



HARTFORD
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA®

PRELUDE

APRIL 2023 MASTERWORKS #7

BEETHOVEN BY THE RIVERS • APRIL 14 - 16, 2023

You may not know the name Xian Xinghai, but you will never forget his story. A fatherless child, born into poverty, taunted by his peers, Xinghai used music as a revolutionary tool to protest the Japanese occupation of what was then Manchuria. Allegedly, he composed the Yellow River Canata in just six days while living in a cave during the Sino-Japanese war, or the War of Resistance, as it is known in China as, during which some 20 million Chinese citizens, mostly civilians, were killed.

Xian Xinghai was born on June 13, 1905 in Macao (on China's southern coast), the child of parents from the Guangdong province of China.ⁱ His father died before he was born, and his impoverished mother, struggling to survive, drifted from place to place with her child.ⁱⁱ Xinghai first learned to play clarinet at the age of 13, when he attended a YMCA charity school attached to Lingnan University in Guangzhou, China.ⁱⁱⁱ Determined to learn music, at the age of 20 Xinghai decided to teach himself to play the violin.^{iv} When he began, his peers called him 'Chicken Killer' because the terrible sound of his cheap violin resembled a chicken's squawk.^v He did not give up, and in 1926, he entered the National Music Institute at Peking University to study music.^{vi} Just two years later, in 1928, he entered the Shanghai National Music Conservatory to study violin and piano.^{vii} Xinghai's refusal to accept defeat in the face of many obstacles became a constant theme throughout his life.

In 1929, he went to Paris under government sponsorship, and just two years later, in 1931, he became the first Chinese student to enroll in the Paris Music Academy, where he studied composition with Vincent D'Indy and Paul Dukas (well-known



Xian Xinghai

composer of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.)^{viii} During this period, he composed *Wind*, *Song of a Wanderer*, his Violin Sonata in D Minor, among other works.^{ix} He became the most outstanding student in the class and received an award, but when asked which award he preferred, his response was simple: meal tickets.^x

As a student from a different country that the French viewed as culturally inferior, Xinghai faced discrimination in France.^{xi} In the summer of 1935,



Xian Xinghai

he opted not to remain in France, and, instead, he returned to China, determined to use music to help invigorate his motherland.^{xii} Sometime after his return to China, he came to Yan'an, where he accepted a position as Dean of the Music Department at the Luxun Conservatory of Music.^{xiii} It was in Yan'an that Xinghai reached the peak of his artistic creativity.^{xiv}

During the second Sino-Japanese War^{xv} (1937 – 1945), Xinghai wrote vocal works to encourage the people to fight the Japanese. The rousing text and titles of his songs were all intended to rouse his countrymen to defeat the Japanese invaders: "Saving the Nation," "Non-Resistance, the Only Fear," "Song of Guerrillas," and "Children of the Motherland,"

MASTERWORKS
SPONSORS

The Edward C. & Ann T.
ROBERTS
FOUNDATION

The Elizabeth M. and Harriette
M. Landon Foundation



among countless others.^{xvi} It was during this period, in 1939, that Xinghai composed his famous “Yellow River Cantata,” a work written for piano and voice, even though there was not a single piano in Yan’an at the time.^{xvii} Allegedly written in just six days while he was living in a cave, the work is a seven-movement cantata (with text by Guang Weiran)^{xviii} that uses traditional Chinese melodies and the image of the mighty Huanghe (Yellow River) as a symbol of defiance against the Japanese invaders.^{xviii} The opening text of the cantata is:



Xian Xinghai

“Sons and daughters of China, who among you is willing to be slaughtered like pigs and sheep? We must resolve to be victorious, to defend the Yellow River! To defend northern China! To defend all of China!”^{xix}

In 1940, Xinghai traveled to the Soviet Union for a final period of work in conjunction with the composition of a score for a full-length documentary for the Chinese government, known as *Yan’an and the Eight Route Army*.^{xx} Just prior to his departure on the project, he was invited to dine with the Chinese leader, Chairman Mao Zedong.^{xxi} While in the Soviet Union, Xinghai worked under the alias of Huang Xun, as he was a well-known composer in China and wanted to work in anonymity.^{xxii} In 1941, while Xinghai was working on the project, Germany invaded the Soviet Union.^{xxiii} When Xinghai attempted to return to China by way of Xinjiang, the local anti-communist warlord, Sheng Shicai, blocked the escape routes, with the result that Xinghai found himself trapped and stranded in Alma Ata, a city in Kazakhstan.^{xxiv} Destitute and alone, Xinghai struggled to survive. He became so weak that he is said to have fainted while standing in a queue to buy rice.^{xxv}

