

The
Singing
Gobi
Desert

PRISM
Quartet

Music
for
saxophones,
traditional
Chinese
instruments,
and
percussion
by
Bright Sheng
Lei Liang
Fang Man
Huang Ruo

Guest
Ensemble:
Music
From
China

PRISM Quartet The Singing Gobi Desert

Bright Sheng (b. 1955)

The Singing Gobi Desert for erhu/zhonghu, sheng, pipa, yangqin, saxophone quartet, and percussion (2012)

20:38

Bright Sheng, conductor

Lei Liang (b. 1972)

Messages of White for saxophone quartet, erhu, sheng, pipa, yangqin and percussion (2011)

17:28

Fang Man (b. 1977)

Dream of a Hundred Flowers for saxophone quartet and four Chinese instruments (2011)

15:47

Nové Deypalan, conductor

Huang Ruo (b. 1976)

The Three Tenses for pipa and saxophone quartet (2005)

14:31

Huang Ruo, conductor



PRISM Quartet/Music From China

PRISM Quartet

Timothy McAllister soprano saxophone

Zachary Shemon alto saxophone

Matthew Levy tenor saxophone

Taimur Sullivan baritone saxophone

Music From China

Wang Guowei erhu

Chen Yihan pipa

Helen Yee yangqin

Frank Cassara percussion

Hu Jianbing (guest) sheng

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The saxophone's place in the music world is not at all what Adolphe Sax had in mind when he invented the instrument over 150 years ago. Ascendant in the world of jazz, relatively marginal in Sax's intended field of classical music, and surprisingly adaptable to various forms of non-Western music, the saxophone family is a marvelous accident of musical history.

The PRISM Quartet, equally marvelous but far from accidental, has done yeoman work for nearly three decades, creating and nurturing a vital body of contemporary works for saxophones, crossing the whole spectrum of modern classical styles. Now, with *The Singing Gobi Desert*, they demonstrate that saxophones and Chinese instruments have a natural, if unexpected, affinity.

Of course, some of that affinity is the result of the creativity and imagination of the four composers represented here. These are composers who've grown up musically bilingual, speaking fluently the musical languages of both Western classical music and the ancient Chinese tradition. They range from Bright Sheng, one of America's pre-eminent composers and part of the first wave of Chinese musicians to come to the West, to Fang Man, who arrived in the States in 2000 and is now establishing herself as a distinctive voice. Naturally, the four members of the PRISM Quartet have also had something to do with the organic way the saxophones and the traditional instruments of Chinese music work together. After all, these are musicians who have consistently played against type, defying expectations of what a saxophone could, or should, sound like. It is another happy accident that so many of the "extended techniques" they use—flutter-tonguing, multiphonics, breath blasts and key clicks—sound very much like techniques that have been used in East Asia for centuries.

In his piece *The Singing Gobi Desert*, Bright Sheng shows a conductor's ear for tone colors, making a sonic connection between the saxes and the reedy

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sound of the Chinese mouth organ, or *sheng*. This work was inspired by the singing sands of the Gobi desert in northwestern China, where, during dry conditions, the wind will cause the desert's unusually smooth sand particles to rub against each other, creating an eerie musical effect. This is perhaps most clearly heard near the midpoint of the work, where the *sheng* and saxes intertwine, like wind stirring the desert.

Bright Sheng's score makes excellent use of bells and percussion, especially the marimba, but some of the most memorable passages are built around the collision of Eastern and Western instruments: for example, the lovely tune spun by the alto sax over rippling figures from the zither, or *yangqin*. Or the spreading profusion of colors as more of the ensemble joins in—briefly reveling in the clanking, out-of-tune quality of these unexpected instrumental combinations.

The eerie sound Bright Sheng describes hearing after visiting the Gobi Desert comes to the fore in the work's final section, which finds the *erhu* singing, in a way that sounds uncannily like a female voice. The conclusion of *The Singing Gobi Desert* is also a fine example of tone painting, with the Chinese ensemble providing a sonic landscape and the *pipa* or lute taking a lead role. The saxophones suggest a drone, and maybe a mirage, as the piece recedes into the distance.

