

# Wu Man/The Circle Magazine Interview

BY MARIA BANKS



When Wu Man first enters the lobby of Westwood's stylish Palomar Hotel, she looks more like a casually-dressed soccer mom than the most famous pipa player in the world. Busily checking her smartphone for messages, she looks up, smiling like an old friend. After a hectic morning, she relaxes into her surroundings comfortably.

"Do you mind?" she asks as she removes a hearty sprout sandwich, offering half. "I've just come from lecturing 500 scientists at UCLA about the importance of music in their lives." Immediately it becomes apparent: this is an amazing woman, one who straddles many worlds.

Originally from Hangzhou, China, Wu Man quickly became hailed as a child prodigy in the Pudong School of pipa playing, studying at conservatories in Beijing before eventually migrating to the United States in 1990. Today she's widely recognized as one of the top pipa players in the world, the first Chinese-born artist to perform at the White House. Her innovative style has grown to incorporate Western classical influences and attract the respect of virtuoso collaborators Yo-Yo Ma and Isaac Stern.

Wu Man speaks with enthusiasm, imparting her love of music, as well as her dedication to revitalizing her cultural heritage. Here she speaks about what it means to be a world-famous performer bridging the gap between traditional Chinese culture and the modern Western world – as well as being a mother.

**CIRCLE:** Thanks for taking the time to meet with us today. It seems as though you have a hectic schedule. Is there anything that you do prior to going on stage, such as meditation, to get yourself ready in order to perform?

**WM:** I think of being a musician as part meditation and part performer. It's also very physical and you need powerful concentration. An actor uses his voice to speak; we use our instrument.

You have to remember the music and get out there. You're a performer. There's a whole theory about playing on stage. Before the curtain rises a lot of performers want to go to the bathroom because they're nervous and excited. It's not easy.

**CIRCLE:** What are some of the differences between Eastern and Western cultures that you hope to bridge?

**WM:** I grew up in China, studied traditional Chinese music. It's in my blood; it's in my body. Living in the States, what can I do? How can I work with other musicians to create something new, something different, more today, as a musician? I don't separate, okay, this is Chinese music, this is Western music. There's only music. That's my experience.

**CIRCLE:** Given you had an extremely different upbringing in China, how do you compare that to how you raise your son here in the U.S.?

**WM:** (Laughs)...Very differently. He's 13 now; a teenager. When I grew up in China, the whole parent/child relationship was very different. Kids basically grow up always listening to their parents. Parents are the boss; even if I were to disagree, I couldn't say...I had to follow what my parents decided for me to do. Music, basically, my parents chose for me. They said "pipa." They understood that it was a part of Chinese culture and very classical. A lot of literature and poems in ancient times describe it. It's a very intellectual and cultural instrument in China. The shape is also very elegant, feminine. I wasn't allowed to say no.

**CIRCLE:** How old were you?

**WM:** I was 9 or 10. It was in the 70's and we didn't have TV – no entertainment. We studied music. Learning to play became my playtime.

**CIRCLE:** When you began, how long was your day related to music?



**WM:** I had a normal elementary school day and afterward homework, and then I'd practice. Basically it's like any other artist, musician, or sports person that is successful. They also spend many hours practicing, and my experience was the same. I didn't have any playtime with my friends. Playtime was music.

It was very different from my son's world: homework, computers, Skype, games... I don't know if my experience was good or bad. But now when I talk to my parents, maybe it was good... because now I am!

**CIRCLE:** Maybe there was wisdom behind their choice.

**WM:** The concept is very different from Chinese culture to Western culture. With Chinese parents, in the early days the kids are kind of pushed, ordered to do this, no matter, yes, you have to do this. (That's what) I'm trying to do now. My son wants to learn the piano, do some sports, go to China and go to school. He says, "Mom, I hate it, I don't want to do it!" I say, "Fine, but you have to." He says, "Why?" I say, "No why. You have to!"

**CIRCLE:** Does it work out that way?

**WM:** He says, "Mom, I hate you, I hate you! I don't want to!" I say, fine, you will thank me later... Parents know their children better than they know themselves. That's a Chinese tradition. I look at

my son and see myself at his age. I know exactly what he's thinking.