We would know nothing of Xinghai’s life in Kazakhstan were it not for a man named Dina Haijia, who was first secretary of the cultural department of the Chinese Embassy in Kazakhstan during the late 1990s.^{xxvi} While it was widely known that Xinghai went to the Soviet Union in 1940 and died in Moscow in 1945, little else was known of his life during that period.^{xxvii} It was Ding Haijia who uncovered the story, after following many clues, meeting insiders and finally discovering the only person alive who had actually met Xinghai during his time in Kazakhstan.^{xxviii}

Sometime in November of 1942, the Kazakh musician/composer Bakhitzhan Baikadamov saw a painfully thin man sitting on his suitcase near a fence, wearing nothing but a light sweater and holding a violin.^{xxix} Baikadamov spoke only Kazakh and Russian, and Xinghai spoke English and French, but despite the language barriers, it was clear that Xinghai was desperate, with nowhere to go.^{xxx} Baikadamov’s daughter explained, “My father just took his hand and led him to us.”^{xxxi}



Statue in Kazakhstan

Baikadamov provided Xinghai with a home, having no idea of his true identity, as Xinghai was then utilizing the name Huang Xun.^{xxxii} Xinghai was well-known in China, but he was completely unknown in Kazakhstan. Baikadamov’s daughter went on to explain the relationship that developed between her father and Xinghai:

“Xian and my father always sat together. My father played the dombra and Xian took notes for the melody. Then Xian played the violin and father checked whether Xian was right or not. That’s how they learned the Kazakh national folklore and culture together.”^{xxxiii}

Xinghai stayed in Kazakhstan, and the generosity of the people made it possible for him to continue to compose.^{xxxiv} Some of his most famous works,

including *Amangeldy*, a symphonic work in honor of the Kazakhi national hero, Amangeldy Imanov, was composed during that time.^{xxxv} Given his years of chronic malnutrition and hardship, Xinghai suffered from chronic lung disease and died on October 30, 1945, in a hospital in Moscow.^{xxxvi} Although World War II had ended, he never had the chance to return to China.^{xxxvii}



Xinghai in Museum in China

Today in Alma Ata, the town where Xinghai lived in Kazakhstan, two boulevards are named after the composers Xinghai and Baikadamov. In addition, a monument was erected to the Chinese composer which reads,

“Xian Xinghai has built a bridge of friendship between the two peoples with his music. May his name be remembered forever, and the China-Kazakhstan companionship be passed on from generation to generation.”^{xxxviii}

The friendship between Xinghai and his Kazakh friends was made the subject of a movie entitled “The Composer,” the first film co-produced by China and Kazakhstan.^{xxxix} The film trailer may be viewed here: <https://mubi.com/films/the-composer/trailer> The film, by director Xierzhati Yahefu, was screened in 2019, and took top prizes in the Golden Screen Awards that year.^{xl}

During China’s cultural revolution (1966-1976), a time when all Western art was forbidden, the pianist, Yin Chengzong, arranged the *Yellow River Cantata* into a concert for piano and orchestra called the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*.^{xli} Yin Chengzong began to perform the concerto in public in 1970 and in 1988,

a decade after China opened its doors to the world, pianist, Riccardo Caramela, became the first Western pianist to perform the piece in China with a Chinese orchestra, the Beijing Radio Symphony Orchestra.^{xlii}



“The Composer” Movie Poster

Thankfully, the world premiere of the piece, performed by Yin Chengzong, was recorded and may be viewed here: [Piano Concerto “Yellow River” by Yin Chengzong: the 1970 Premiere - YouTube](#)

PLEASE JOIN US!

APRIL 14-16, 2023

Please join the HSO to hear Xian Xinghai’s uplifting *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, alongside Smetana’s nationalistic *Moldau*, and Beethoven’s immortal Symphony No. 6, known as the *Pastorale*, in a performance by the Hartford Symphony Orchestra entitled *Beethoven By The Rivers*, April 14-16, 2023.

Did you borrow this Prelude? Get your own free copy! Whether you’re a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to rsovrnsky@hartfordsymphony.org. We’ll make sure you receive Prelude by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!

Have we sparked your interest in Xinghai and an exploration of the music of other Chinese composers?

Check out these recommendations:

Tan Dun, famed composer of the sound track for the film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is a prolific modern composer who may be seen here, conducting his *Zheng Concerto*:

[Tan Dun: Zheng Concerto \[1/4\] - YouTube](#)

To hear more of Tan Dun, here is a clip from his widely popular Water Concerto:

[Water Concerto - Tan Dun - YouTube](#)

Qigang Chen, a Chinese composer living in France, was music director of the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics. His *Joie Eternelle* for trumpet and orchestra was brilliantly performed by soloist Alison Balsom, with the Beijing Philharmonic, at the 2014 BBC Proms:

[Alison Balsom plays Qigang CHEN's "Joie Eternelle" for trumpet & orchestra at BBC Proms 7/19/ 2014 - YouTube](#)

Ye Xiaogang is one of the greatest contemporary Chinese composers. He studied at the Eastman School of Music and is the founder and the artistic director of the Beijing Modern Music Festival. He holds positions as the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, the Xinghai Conservatory of Music, and the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, among others. Enjoy his composition, *Cantonese Suite*:

[XIAOGANG YE - Cantonese Suite - YouTube](#)

An example of one of many the patriotic songs composed by Xinghai, *Song of the Yellow River Boatmen*, may be heard here, and includes a translation of the lyrics as they are performed:

[Song of the Yellow River Boatmen - a Chinese patriotic song by Xian Xinghai - YouTube](#)



WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND?

