

PRELUDE

NOVEMBER 2023 • MASTERWORKS #3



HARTFORD
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

Ravel & Debussy November 10 – 12, 2023

The name Huang Ruo may be somewhat familiar to opera devotees, but this composer is certainly well-known to HSO's Music Director, Carolyn Kuan, who conducted the 2014 American Premiere of Huang Ruo's opera *Dr. Sun Yat-Sen*, at the Santa Fe Opera. Most recently, Carolyn conducted the 2022 world premiere of Ruo's new opera, *M. Butterfly*, which also took place at the renowned Santa Fe Opera.



Huang Ruo

Huang Ruo currently serves on the composition faculty of the Juilliard School and the Mannes School of Music in New York. He is also the Artistic Director/Conductor of Ensemble FIRE, an adventurous group dedicated to the future of new music, specializing in multi-media and cross-genre projects.ⁱ Ruo is one of those unique artists who has his feet firmly rooted in classical musical tradition, but who advocates passionately for new music and the future of the orchestral art form.

Ruo was born in 1976 in Hainan Island, China, the year the Chinese Cultural Revolution ended.ⁱⁱ His father, a composer, began to instruct Ruo in composition and piano when he was six years old. But, as Ruo noted in a recent interview, it's difficult for a child to accept instruction from a parent. When a terrified and stage-struck Ruo suffered a memory lapse during a piano recital of a Bach piece, and then began to improvise in the style of Bach, one of Ruo's piano teachers told his father, "I don't think he's going to be a pianist. But I think he can write music."ⁱⁱⁱ

At the age of 12, Ruo was sent to Shanghai to study.^{iv} It was the 1980s and 1990s, and China was opening its doors to western influences, so Ruo received both

a traditional Chinese and a Western education at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.^v Ruo's exposure to opera began early in life, and in an interview about his recent opera, *M. Butterfly*, he explained his early upbringing:

"In every village in Hainan, there is a communal open-air space, like a square. During the day, people would bring their clothes to dry and to put the rice out to dry... Occasionally, there were Hainanese opera troupes that came to the village to perform in the open square. And my grandmother took me there to see opera."

"My grandmother never attended school because she was a woman, and her family was poor. But she got her education by watching opera. Opera was for everyone: men, women, the elderly and the young. She learned stories and moral lessons, and she taught these to me."^{vi}

As a result of the dramatic cultural changes in China after the Cultural Revolution, Ruo's education included not only Bach, Mozart and Stravinsky, but the Beatles, rock and roll, heavy metal and jazz.^{vii} After winning the Henry Mancini Award at the 1995 International Film and Music Festival in Switzerland, Ruo moved to the United States to further his education.^{viii} He earned a Bachelor of Music degree from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and both

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a Master of Music and a Doctor of Musical Arts degrees in composition from the Juilliard School.^{ix}

In 2012, Ruo began his collaboration with David Henry Hwang, an American Playwright,^x a relationship that continued with *M. Butterfly* and other projects. Both Ruo and Hwang feel it is vital to tell stories of so many Chinese Americans who, despite being raised or born in this country, “are often treated like foreigners.”^{xi}



David Henry and Huang Ruo

One of their early collaborations, *An American Soldier*, was inspired by the true story of Private Danny Chen, the American-born son of Chinese immigrants, raised in New York’s Chinatown, who enlisted in the U.S. Army right out of high school against his mother’s wishes.^{xii} During his six weeks in Afghanistan, Chen’s superiors showered him with daily racial slurs and on one documented occasion, threw rocks at him. Just months after his enlistment, the 19-year-old Chen was found dead at his base with a self-inflicted gunshot wound.^{xiii} Written on his arm, in black marker, were the words: “Tell my parents I’m sorry.” Chen’s death helped to drive legislation signed by President Barak Obama in 2013, that required new reviews of the military’s response to hazing.^{xiv} The original one-hour version of the opera was performed at the Kennedy Center in 2014, and the subsequent two-act version had its world premiere in 2018 during the Opera Theatre of St. Louis Festival.^{xv}

The issue of anti-Asian hate has become more pronounced since (and because of) the recent pandemic, a fact noted by Ruo in an interview with the New York Times about the creation of his more recent opera, *M. Butterfly*. Ruo, now a father and resident of New York City, observed the spike in hate crimes and the impact on his own family:

“I took my kids out biking after the severe attack on a Filipino woman in Times Square (in 2019.) I basically disguised them and myself. We all wore masks, they had helmets on, and I had a hat, so we all looked less Asian. That was the first time

I felt I had to disguise myself in America. Normally, Asians and Asian Americans want to be seen and heard. For a long time, we have been complaining that we are invisible. But that was the moment that I wanted to be invisible. I did not want to be seen or identified.”^{xvi}

Ruo feels a strong obligation to advance music and stories that are uniquely Asian, and which are more relevant to his culture and the issues being faced by Asian-Americans today.^{xvii} As a teacher, however, Ruo is adamant that every student be encouraged to find his or her own voice:

“I never want to teach my students to write in my style. Quite the opposite. I tell them that I am like the earth, and they are the seeds. If they are an apple seed, I don’t want to grow them into a tomato plant or a cherry tree. I can provide the tools, but they must be the ones to struggle and to find their voice.”^{xviii}

Since this weekend’s performances will include the harmonica, an unusual instrument on a classical stage, below is a brief harmonica history.

It is surprising to learn that the history of the harmonica began around 1100 B.C. with the *sheng*, a Chinese instrument that features a bundle of bamboo tubes attached to a curved pipe.^{xix} A free reed, a strip of flexible metal, vibrates when a musician blows into the holes of the *sheng* to create musical tones.^{xx} The modern-day harmonica was created in 1780 by Christina Gottlieb Kratzenstein, a Dutch physician and physicist.^{xxi} Over the next century, music-minded inventors reduced the size of the device, calling their creations *harmonium*.^{xxii} A young instrument maker named Christian Friedrich Buschman created an instrument with metal reeds which he called “The Aura.”^{xxiii} The pocket-sized “mouth organ” was created by a European inventor named Richter in 1825.^{xxiv}

Mass production of harmonicas began in Vienna in 1829 and it didn’t take long before harmonicas

were produced in other cities as well.^{xxv} Christian Messner, and his cousin, Christian Weiss, were clockmakers living in Trossingen, Germany, who, in their spare time, began to produce harmonicas of such good quality that they developed a very successful business.^{xxvi} Their enterprising efforts, however, were soon subsumed by another clockmaker in Trossingen named Matthias Hohner.^{xxvii} Hohner was not a great musician, but he proved to be an excellent businessman. He produced his own harmonica and quickly bought out his competitors.^{xxviii} By 1862, he began exporting harmonicas to the United States, which became his largest market.^{xxix} Hohner went from making 87,000 instruments in 1880 to 2.1 million in 1892, with 90% of his sales in North America.^{xxx}

Today, the name Hohner is the most well-known harmonica brand. The Chromatic harmonica (which includes a button on the side that allows for all notes to be played), was also developed by Hohner. The harmonica quickly became known as a “blues” instrument and Chicago, a major center for the blues, boasted great harmonica players including Little Walter,^{xxxi} born Marion Walter Jacobs, in 1930. Although he died prematurely in 1968, some still consider Little Walter to be the greatest blues harmonica player.^{xxxii}

Need proof? Watch this wonderful recording of Little Walter:

[Little Walter Walter's Jump - YouTube](#).

Want more? Here's an audio version with more from Little Walter:

[Little Walter - The Blues Harmonica Legend - YouTube](#)

Today, the harmonica is frequently featured in jazz, as well as classical music forms.



Vintage Hohner



Little Walter



Huang Ruo

Please join the HSO on November 10-12, 2023, to hear Ruo's *Folk Songs for Orchestra*, along with Michael Spivakovsky's Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra, Debussy's *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune (Afternoon of a Faun)* and Ravel's *Ma mère l'oye (Mother Goose Suite)*.

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 dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org We'll make sure you receive Prelude by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!

Did Little Walter's harmonica spark your interest? Here are some more links to some of the great harmonica players:

Cy Leo, our featured harmonica soloist this weekend, performs the Bach Cello Suite No. 1 in G. Major:

[\[Official MV\] Bach Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major, Prelude - Cy Leo - YouTube](#)

Another great player, Christelle Berthon, will stun you with a gorgeous rendition of Gershwin's *Summertime*:

[Summertime G Gerschwin - CHRISTELLE BERTHON - YouTube](#)

Here's Philip Achille performing live at the BBC proms in 2007:

[Chromatic Harmonica Classical Music Larry Adler's Genevieve Harmonica British Film Music - YouTube](#)

Didn't know the harmonica could sound like that?

