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Experiences from the 15th Congress of the Cimbalom World Association (CWA)

The Cimbalom World Association held its 15th congress in Hefei (China) from 26 to 31 October 2019. The congress was organized by the Chinese Conservatory of Music in Beijing and the Cultural Committee of Hefei City. The organizing committee was chaired by Li Lingling, a professor at the Chinese Conservatory of Music in Beijing and Vice-President of the CWA. The professor's students and colleagues helped in the organization. This was necessary as almost 800 people from 17 countries attended this large-scale event. Most of the participants came from Asia and cities in China. A Chinese delegation from Australia also came. Fewer people from Europe and America attended the event than first thought. According to the feedback, most of them decided not to apply because of the high travel costs and uncertain financial and political situation. I can safely say that those who did not attend the event missed out on a great experience! China has shown how much it supports culture and scientific development, even for us in such a small area as the culture of the cimbalom.

Hefei is the capital and largest city of Anhui Province with 8 million inhabitants. It is the political, economic and cultural centre of the province. The largest cultural centre of the city hosted the congress events: concerts, lectures and exhibitions. The congress's opening and closing events were held in the 2,500-seat theatre hall, the concerts in the 1,200-seat concert hall, the lectures in the 800-seat technically equipped lecture hall, and the exhibition in the huge foyer. Several hotels were available for the participants. Foreign guests stayed at the Hongrui Junling Grand Hotel, where the registration of the congress was also held. The hosts put great emphasis on making the foreign participants feel good and happy with everything. Each of us was greeted with great respect. I, as the President of the CWA and my husband, the secretary of the CWA were met at the airport with a large bunch of flowers and a TV crew. Only we represented Hungary. Slovakia was represented by my student Mykhaylo



Zakhariya, who is Ukrainian but now he is living in Slovakia, so he was considered as Slovakian. He presented a solo piece “Splinter” composed by Gyorgy Kurtag at the congress. This composition was the mandated piece at the competition in Budapest where he won the first prize. He also played Slovakian folk songs. From Switzerland Johannes Fuchs, the other Vice-President of the CWA, came to the congress; he is a folk musician and hackbrett maker (the hackbrett is the German name for hammered dulcimer). England was represented by



Atlas David Zaldívar Briseño

Sally Whytehead, board member of the CWA, and Geoffrey Smith hammered dulcimer artist. Geoffrey, an avant-garde artist, inventor and composer, brought his own compositions to the congress. There was one more supporting member from Europe, Manfred Keller, who represented Germany. From the United States hammered dulcimer artist Karen Ashbrook, board member of the CWA, participated in the congress. Mexico was represented by Atlas David Zaldívar Briseño, who presented classical works on his plucked salterio (Spanish name of the dulcimer).

From Australia a Chinese children’s group attended the event, led by their teacher, who played on the Chinese hammered dulcimer, yangqin. It was interesting that Chinese-born children in Australia, while preserving their traditional instrument, played Australian music, dressed with the design of the Australian flag



Australian yangqin ensemble.

The Santoor (the Persian name of hammered dulcimer) was presented by Mehdi Siadat from Iran, and he played Persian music. Two groups came from Seoul, Korea. One was the ensemble of the Korean Yangguem (Korean name of hammered dulcimer) Association led by Eunhwa Yun (her Chinese name is Yinhua Yin). The ensemble plays not only folk music but also popular music featuring a high level of technical skill, and most of pieces are composed by Eunhwa Yun.



Ensemble of the Korean Yangguem Association

The other was the folk music group of the Korean National Academy (Karts) led by Eunjoo Lee. They play the Chinese type of dulcimer, not the Korean type, but their music is based on Korean folk music and folk traditions.



KARTS Folk ensemble

The Japanese delegation consisted of four members. In their program, Junko Sakimura played on the Hungarian-type of dulcimer and Yoko Aoki played on the hammered dulcimer. Kenji Koide took photos, and most of the photos in this article are from him. Joining them on stage was Yanki Ma, who lives and teaches in Hong Kong, playing yangqin. Qu Jian Qing, our board member, represented Singapore with her student. Their duet was a composition by a Singapore composer. There were three young people from Malaysia who introduced the music culture of their country on the Chinese type of dulcimer. The team from Hong Kong

presented a program with a mixed music style, including world music. There were eleven members of Butterfly Studio from Taiwan who performed traditional Taiwanese music.



The Butterfly Studio from Taiwan

Schools from all major cities in China introduced themselves at the congress. Their performance was very wide range of musical styles from folk to classical music through jazz, and rock music was also presented. Teachers and their students played together.

