

A JOURNEY TO THE SILK ROAD

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She walks on stage with an understated elegance and impeccable posture. Clothed in a scarlet and sapphire kimono, she settles into the centre of the stage. The intimacy of the space moves the audience to silence their breath. Junko Tahara is a legendary biwa performer. As a member of [Pro Musica Nipponia](#), she is among Japan's elite group of classical and contemporary musicians. She has studied under Kyokusui Yamazaki, a Living National Treasure of Japan.

From the sash of her kimono, she draws a tiny black copper-tipped fan. I do a quick scan of the program notes to learn that one of the most notable differences between playing the [biwa](#) and [pipa](#), is the biwa is played with a [plectrum](#), while the pipa is played with the fingers. This drastically alters the timbre of the instrument; the steel strings and plectrum creating a buzzing resonance encompassing the hall. Being an acoustic instrument, the un-amplified sound draws the listeners closer in anticipation. Her voice is striking. I am taken aback by the rawness of her vocal sound in comparison with the metallic instrumental backing.

The biwa is a traditional Japanese instrument used to enhance and intensify a folk or historical narrative. Tonight we are introduced to *The Tale of Heike*, an epic 12th Century tale of the battle between the Taira and Minamoto clans during the Genpei War. Dramatically the tale begins to unravel as she blends passion and sensitivity, augmenting her phrases with exact melodic emphasis and support. The sound is reminiscent of chanting or poetic recitation in other cultural narrative musical forms.

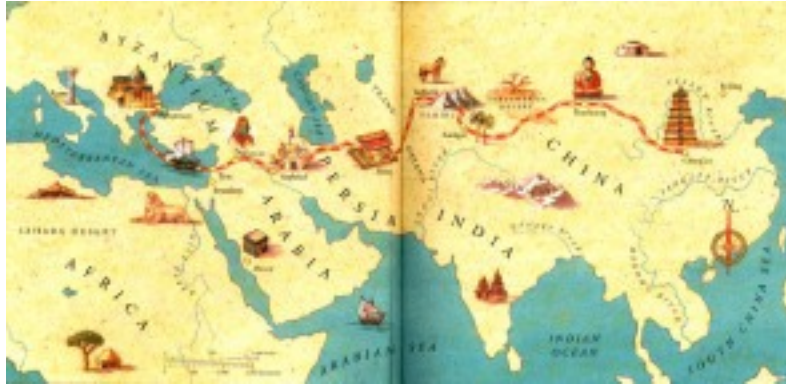
Her emotional connectivity inspires every word and every note. With a whisper she concludes the first half of the show. The audience erupts and the applause echoes out of the theatre, into the night.

The second half brings a completely different aural presentation. Qiu Xia He is the founder of the [Silk Road Music](#), an initiative she developed to expand and *build a deeper understanding between East and West*. Growing up in the province of Shaanxi in China, and now living in Canada, Qiu Xia He seeks to merge Chinese traditional instrumental sounds with contemporary global soundscapes on a national and international level. If there were a single word to describe her approach to musical performance it would have to be *play*. The interaction between Qiu Xia He and Andre Thibault on stage is remarkably similar to watching children pick up random instruments for the first time and, quite naturally, beginning to jam and create together. But it is their virtuosic ability and intuitive approach to improvisation that creates an unshakeable foundation, which then allows them to explore, create and play so freely, with such ease. Through their exceptional skill levels they are able to highlight the arbitrary nature of “binding” genres: exploring Chinese folk music, Irish traditional forms, Brazilian and Latin American roots, and the *Blues by Candlelight*.



Andre takes out a bird whistle and percussion blocks and Qiu Xia He lays her pipa beside her. Picking up a whistle, they begin “speaking” in bird tongue, adding in relevant percussive and instrumental sounds to illustrate their story. Standing up, they casually pick up new sounds as they move around the stage. As they begin to wind down their eclectic aural dialogue they return to their seats, pick up their instruments, and begin. The agility and accuracy with which they manipulate their instruments, combined with the breadth and diversity of their musical repertoire and instrumentation, is awe-inspiring.

To close the concert, Junko Tahara returns to the stage to join Qiu Xia He and Andre Thibault for the final piece of the evening, *Hana no Uta* (The Flower Song). Each player brings her or his own richly diverse musical background and the blend is stunning. The outstanding image that is framed in this moment is immensely powerful. It clearly exemplifies the intention behind the [The Silk Road Encounter](#), allowing the music to act as an educational and political bridge between Japan and China, tradition and innovation, and the East and the West.



This event was generously supported by the [Prince Takamado Japan Centre](#), the [China Institute](#), [folkwaysAlive!](#), and the [Alberta Foundation for the Arts](#).

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- Allison Sokil