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

A performance of the Yellow River Piano Concerto by pianist Victor Ong with the Asian Cultural Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Dedic Wong Deli:

[Yellow River Piano Concerto - Asian Cultural Symphony Orchestra - YouTube](#)

黄河钢琴协奏曲

亚洲文化乐团

Enjoy a recording of the Boston Symphony performing Smetana's *Moldau*:

[Smetana - Vltava \(The Moldau\) - YouTube](#)

Watch a recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, "Pastoral," conducted by Paavo Jarvi:

[Beethoven: Symphony No.6, "Pastorale"; Jarvi, DKB - YouTube](#)



L to R: Xinghai Stamp, Xinghai Statue, Xinghai Stamp Set

CASEY'S CLASSICS

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.

Smetana's *The Moldau* is given tremendous forward thrust and magical tone colors by George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra (SONY).

The *Yellow River Piano Concerto* has gradually entered the repertoire since the early 1970s when it was premiered, to the point that there are now several recordings. But the version by Adrian Leaper and the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra will give pleasure and is very inexpensively priced (NAXOS).

Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 is so beautifully conducted and played with Karl Bohm and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (DG) that one feels immediately in the best possible hands as the performance unfolds with utter naturalness.



Poster from "The Composer"

REFERENCES

- i [Xian Xinghai: Short-Lived but Not Forgotten \(chinaculture.org\)](http://chinaculture.org)
- ii Ibid
- iii [Xian Xinghai age, hometown, biography | Last.fm](http://Last.fm)
- iv [Xian Xinghai: Short-Lived but Not Forgotten \(chinaculture.org\)](http://chinaculture.org)
- v Ibid
- vi [Xian Xinghai age, hometown, biography | Last.fm](http://Last.fm)
- vii Ibid
- viii Ibid
- ix Ibid
- x [Xian Xinghai: Short-Lived but Not Forgotten \(chinaculture.org\)](http://chinaculture.org)
- xi Ibid
- xii Ibid
- xiii Ibid
- xiv Ibid
- xv Note that the first Sino-Japanese Wars took place in 1894 to 1895, a war between the Empire of Japan and the Qing Dynasty primarily over influence in Korea. The treaty signed in 1895 acknowledged Japan's victory. In 1937, Japan invaded China as part of a campaign to establish Japan as a world power.
- xvi [Xian Xinghai: Short-Lived but Not Forgotten \(chinaculture.org\)](http://chinaculture.org)
- xvii Ibid
- xviii Ibid
- xix [Feature: Chinese composer Xian Xinghai's works inspired by strong ties to Kazakh people - Xinhua | English.news.cn \(xinhuane.com\)](http://xinhuane.com)
- xx [Xian Xinghai: Short-Lived but Not Forgotten \(chinaculture.org\)](http://chinaculture.org)
- xxi [Xian Xinghai age, hometown, biography | Last.fm](http://Last.fm)
- xxii [Feature: Chinese composer Xian Xinghai's works inspired by strong ties to Kazakh people](http://xinhuane.com)
- xxiii [Xian Xinghai age, hometown, biography | Last.fm](http://Last.fm)
- xxiv Ibid
- xxv [Xian Xinghai: Short-Lived but Not Forgotten \(chinaculture.org\)](http://chinaculture.org)
- xxvi [Feature: Chinese composer Xian Xinghai's works inspired by strong ties to Kazakh people - Xinhua | English.news.cn \(xinhuane.com\)](http://xinhuane.com)
- xxvii Ibid
- xxviii Ibid
- xxix Ibid
- xxx Ibid
- xxxi Ibid
- xxxii [The Composer \(2019\) - MyDramaList](http://MyDramaList)
- xxxiii Ibid
- xxxiv Ibid
- xxxv Ibid
- xxxvi Ibid
- xxxvii Ibid
- xxxviii Ibid
- xxxix Ibid
- xl [China-Kazakhstan Ties: Co-production 'Composer' to screen later this year - CGTN](http://CGTN)
- xli [Xian Xinghai age, hometown, biography | Last.fm](http://Last.fm)
- xlii Ibid