Before the congress's opening ceremony, the leaders of the city, leaders of the organizing committee and a representative from the Ministry of Culture welcomed the leaders and representatives of the CWA at a dinner. At the opening ceremony, which was held in the theatre hall of the Cultural Centre, the Chinese Ministry of Culture, Mayor of Hefei City, President of the organizing China Conservatory of Music in Beijing and myself, as the president of the CWA, delivered a welcoming speech. The opening concert was presented by the host country. Their program featured yangqin in a variety of formats - with symphony orchestra; with chamber orchestra; with folk instruments; and solo. The Anhui Symphony Orchestra participated, with conductors from Taiwan and Singapore. China's most famous yangqin artists and teachers presented performances, with the star artist, the main organizer of the congress and the Vice President of the CWA, Mrs Li Lingling.



Li Lingling and the Anhui Symphony orchestra conducted by Ye Cong

The participants of this concert were also from a wide age range; from small children upwards we could see and hear representatives of the Chinese dulcimer.

In particular, I would like to highlight the children, who have stunned the audience with their disciplined behaviour and excellent playing. On the stage we saw and heard many types of yangqin, the most interesting of which was the small yangqin, which can be used not only for learning music but also as a toy for children. The instrument was designed and manufactured by the instrument manufacturer for the direct purpose of using this toy for children to enjoy. I have been recommending this to Hungarian instrument makers for over 30 years, but until now I have not succeeded in making the Hungarian cimbalom a child-friendly instrument.



Small yangqin for the children

During the concert, in addition to yangqin, various types of dulcimers were also introduced by performers attending at the congress. For this, a compilation was presented, featuring the playing of yangqin, hackbrett, hammered dulcimer, santur and cimbalom. As each instrument sounded, a film presented the country of the instrument players in the background.



Herencsár Viktória, Johannes Fuchs, Li Lingling, Mehdi Siadat, Geoffrey Smith

The film screening was not only shown for foreign guests but also during the Chinese program. The background film featured the characteristics of different regions of China.





After the concert a reception was held at the Hongrui Junling Grand Hotel with Chinese and European cuisine.

The next morning, the exhibition opened and the leaders of the instrument factories presented their products, which were not only exhibited but were also available for purchase. In China, there are 17 instrument factories making yangqin. Among them the three largest brought their products; the Beijing, Shantou and Hebei musical instrument factories. Each instrument factory produces approx. 6000 yangqin of different sizes yearly.



At the opening of the exhibition, instrument makers and performers together

The exhibition took place in the lobby of the building, where, besides musical instruments, musical instrument accessories and sheet music, the performances of leading artists and leading teachers were displayed on huge posters. A separate poster indicated the program of the congress and the names of the supporters. The exhibition featured a variety of yangqins of various sizes and types made in the factories which I mentioned earlier. The Chinese dulcimer

underwent much development since the establishment of the CWA. They have increased their range, and the newer models have a pedal system similar to the Hungarian cimbalom. Musical instruments could be tried and, of course, purchased. Instrument accessories included bamboo mallets, mallet cases and tuning keys, which are included with every yangqin when purchased, but can also be purchased separately, with different materials for the mallet's head, and more. Sheet music, CDs, and video recordings changed hands. For three days the music hall was loud, with musicians and teachers alike testing the exhibited instruments.



Photos of the exhibition



Lounge with photos of the participants and the instrument exhibition

At the congressional concerts all regions and schools of China, as well as the foreign countries, presented their dulcimer culture. The programs were varied and of high quality. Many of the teachers presented their own compositions, folk music, world music, and European classical music

style. It was good to hear and see the enthusiasm, great technique and musical sensibility of children and young people playing on their instruments. It was interesting how diverse the musical culture of the regions was when they introduced the regions of China, despite playing the same type of instrument. Inner Mongolia presented Mongolian traditions. In this area the Mongolian culture is heavily protected, not only in their music and clothing, but also in playing on the Chinese instrument, which is called yochin in Mongolia.



Inner Mongolia yangqin ensemble

Participants also came from the Uyghur area. Their tuning is different from standard Chinese tuning, so they can't easily play each other's instruments. The sound of their music is also completely different, their music is characterized by a tight, bouncing rhythm. Bamboo mallets are also used there, but the shape of the mallets is different and much harder than the Chinese mallets. Although they say that the Uighurs are related to the Hungarians, I did not understand anything in the Uyghur language as much as in the Chinese. The character of their music is similar to the Hungarian folk music.



The Uyghur performance

We could also often infer the musical style of the performers from their dress. Folk music artists performed in traditional dress, classical compositions were performed in very beautiful evening dresses, while performers of popular genres did not emphasize their attire.

In addition to the concerts there were lectures on the history, development, technical ways of playing and literature of the instrument. I presented my book “World of cimbalom”, which provides a complete overview of the international world of cimbalom. This book has been published in a Slovakian translation this year and I am planning to publish it in English next year due to the great interest. The Chinese have no problem translating texts because they have excellent translator programs that translate texts from any language into Chinese simultaneously. Through this I communicated with those who did not speak any other language than Chinese. We understood each other perfectly through the translation program.

