

'Distant' sounds come together in harmony

The Foundation for Chinese Performing Arts presents "Distant Rhythm," Saturday evening at Jordan Hall, Boston.

By KEITH POWERS

In the early 70s, critic Jon Landau wrote presciently of his first Bruce Springsteen concert: "I saw rock and roll's future." One

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might say the same for classical music after Saturday evening's polymath presentation by the Foundation for Chinese Performing Arts, titled "Distant Rhythm," at Jordan Hall.

The music came from sources East and West: Lou Harrison, Philip Glass, Bright Sheng, Chen Yi and Yang Yong. The musicians, and their instruments, likewise: Lynn Chang (violin), Robert Schulz (percussion), Wu Man (pipa), Carol Ou (cello) and Xu Ke (erhu), among others. One thread that ran through all the works was the fearlessness of each composer when faced with blending mature yet completely different musical traditions.

We're not talking crossover here, that bastard stepchild of a musical genre. We're talking intelligent sonic explorations of gorgeous instruments. The program began with the recently departed Harrison's "Varied Trio," which showcased Schulz's musicianship and his dazzling percussion kit. Chen Yi's "Ning," ruminating on the notorious Rape of Nanking, showed off the string talents of Chang, Ou and Wu Man, whose pipa, a lute-style instrument held upright and plucked like a banjo as well as strummed, blended seamlessly with its Western counterparts.

"Ning," rotating solo lines for all three players, had many of the same sonic textures as the great guitar works of Rodrigo or Sor. Chen Yi's music has been receiving an increasing number of performances locally of late, and she is a composer worth seeking out.

Xu Ke then offered Wang Jian-Min's "First Erhu Rhapsody," demonstrating the surprising volume and clarity offered by that two-string violin, also played upright. (Idlers in Harvard Square have been treated to a fine erhu busker the past few summers.) Glass' "A Sound of a Voice" proved the only disappointment of the evening, sounding awfully recycled from some of his other chamber pieces. A brief choreographed piece from Bright Sheng was gracefully interpreted by Chang and Boston Conservatory dance student Xiao Lin Fan.

The evening's conclusion, Yang Yong's "Distant Rhythm," for which the program was named, epitomized the spirit of the event. The string quintet had violinist Chang anchoring the center of the stage, with Xu Ke and violist Meng-Hsun Chuang stage right, Wu Man and Ou to his other side, their arc a symbolic bridge from one musical culture to another.