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A Determined Journey Seeking Musical Freedom

By Melissa Hendricks

Our nation is based on the essential freedoms of expression and therefore creativity, rights we often take for granted. In search of artistic flexibility, musical virtuoso Min Xiao-Fen began a cultural odyssey almost 14 years ago from her native China.

As a child growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s, Min had few choices. Colleges and universities were closed and people feared being called to the countryside. Musical talent had a way of opening doors.

Having studied the Chinese Pipa, a 3,000-year-old lute-like instrument similar in sound to a banjo since early childhood, Min auditioned for the world-renowned Nanjing Traditional Music Orchestra. "As a member of the orchestra, you are taken care of by the government," said Min. "It is a very stable life."

Min toured much of Europe with the orchestra but after 10 years, grew tired of the same classical repertoire. "I wanted to experience something new," added Min. "I wanted to be an individual and be free to explore music." Against popular norms, Min began exposing herself to modern music and sought to adapt her voice and instrument to incorporate western styles.

In 1992 Min decided to give up her "stable life" for a life of freedom and versatility. She arrived in the San Francisco Bay area and quickly adapted to American culture and music. There she met composers and musicians who fostered her desires for expression and cross-cultural meshing.

"In America it is hard to be a musician. I consider myself pretty lucky," said Min. "Not many musicians, especially from China, can come to this



Photo courtesy of Min Xiao-Fen

Min Xiao-Fen has become known for crossing musical boundaries.

country and begin working professionally as quickly as I did."

In 1996 Min moved to New York. "I wanted to experience life in New York because I knew it was a great city for arts and music," said Min. "I am a live-in-the-moment type person. I soon real-

ized that you can't limit yourself."

It was in New York that Min, now a resident of Forest Hills, explored the eclectic world of Jazz music, Bluegrass and pop. She collaborated with the musicians like Randy Weston and Philip Glass, and through interpreta-

tions of music by jazz legends Mile Davis and Duke Ellington.

On a mission to blend modern western genres of music with traditional Asian styles, Min began performing her own style of music. "Music became a physical experience for me," said Min. "I wanted to capture the soul of each artist as well as my feelings."

Min has performed countless concerts and music festivals throughout the country and the world. She was the first Chinese musician invited to perform by Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Min now performs with musicians Mark Helias and Stephen Salerno in their trio Blue Pipa. "I really love working with Mark and Stephen, they are extraordinary musicians and I learn a lot from them."

Min successfully brought her love of the Chinese pipa and music to the world and now has directed her attentions to fusing Asian cultures together in her community and beyond. Thanks to grants provided by the Queens Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the Greater NYU Arts Development Fund Program, Min has scheduled a free concert at the Flushing Branch of the Queens Public Library on February 12 in celebration of Chinese New Year.

"The Chinese New Year is also Asia's New year," said Min. "This concert is a chance to unite the arts and Asian cultures together in harmony and peace."

Music has given Min the opportunity to cross both cultural and musical boundaries. Her inspirational ambition and will to make a difference has repaid her adopted country and freedom of expression in beautiful musical way.

"You cannot limit yourself," said Min. "You must remain open-minded and show the world what is in your soul."

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— Min Xiao-Fen