It was a great surprise to me that Li Lingling, lecturer at the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing introduced my pedal technique on yangqin. In 2005, when I was invited as a guest professor to the Chinese Conservatory of Music, there was no pedal system on the yangqin. Then the Chinese instrument makers experimented with solving a pedal design on the yangqin. My pedal technique, which is widespread in Europe and which I teach to my students, of course, was introduced to Chinese students using the Hungarian cimbalom. And the students learned this technique on the cimbalom, because the Chinese Conservatory of Music bought several types of dulcimer, so that students could learn how to play other types of dulcimers. A few years later, the yangqin with pedal appeared which was not yet perfect. But now, at the congress, we saw instruments with a perfect pedal system, whose use was widespread among students at the Chinese Conservatory and now among teachers. When they bought a cimbalom, I thought they would distribute them in China, and later the Chinese instrument manufacturers would make cimbaloms. But that's not what happened. They maintained their national instrument by developing it further along the lines of the most advanced cimbalom type, the Hungarian instrument. My pedal technique has been incorporated into their instrument, which can now express perfect musical character.



Foot Pedal System

These instruments have the same or larger range than ours, because often the contra A is deepest and 4-line C is the highest, which is more than 5 octaves, while our instrument has less than 5 octaves.



Yangqin with pedal system

Between the lectures, we took time out for a meeting of our Association, where we welcomed our new members; talked about our work so far; made suggestions for the tasks ahead; and discussed suggestions for the next congress venue. As we were unable to decide on the next venue for the congress, the board of CWA suggested that this be decided at a later date and that everyone be notified in writing of the outcome. In two years, our Association will celebrate its 30th anniversary, so we need to consider the location of the 16th Congress to be a venue to celebrate it.

As usual, at the final concert we closed the congress with participants performing and playing together. As the congress had many participants, local teachers and soloists gave concerts separate to the foreign delegations, because if all the participants had played, the concert would have been very long. The concert opened with my performance. I presented my composition "The Sun and the Moon", which I wrote for the cimbalom and a symphony orchestra. The Anhui Symphony Orchestra collaborated with me conducted by Ye Cong, guest conductor from Singapore. The symphony orchestra's devoted and exemplary attitude to the works was demonstrated several times during the congress. Well-trained musicians

followed the conductor's instructions without a word during rehearsals and did everything they could to make the music a success. Their discipline yielded results, and all of the music pieces were highly successful with high-quality playing. The conductor's preparedness and attitude towards the pieces was exemplary. Ye Cong is a conductor of the Chicago Philharmonic and a conductor of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, and so he is well versed in interpreting both European classical and Chinese folk-inspired compositions. His professional musical knowledge has greatly influenced the music he conducts. My music was received with great enthusiasm by the audience and many people asked for the score.



I performed with the Anhui Symphony Orchestra conducted by Ye Cong



After the concert with the conductor

My performance was followed by a yangqin concerto by a Chinese composer, which he composed especially for this congress. Performers of the premiere were Wu Huanghuang, Teacher of the Beijing China Conservatory of Music and student of Li Lingling, with the symphony orchestra conducted by Ye Cong, who premiered the yangqin concerto „Time in Hands”. written by Wen Zhanli. This concert piece represented the European classical style.



Wu Huanghuang yangqin artist with Ye Cong conductor and the Anhui Symphony Orchestra

The orchestral peices were followed by programs of the delegations. At the end of the concert the participants played together according to our tradition. As the number of participants was very high, leading delegates and schools featured the prominent Chinese soloists in this performance. Even so, more than 60 dulcimers came to the stage and all the dulcimer types were seen and heard: santur, hackbrett, hammered dulcimer, cimbalom, yangguem and yangqin. This cimbalom orchestra was conducted by Taiwanese conductor Chih Sheng Chen and of course we performed a Chinese song called "Jasmine".



Concert finale. Everyone played music together.

The congress took place in a friendly, family atmosphere. Our programs have been influenced by the love for our instrument and its development, and respect for one another. Old friends were happy to meet again, and new friendships were formed. Young people could learn a lot at this congress, but there were many new things for the older generation as well.

Everyone said good-bye happily, with lots of unforgettable experiences, informative information from the congress and from each other so that we meet again in 2021. The day after the congress, a small team finished their stay in Hefei with sightseeing.



We thank the city of Hefei, the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing, the organizing committee and Li Lingling for the professional organization of the congress. We thank the participants for appearing in such large numbers and for considering it important to attend the congress which will help us improve our instrument.



The board members at the congress:

**Sally Whytehead (UK), Horváth István (H), Li Lingling (CN), Herencsár Viktória (H),
Johannes Fuchs (CH), Qu Jianqing (SG), Karen Ashbrook (US)**



Photo of the participants in front of the congress venue