

Music REVIEWS

Silk Road takes pipa player on a journey

Vancouver, BC
Georgia
Straight
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Should you desire a quick trip to Bombay, Silk Road Music's Qiu Xia He has just the ticket. If Rio's your preferred destination, she can get you there. Guangzhou, of course, is no problem — but neither is Casablanca. And if you'd like something a little closer, the ever-adventurous *pipa* player is even willing to escort you to now-deserted D'Arcy Island, just east of the Saanich Peninsula, which once housed an internment camp for Chinese Canadian lepers.

The Silk Road Music founder is a fearless traveller, and that's amply reflected on her new CD, *Autumn Cloud: Journey With Her Pipa*. The destinations listed above are just a few of the places visited on the new disc's dozen songs, which touch on almost as many different musical styles. After one CD, *Endless*, which dealt with the Shaanxi-born virtuoso's first impressions of Canada, and another, *Village Tales*, that took a nostalgic look at her roots, He has abandoned boundaries altogether in favour of finding new ways — and new settings — in which her instrument can flourish.

"This one is focused on the pipa itself," she says, calling from the Vancouver home she shares with Silk Road guitarist André Thibault. "I'm trying to use the pipa as a centre to explore all these musical styles that I have been interested in for the past 15 or 16 years. It covers the full spectrum of what I've been doing over all that time."

The pipa, for those just discovering Chinese music, is a pear-shaped stringed instrument that resembles a Renaissance lute but sounds more like a member of the mandolin family. Unlike the mandolin, however, the pipa lends itself to a number of guitarist techniques, including bluesy stringbending and five-fingered picking patterns, many of which He explores on *Autumn Cloud*. (The disc's title, by the way, is an English translation of her given names.) But her musical fusions transcend pastiche: when He encounters a style she likes, she first absorbs it, then makes it her own.

"I don't think I'm ever completely fluent in other styles of music; I don't think that is possible for me," she explains. "But I'm trying to understand as much as I can from my point of view."

An important part of that process is meeting, and playing with, musicians from other cultures. She cites *Rays and Forces*, a collaborative project with Indian composer Chitravina N. Ravikiran, American percussionist Glen Velez, and other musicians as typical. "Basically the music forced me to encounter it, you know," she says. "I didn't know Indian music very much, and then in one week I had to go into the studio with those guys! It was very stressful, but it was also a good introduction. You get into the music right away, and you don't have any excuses; there's no way to back off, because you're going to do a recording, right?"

A similar spirit animates *Autumn Cloud's* gutsy "Way In", an Indian-flavoured excursion driven by Stefan Cihelka's percussive virtuosity, and "Entre Lagos e Montanhas", a duet with Brazilian guitarist and music collaborator Celso Machado. Cihelka won't be able to join He and Thibault when they launch *Autumn Cloud* at the St. James Hall on Saturday (June 17), but an array of other guests will be on hand—including Machado,



Qiu Xia He can play in seemingly any style on her *pipa*. You ought to hear what she does with "Purple Haze". Rebecca Blisset photo.

who'll unveil his new *Capivara* CD at the same event.

The concert promises to be quite festive, although it will likely include a brief detour into melancholy when He plays "Fire! Fire! Fire!", an instrumental adaptation of the theme from Erik Paulsson's documentary *Island of Shadows*. This is the piece that takes us to D'Arcy Island, and it's a good example of how He, like many Chinese composers, attempts to paint a musical picture of the feelings associated with a particular landscape. It's also another illustration of how, by combining genres, she comes up with music that's all her own.

"Originally, this piece was a song, with singing," He explains. "But I really liked the melody, so when I started working with André, who is trained in flamenco in a very traditional way, I thought it would be interesting for me to explore flamenco playing on the pipa. So I used that piece to explore that idea, and all the similar techniques we have: the tremolo playing, and the strumming things, and the fast scales."

"But it's funny," she adds. "I thought I was working in the flamenco style, so André should feel very comfortable with it. That's what I intended! But when he started working on it, he went, 'No, this is not in the flamenco style. This is so difficult for me to play!' So that's a good example of what happens when you learn new styles: you assume you can do what other musicians do, but in the meantime you're interpreting the music to fit how you see it."

Of course, this kind of give-and-take is a vital part of any multicultural society, and in that regard Silk Road Music is a microcosm of the city where it was born: our city, in all its vibrant diversity. The harmony that He, Thibault and their friends have found is impressive — and exemplary, too.

Local Motion
Alexander Varty



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