Lei Liang's contribution to this project is called *Messages of White*, and it too attempts to draw a picture of a landscape. In this case, though, the dominant image is not wind or sand, but snow. Liang says he was inspired by "the diverse messages snow seems to embody: innocence, silence, pain, playfulness, longing, solitude, miracle, fantasy, redemption." *Messages of White* has an icy, reflective sheen. And the title perfectly fits the work's spare, abstract opening—winking points of color and light. Bowed percussion and glissandi on

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the *erhu* add to the unsettled soundscape, but as the instrumental ensemble gradually comes together, these disparate sounds cohere into a falling gesture that evokes a steady snowfall, glittering and hushed.

When the saxes enter, it's with gently played multiphonics, enhancing the work's almost electronic texture and ambiguous tonality. Eventually we hear a shifting cascade of harmonies, a variant of the initial falling gesture which turns out to be a key building block of the piece. The role of the sax quartet becomes more eventful; the key clicks serve as percussion, and the multiphonics grow more insistent. Towards the end, Liang treats us to some pungent harmonies before the ensemble dissolves, leaving the last word to the ghostly sounds of bowed percussion.

Fang Man approaches the combination of the PRISM Quartet and Music From China in a fascinating way in her *Dream of a Hundred Flowers*. The four saxes are paired with a quartet of Chinese instruments: the *erhu*, the *sheng*, the *pipa* and the *yangqin*. Noting that these four instruments have traditionally been used in Chinese opera, she asks the two ensembles to “imitate Peking opera speaking voices.”

The Chinese instruments appear first, but the saxophone entrance is immediately arresting: it is the sound (again) of wind, of distant rumblings, promising drama and—in another context perhaps—a kind of cinematic experience. Fang Man makes liberal use of the unusual articulations and techniques that PRISM is capable of. And while the score may be harmonically uncertain, its dramatic impact is clear, especially in those moments where the soprano sax takes on the role of one of the Peking opera characters, and the *erhu* replies with the same slides and slurs.

The work eventually settles into a stuttering rhythmic section where the

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“characters” talk at (and over and through) each other. The sax quartet is very much in the foreground here: chattering passagework, key clicks, soft but biting harmonies. There also appear to be several nods to electronic music near the end of the piece, including a quick moment where we hear a curious strobing effect—like the shuddering sound of a vintage Leslie cabinet speaker, and what sounds like the high whistle of feedback.

As the piece concludes, the two quartets find yet another way to work together, with the saxes serving as a sonic bed for the Chinese instruments as they dissolve and fade away.

Huang Ruo scales the ensemble down even further in *The Three Tenses* for *pipa* and saxophone quartet. He starts right away with saxophones, playing with and around the *pipa*, and producing some striking harmonies in passing. Quick, elusive gestures on the *pipa* are buoyed by long held saxophone multiphonics; this creates a sense of suspended time. That, Huang Ruo says, is deliberate: “Although this piece has a beginning and end, it only means to capture a moment in the circle of time.”

The Three Tenses becomes a chattering dialogue between the *pipa* and the sax quartet, with some briefly jazzy-sounding chords about halfway through the piece. Finally, something like concord between the saxophones and *pipa* leads to a slowly shifting set of drones, shot through with quick gestures, fleeting harmonies, and microtones. With the *pipa* at the very threshold of audibility and an ambiguous, perhaps questioning set of chords at the end, Huang Ruo effectively evokes another piece that dealt with the implacable and unknowable nature of time: Charles Ives’s *Unanswered Question*.

John Schaefer

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Intriguing programs of great beauty and breadth have distinguished the PRISM Quartet as one of America's foremost chamber ensembles. Two-time winners of the Chamber Music America/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, PRISM has performed in Carnegie Hall on the Making Music Series, in Alice Tully Hall with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and throughout Latin America and China. PRISM has also been presented to critical acclaim as soloists with the Detroit Symphony and Cleveland Orchestra, and conducted residencies at the nation's leading conservatories, including the Curtis Institute of Music and the Oberlin Conservatory.

Champions of new music, PRISM has commissioned over 150 works, many by internationally celebrated composers, including Pulitzer Prize-winners William Bolcom, Jennifer Higdon, Zhou Long, and Bernard Rands; Guggenheim Fellows William Albright, Martin Bresnick, Chen Yi, Lee Hyla, and Steven Mackey; MacArthur Fellow Bright Sheng; and jazz masters Rudresh Mahanthappa, Greg Osby, David Liebman, Miguel Zenón, and Tim Ries. In 1997, PRISM initiated its own concert series in Philadelphia and New York City, presenting the newest compositions created for their ensemble by composers from around the world. The series has featured an eclectic range of guest artists, including Ethel, the Talujon Percussion Quartet, Music From China, Miro Dance Theatre, Cantori New York, and top jazz artists, including guitarist Ben Monder, saxophonist Rick Margitza, and drummers Gerald Cleaver, Mark Ferber, and John Riley. PRISM has also joined forces with the New York Consort of Viols, Opera Colorado, and the Chilean rock band Inti-Illimani in touring engagements.