Check out the brilliant playing of Philip Achille here, with his marvelous version of Dave Brubeck's *Take Five*:

[Take Five - Chromatic harmonica \(Philip Achille\) - YouTube](#)

Here's Philip Achille performing the jazz classic, *Fly Me To The Moon*:

[Fly me to the Moon // Harmonica \(Philip Achille\) - YouTube](#)

Hooked on harmonica yet? Enjoy Jason Keene performing Duke Ellington's *Take The A Train*:

[Take The "A" Train -- Jason Keene plays Chromatic Harmonica - YouTube](#)

And just one more: Willi Burger on harmonica, in a performance of Piazzola's *Oblivion* with the Sinfonica de la Juventud Venezolana Simon Bolivar conducted by Rafael Payre.

[Astor Piazzolla Oblivion - Willi Burger armonica cromatica - YouTube](#)

Want to learn more about Huang Ruo and his music? If so, we hope you will explore some of our recommendations:

Enjoy a wonderful conversation about *M Butterfly* between David Henry Hwang (librettist) and Huang Ruo (composer):

[The Santa Fe Opera 2022: World Premiere of 'M. Butterfly 蝴蝶君' by Huang Ruo & David Henry Hwang - YouTube](#)

Listen to a very special discussion with Huang Ruo at the Asia Society about the creation of an opera sung entirely in Cantonese, which also features HSO's Music Director Carolyn Kuan as part of the conversation:

[Huang Ruo: 'Opera with a Cantonese Flavor' - YouTube](#)

If you know nothing about Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, or the opera of the same name, this conversation between Huang Ruo and Charles MacKay (Director of Santa Fe Opera) explores the American premiere of the opera:

[Huang Ruo: Composer - YouTube](#)

To learn more about Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the father of modern China, listen to this discussion between Huang (composer) and the librettist:

[Meet the Artists of VOX's Dr. Sun Yat-Sen - YouTube](#)

Two clips from the opera, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, may be heard here:

[DR. SUN YAT-SEN: Love Duet \(Corinne Winters and Joseph Dennis\) - YouTube](#)

[DR. SUN YAT-SEN: The Soong's Duet \(MaryAnn McCormick and Gong Dong-Jian\) - YouTube](#)

The story of *An American Solider* may be heard here:

[An American Soldier @ Opera Theatre Saint Louis - YouTube](#)



Huang Ruo



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!

Delight in Huang Ruo's *Folk Songs for Orchestra*, performed by the BBC Symphony, led by Sir Andrew Davis:

[Huang Ruo: FOLK SONGS FOR ORCHESTRA 《交響民謠》 \(performed by BBC Symphony Orchestra & Sir Andrew Davis\) - YouTube](#)

Enjoy the first movement of Spivakovsky's Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra, performed by the brilliant soloist Philip Achille, at the opening of the Vienna Music Festival in 2008:

[Concerto Harmonica Spivakovsky 1st Mov with Orchestra Harmonica concerto Music A Classical Harmonica - YouTube](#)

To hear the full version of the concerto, listen to this recording, featuring soloist Tommy Reilly:

[Michael Spivakovsky \(1919-1983\) - Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra - YouTube](#)

Enjoy Debussy's *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* (*Afternoon of a Faun*) with the London Philharmonic, conducted by François-Xavier Roth:

[Debussy: Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune | François-Xavier Roth & London Symphony Orchestra - YouTube](#)

Listen to Ravel's *Ma mère l'oye* (*Mother Goose Suite*) with Eka-Pessa Salonen conducting the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra:

[Maurice Ravel: "Ma mère l'oye" with Esa-Pekka Salonen | NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra - YouTube](#)

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.

Michael Spivakovsky's Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra is splendidly performed by Tommy Reilly and the Munich Radio Orchestra under the baton of Charles Gerhardt (CHANDOS).

Debussy's revolutionary and fabulous *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* receives a classic performance from Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (DG).

Maurice Ravel's sublimely beautiful *Ma mère l'oye* is unforgettably recorded by Pierre Boulez and the Berlin Philharmonic (DG).



Huang Ruo

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