

Esa-Pekka Salonen
Music Director

Harrison: Concerto for Pipa with String Orchestra

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LOU HARRISON

BORN: May 14, 1917, Portland, Oregon

DIED: February 2, 2003, Lafayette, Indiana

COMPOSED: 1997

WORLD PREMIERE: April 26, 1997, at Lincoln Center in New York City. Wu Man was pipa soloist and Dennis Russell Davies led the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra

INSTRUMENTATION: Pipa and string orchestra

DURATION: About 26 mins

Lou Harrison was an American original, at once eclectic and unique. He was a quintessential creative Californian, absorbing the multicultural influences so prevalent on the West Coast and channeling them in highly original ways from his eccentric home removed from the bustle of the artistic centers.

He was fascinated by Asian music already during his student days at San Francisco State College. He became a regular visitor to Chinatown, developing a degree of connoisseurship through constant attendance at Chinese opera performances. In the early 1960s he finally visited the Far East, making trips to Japan and Korea in 1961 and to Korea and Taiwan in 1962. He plunged himself into hands-on study of the music of those regions; and although he never developed a deep affinity for Japanese music, the repertoires of China, Korea, and especially Indonesia, became evergreen inspirations.

The Pipa Concerto, Harrison's last large-scale work, which he wrote for Wu Man, places a single Asian instrument against the Western symphony orchestra. Even without the mixture of disparate instruments that characterizes many of Harrison's earlier pieces, this concerto is one of his great unclassifiable hybrids. Although the opening movement suggests the formality of a "classical" concerto, the following movements are truly *sui generis*. The second movement is a highly varied mini-suite that treats the pipa as a cameo soloist in different settings—a pseudo balalaika in the "Troika," a percussion instrument in "Three Sharing" (along with cello and double bass, all of them tapping out rhythmic patterns while the orchestra rests), an expressive Chinese soloist in "Wind and Plum," and a make-believe mandolin in "Neapolitan." The third movement lament offers one of Harrison's characteristically generous melodic lines—what he regularly called "the audience's take-home pay." The concerto finale is an estampie, a dancelike form from fourteenth-century France and Italy that here becomes a surprising virtuoso showpiece for the ancient Chinese lute.

—James M. Keller

An earlier version of James Keller's note appeared in the programs of the New World Symphony. ©James M. Keller