PRISM's discography is extensive, documenting more than sixty works commissioned by the Quartet on Albany, innova, Koch, Naxos, New Dynamic, and New Focus. PRISM may also be heard on the soundtrack of the film Two

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Plus One, by Emmy nominee Eugene Martin, scored by Quartet member Matthew Levy, and has been featured in the theme music to the weekly PBS news magazine “NOW.”

PRISM performs exclusively on Selmer saxophones and mouthpieces.

prismquartet.com



Photo: Jacqueline Hanna



13 Music From China

Music From China performs an eclectic repertoire that embraces both traditional and contemporary music. The ensemble was founded in 1984 by Director Susan Cheng and is under the artistic direction of *erhu* virtuoso Wang Guowei. Performing on Chinese instruments, the musicians invoke the sonorities of age-old musical traditions and interpret the music of today. Music From China has appeared at colleges and universities including Princeton, Duke, Pittsburgh, Yale, Wisconsin, Dayton, Bucknell, Vermont, Colgate, Indiana, Bard, Vassar, Dartmouth, Lafayette, Peabody Conservatory, and Eastman School of Music. The ensemble has also performed at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, San Diego Museum of Art, Chautauqua Institution, 92nd Street Y, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Boston Early Music Festival, American Folk Festival, and the Library of Congress. A proponent of new music, Music From China has collaborated with celebrated composers Chen Yi, Zhou Long, Bright Sheng, Bun-Ching Lam, Dorothy Chang, James Mobberley, Vivian Fung, Tan Dun, Lei Liang, Yu-Hui Chang, and Derek Bermel. Music From China is the recipient of an Adventurous Programming special commendation from Chamber Music America and ASCAP for creative programs that combine the music of East and West.

musicfromchina.org

14 **Conductor:** Nové Deypalan

Conductor Nové Deypalan hails from the small town of Victorias, Negros Occidental in the Philippines. He began studying at the College of Music, University of the Philippines. He completed his Bachelor of Music degree in conducting at Chapman University, his Master of Music degree at the University of Southern California, and his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Orchestral Conducting at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Deypalan was a recipient of the Bruno Walter Foundation Scholarship in the 2010 Cabrillo Conducting Workshop, Santa Cruz, California, led by the renowned Gustav Meier and Marin Alsop. His conducting performance of the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1, on March 16, 2011, and was hailed by the *Columbia Freetimes*, as “fearless...first class music making.” His conducting teachers have included Dr. Larry Livingston, Dr. Jane Hardester, Patrick Goesser, Donald Brinegar, John Farrer, and Dr. Donald Portnoy.

novedeypalan.com



15 **Guest Artist:** Hu Jianbing

Hu Jianbing, a traditional Chinese wind musician, has earned wide recognition for his artistry as a *sheng* soloist and composer. *The Boston Globe* wrote of Hu's recent performances in Boston, "he has an impressive command of the *sheng* and of a broad range of its classical, folk and modern musical literatures." He graduated from the Chinese Central Conservatory of Music, and joined the National Traditional Orchestra of China. He also performs regularly with Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble, and has premiered concertos with many orchestras, most recently with the Seattle Symphony. He has been featured as composer, performer, and lecturer at the Beijing International Contemporary Music Festival and Cambridge Salon of Harvard University. In 1998, Hu founded the Chinese Performing Arts of North America. He currently serves as the president of the association. Hu later spearheaded and performed at the concert Masters of Chinese Music at Lincoln Center.



