

Reaching for the Sky: Wu Man Pipa Journey



Born and raised in Hangzhou, Wu Man's musical talent became apparent at an early age. She began playing pipa at age 9 and demonstrated an unusual interest and sensibility to the instrument. At 13 she competed against hundreds of other pipa students to gain entrance to the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. Her performance at the audition caused a media frenzy, and the piece Dance of Yi People that she played became a required piece for future auditions. With vigorous training under the guidance of master teachers, Wu Man developed a strong command of pipa techniques. After completing the high school division as a star student, she was admitted to the Conservatory's undergraduate division. This was during the 1980s, when the Cultural Revolution was finally over and China became open to Western ideas. Many Western musicians, including Seiji Ozawa and Isaac Stern, visited China at that time and left a lasting influence. Wu Man began to look toward the West. Once completing her undergraduate studies, she was admitted to the Graduate School of the Conservatory, and in two years became the first recipient of a Masters Degree in Pipa Performance. During these two years, she further advanced her musical study, performing at local theaters and concert halls, and recording for TV and movie soundtracks. She also visited the U.S. for the first time during this period. The warmth of the American people left an indelible impression on her. After graduating in 1987, she attended the Edinburgh International Festival and began to appreciate the diversity of music in the world. She returned to China and competed in a national traditional music competition, taking first place after extremely grueling trials. Around this time, she also appeared in a movie as a sword-fighting kung fu girl who played pipa as a disguise. After the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989,

Beijing was under strict government control. The country was suppressed into total silence: no music, no laughter, and no freedom of expression. Wu Man decided to leave. In 1990, Wu Man moved to the United States and settled in New Haven, Connecticut where she met her future husband Peng. They married the following year. Wu Man studied English in adult education classes and began to learn about American culture and customs. She later connected with Chinese musicians in New York and joined Music from China, an organization that presents traditional Chinese music in American venues. Together they performed in churches, high schools, museums anywhere they were invited where they reached Americans at a grassroots level. Soon Wu Man became known in music circles as a pipa master and connected with some of the most influential contemporary musicians such as Yo-Yo Ma, Tan Dun, Lou Harrison, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley, among many others. She was also invited to perform with the cutting-edge Kronos Quartet, and has performed with them regularly since then. During this time, many Western musicians were looking outside Europe for inspiration and Wu Man's pipa provided a bridge between East and West. Together they incorporated pipa into their music and composed music jointly. Wu Man works continuously with Yo-Yo Ma on the Silk Road Project to connect Eastern and Western music. Her own project, Wu Man and Friends, strives to expand music across borders and cultures, without walls or boundaries.

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