in a different language, and another 80 years later, a Chinese singer sang the famous lines in Czech at a classical music stage in Shanghai.

"This is not a concert that we will expect clapping, in fact, we won't leave space for audiences to clap," Shen concluded.

"Because the applause belongs to our ancestors who created such wonderful texts that inspired artists from far away, and to those artists who resonated with culture from another world and created something new and aspiring."