16 **Composer and Conductor:** Bright Sheng

MacArthur Fellow Bright Sheng (b. 1955) is the Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor at the University of Michigan. His music ranges from dramatic to lyrical and is strongly influenced by the folk and classical music tradition from eastern and central Asia. He has collaborated with distinguished musicians such as Leonard Bernstein, Kurt Masur, Neeme Järvi, and Yo Yo Ma. He has been widely commissioned and performed by many important musical institutions in North America, Europe and Asia, including the White House, New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, Chicago Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Orchestra de Paris, BBC Symphony, Hamburg Radio Symphony, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and New York City Opera. Exclusively published by G. Schirmer Inc., his music may be heard on Naxos, Sony Classical, Talarc, New World, and Grammofon AB BIS. As a conductor and pianist, he has performed with the Detroit Symphony, St. Petersburg Philharmonic, Dortmund Philharmonic, and China National Symphony.

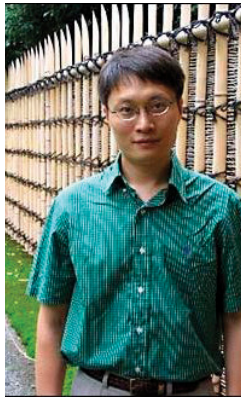
brightsheng.com



17 **Composer:** Lei Liang

Winner of the 2011 Rome Prize, Lei Liang (b.1972) has been heralded as “one of the most exciting voices in New Music” (*The Wire*). He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Aaron Copland Award. He was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic and Alan Gilbert for the inaugural concert of the CONTACT! new music series. Other commissions and performances come from the Heidelberger Philharmonisches Orchester, Thailand Philharmonic, Shanghai Quartet, Fromm Music Foundation, and Chamber Music America. His music is recorded on Mode, New World, Innova, Telarc, and Naxos Records. Lei Liang received degrees from the New England Conservatory of Music (BM and MM) and Harvard University (PhD). A Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum, he held fellowships from Harvard Society of Fellows. Lei Liang serves as Associate Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego. His music is published exclusively by Schott Music Corporation.

lei-liang.com



18 **Composer:** Fang Man

Hailed as “inventive and breathtaking” by *The New York Times*, Fang Man’s (b. 1977) original concert music has been performed worldwide by notable orchestras and ensembles, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra New Music Group under the baton of Esa-Pekka Salonen, American Composers Orchestra, Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, National Orchestre de Lorraine (France), Minnesota Orchestra, and Cabrillo Festival Orchestra. She is the recipient of a Koussevitzky Music Foundation commission, Los Angeles Philharmonic Commission, an Underwood/ACO New Music commission, Toru Takemitsu Award (Japan), and Darmstadt Stipend-Prize-Award. Fang Man has served as a resident composer at the Aldeburgh Music Centre in the United Kingdom and Civitella Ranieri Music Foundation in Italy. She holds a Doctorate in music composition from Cornell University, where she studied with Steven Stucky and Roberto Sierra. She also obtained a computer music certificate from IRCAM-Paris. Fang Man is currently a Research Assistant Professor at the School of Music of the University of South Carolina.

fangmanmusic.com



19 **Composer and Conductor: Huang Ru**

Awarded First Prize by the prestigious Luxembourg International Composition Prize, Huang Ruo (b. 1976) has been cited by *The New Yorker* as “one of the most intriguing of the new crop of Asian-American composers.” His musical voice draws equal inspiration from Chinese folk, Western avant-garde, rock, and jazz, seamlessly integrating a range of musical practices using a compositional technique he calls dimensionalism. Huang Ruo’s writing spans from orchestra, opera, theater, and modern dance, to sound installation, experimental improvisation, and film. Ensembles who have performed his music include the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Hong Kong Philharmonic, and Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Huang Ruo has received awards and grants from the ASCAP Foundation, Presser Foundation, Jerome Foundation, Argosy Foundation, Chamber Music America, and Aaron Copland Fund. He is represented on the Naxos, Albany, and Koch record labels, and is a member of the composition faculty at SUNY Purchase.

huangruo.com



Executive Producer: PRISM Quartet

The Singing Gobi Desert produced by the PRISM Quartet and Bright Sheng

Messages of White produced by the PRISM Quartet, Music From China, and Lei Liang

Dream of a Hundred Flowers produced by the PRISM Quartet and Fang Man

The Three Tenses produced by the PRISM Quartet and Huang Ruo

Editing, Mixing, Mastering: Matthew Levy, except *Dream of a Hundred Flowers*, edited by Fang Man, mixed by Fang Man and Matthew Levy

Liner Notes: John Schaefer

Recording session pictures: Hu Jianbing

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Owner: Rob Hyman; Engineer: John O. Senior

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