**CIRCLE:** Does he play a musical instrument?

**WM:** Yes, he plays the piano. He started when he was six, so now he's been playing for eight years. Many times he says, "I want to quit." I say, okay let's quit. Are you sure you really want to quit? He says, "No." I tell him: I don't want you to be a musician, but you have to have some music (in your life). Music makes people think. Music makes people's brains smart.

A lot of people say they're not musical. I say no, everyone can sing. You don't have to sing opera, but you can sing. Everyone can move their body with the music. It's human; it's basic. It's good to start with children: the focus isn't on being a musician but on being an artist. You begin with art and it will open your mind. It doesn't matter if you want to be a scientist, a writer, dancer, or a chef. You'll still have music in your system and you will be a different person.

**CIRCLE:** I learned that your father is an artist and that you use some of his work on stage as backdrops.

**WM:** Yes, my dad is an artist.

**CIRCLE:** Who is your favorite visual artist and why?

**WM:** While I was in college I really enjoyed the Impressionist style of the French; Monet and Renoir. Van Gogh I saw as really strong. My father's style is classical Chinese; he uses brush and rice paper. But somehow the French artists give me imagination. I look at their paintings: soft colors, lotus blossoms on the pond. Then the strong colors of Van Gogh, exaggerated strong colors, I had never seen before. Like music, the contrast was very big. Like pipa music. We have different styles: military, strong, and then like a meditation, very quiet, soft.

**CIRCLE:** Would you compare that to the yin/yang of Taoism?

**WM:** Yes, very true.

**CIRCLE:** Do you have a favorite pop singer, star or movie?

**WM:** Filmmaker Ang Lee. He's not only a director, he's a scholar. I think even though he's in a commercial situation, I think his movies are never commercial. He's a good storyteller.

**CIRCLE:** Does any one particular movie stand out for you?

**WM:** His early movie - I did a soundtrack - Eat Drink Man Woman. The story is about the relationship of a man and his three daughters. The father is a chef; a lot of scenes in the kitchen, very enjoyable and funny.

**CIRCLE:** I love the subtlety of the visuals in your show, the Chinese calligraphy. It's very touching... along with your music, beautifully done. I don't know much about Chinese art, except they tend to paint landscapes that tell a story.

**WM:** Yes! That's the difference between Chinese music and Western music. Chinese music always describes something. Everything has titles like "Sunset" or "Temple Bells." Very poetic.

**CIRCLE:** One of your titles, "Footprints in the Snow," is very visual.

**WM:** That's very much Chinese music. Visual. Imagination. It offers you a suggestion. As in a painting; you will see water, a little boat, and lots of space. The space is there for your imagination... very abstract. Western music is always Symphony #2, Symphony #3, Sonata #1, and Sonata G Major.

**CIRCLE:** With Taoism having taken root in

China along with Buddhism, how have these philosophies influenced your life or perhaps your parents?

**WM:** My grandma is Buddhist, but the years I grew up religion was pretty much forbidden. I remember my grandma singing to me, but in her daily life there were no temples to go to worship.

**CIRCLE:** Was that difficult for your grandma?

**WM:** I think she's accepted it, as she never talked about it. In celebrating the New Year there were no Buddhist ceremonies in urban areas. If you lived in the remote countryside, it was very active.

**CIRCLE:** I listened to your piece called "Full Circle." It sounded aboriginal.

**WM:** Oh, yes. The pipa improvised with the Australian didgeridoo.

**CIRCLE:** Very haunting.

**WM:** Yes, it is haunting; it was recorded in the woods.

**CIRCLE:** Recently I listened to your wonderful recording called "Immeasurable Light." Was that a piece that you had written?

*"I didn't have any playtime with my friends. Playtime was music."*

**WM:** It was ancient, from the 12th Century, and is the first world recording of early pipa music. That music existed in the Tang Dynasty and the manuscript was discovered in Japan.

**CIRCLE:** How are you able to play ancient music?

**WM:** I worked with a musicologist from the University of Arkansas, a professor whose specialty was early Chinese lute and early pipa music. He's spent 40 to 50 years (studying it). Basically, he transcribes ancient notation to modern notation. Ancient notation explains the right hand, which finger on the left hand, and how long, and on which strings.

**CIRCLE:** That must have been an arduous task



requiring tremendous focus.

**WM:** The whole project required eight years. I had the idea, started working, then chose the piece, interpreted it, and made the recording. Many pieces don't exist in China. The music was written on silk fabric, and a scholar in the late 19th Century discovered them in a cave in the western part of China.

**CIRCLE:** Do you experience any challenges taking your music back to China?

**WM:** Now, nothing. Chinese music has always existed in China and never really stopped. However, during the Cultural Revolution we played music very differently: revolutionary songs, more propaganda sounding. All the classical pieces we learned but did not play in public – which was how so many children continued to learn an instrument.

**CIRCLE:** When did you first hear the pipa?

**WM:** When I was little. I heard the pipa and other Chinese instruments on the radio and I liked the sounds. My father's friend played the pipa and offered to teach me.

**CIRCLE:** What was the first song you remember

hearing on the pipa?

**WM:** Probably some kind of revolutionary song.

**CIRCLE:** As a child, were there special occasions that you would play?

**WM:** Oh yes. New Year. And my friend's parents always asked me to play for them, which I hated.

**CIRCLE:** Your concert combines music, dance and literature. Why did you choose these literary pieces and what significance do they hold for you personally and culturally?

**WM:** When I started thinking of how to put a concert together a few years ago, I wondered how to combine the pipa music with painting, calligraphy and poems - the four Chinese cultural elements - along with hi-tech computer design. The goal is to have the audience have a full experience - lifted musically and visually - and at the same time, when they walk out, something stays, they remember. And they want to know more about Chinese culture.

**CIRCLE:** I understand that you are a part of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble. Can you tell us a little about working with other disparate Asian

instruments and musicians?

**WM:** I've been working as a part of this ensemble for more than 10 years. It's a natural way to work with musicians from Mongolia, Iran, Palestine, China, Japan, and America as well. I remember when we rehearse or have jam sessions; very, very joyful.

Working with Persian musicians, I learned that the pipa originally came from Iran. They have a plucked instrument called "Barbat." The Barbat followed the Silk Road from Iran to China and with the Chinese pronunciation it became the pipa. I thought: Wow! That's fascinating, that kind of detail. In central Asia there are quite a number of Cossacks also found in China, along with Turkish and Mongolian people. Working with this special ensemble of musicians reminds me of where our cultural roots expand to, starting from central Asia, going to Europe, then to Africa.

**CIRCLE:** Do you still play the piano?

**WM:** Not anymore. In music school we were required to learn piano. I played a pretty good Mozart Sonata. I remember my piano teacher asked me if I wanted to switch majors. I said, "No, I'm going to stay with the pipa."

**CIRCLE:** That was a good choice. I understand you will be going to China next year to make a documentary. What's it about?

**WM:** It's about Taoist Chinese folk music in a remote area of northern China. I visited the village and they have a lot of family, music, and dance. The Taoist Band has played for many generations. They're hired to play for the New Year Festival, The Shadow Puppet Festival, weddings, and funerals. For a burial ceremony, they play music from six a.m. to midnight; on the 13th day they take the body to bury. They play very detailed music for the entire ceremony. There's tons of fascinating music...Taoism exists in both northern and southern China with different styles. But this is slowly disappearing, due to the older generation not being replaced and only the older generation wanting to have Taoist ceremonies. The younger generation is very urbanite; they don't want to have any kind of funeral Taoist Band. They want what's popular today. So I realized the fact, that in the next 15 years this will be less and less. But I'm hoping this won't happen. So I want to do the

documentary to remind the people of this.

**CIRCLE:** It sounds as though the more you explore, the more you find.

**WM:** Exactly. Somewhere in China - the southwest mountains - those minority tribes, there's so much instrumental music and singing. And in Taiwan, it's also very different, very close to the Pacific, New Zealand, and Australia... I'm also fascinated by Australian Aboriginal folk music. I want to see the similarity of Aboriginal music to African-American music as well. I feel as though I need to learn more about the whole history.

*"I think it's quite sad to me that the Chinese people don't know their own culture..."*

**CIRCLE:** Do you see Asian and Western influences combining in new ways?

**WM:** I think it's quite sad to me that the Chinese people don't know their own culture. The younger generation doesn't know their origin. China right now is very westernized. Pop culture. They are somewhat lost and don't understand. They drink Coke, go to McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken and now Starbucks. But what about the Chinese? We ourselves have culture. I'd like to be doing in China what I'm doing in the States.

**CIRCLE:** What do you hope for your future as an artist?

**WM:** I want to continue to perform until I can no longer travel and I seriously want to continue to teach the younger generation. And I hope not only to play pipa, but to ask them: Why do you want to be a musician? I was never asked when I was a student. And then you will do something meaningful...as a teacher... not only to play music, but the idea of a musician or artist will be much broader and cross over into a different area, not separate.

Musician, artist, composer will all work together. \*

# Wu Man: Return to the East

BY MARIA BANKS



Like Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, UCLA's grand Royce Hall is nationally known – not only for its astounding beauty and superior acoustics, but also for the lingering melodies of some of the greatest musical performances of days gone by.

Tonight's no different. Obviously, the word has gotten out that this evening's performance is going to be something special.

The doors open and the expansive hall quietly begins to fill. The stark stage is already set.

Without fanfare, the lovely Wu Man enters, adorned in an exquisitely-embroidered sequined blouse and carrying her pipa. Confidently she takes her place on center stage and triumphantly begins the evening's program.

Immediately, an enraptured audience is catapulted back in time.

Wu Man's fierce strumming is haunting; the fingers of her right hand move with the speed of a hummingbird's wings as her left hand holds the delicate instrument upright, balanced, swaying to the rhythms of its impending crossfire and

transporting the audience together into the middle of this epoch battle between the kingdoms of the Han Dynasty and the warlord of Chu in 202 BC.

The movement she plays is called "Ambush from All Sides," a piece first appearing in 1875 and written specifically for pipa solo – the grand opus and best-known of all traditional pipa works.

Her technique is ingenious: through it, the audience hears – experiences – the sounds of the army setting up camp, planning their ambush, fighting fiercely. Eerie sounds of war drums, gunfire, soldiers crying out, even stampeding horses are all masterfully played by one woman on one instrument.

For a while, time seems to stop. Eventually, the story comes to its end; the Han army ambushes the Chu army and defeats the powerful Chu, who thus commits suicide.

Standing tall, victorious, having accomplished her own brilliant defeat, leading one in and out of battle, Wu Man bows to her audience.



The audience remains captivated as the performance continues, blossoming to include visuals that subtly blend calligraphy, ancient Chinese art and Wu Man's own father's paintings. The images are superbly displayed on panels suspended behind the performers, illustrating the musical story as she works in harmony with talented collaborators Robert Schulz and Catherine Owens.

A teacher at heart, from Wu Man we learn the history of the pipa and its music. How and when Wu Man first learned to play, and her struggles during China's Cultural Revolution, endear her to the audience even further. Wu Man is not merely

a musician; in her repertoire, one's talents must also include being a wonderful storyteller.

Soon one hears the first strains of Wu Man's signature piece: Dance of the Yi People. The piece is legendary throughout China. First arranged in 1960 by Wang Huiran; based upon the folk tunes of the Yi minority group who live in southwestern China. Due to its frivolous nature – including dance, romance and joyful get-togethers – it originally required approval by censors to be played, for one was bound to play music depicting martial arts, the military and fighting during the Cultural Revolution.

Making inroads with her courage and strength, a young Wu Man, just starting out on her path, chose Dance of the Yi People for her audition to enter the Conservatory in Beijing in 1978 and won first place. Dance of the Yi People was recorded and broadcast nationally in China. The recording has since become one of the most popular pipa compositions in history, demonstrating all of Wu Man's virtuoso pipa techniques: tremolos, strumming, sliding notes and harmonics.

It is a dramatic climax to an incredible display of virtuosity.

As the performance ends resoundingly, one is left to savor an incredible evening. It is as if the

audience has shared more than a performance: we've experienced history together. A journey through ancient times brought to the present, evoking a sense of connection to a long-lost but not forgotten culture.

Heading to the parking lot to find my car, lost, I ask a stranger: "Do you know where lot five is?" "Sorry, I don't," comes his response. Then he asks, "Did you come to see Wu Man?" "Yes," I reply. Just as we both find our cars, he yells; his voice echos through the empty parking garage..., "I've wanted to see Wu Man for twenty years and tonight I finally did. What a performance!" Agreed! \*