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Music Is His Life & His Gift To Us!

By Jessica Lyons

Flushing Town Hall Composer in Residence Bright Sheng's love of music was encouraged during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and now is helping to bring people together.

Sheng was born in China in 1955, 11 years before the Cultural Revolution began. Because Sheng played the piano as a child, he was able to pursue a career in the performing arts rather than one as a farmer, which was being forced on many his age by China's leader Mao Zedong.

Sheng said that he would have become a professional musician because he was determined to never give up his music. At 13-years-old, he made a keyboard out of cardboard so that he could practice silently. At that time, he remembers saying to himself, "No matter what I do in the future I will never forget about music."

While in China, Sheng studied at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Following his graduation, he headed for New York in 1982 where he continued his studies at Queens College. Sheng studied with Leonard Bernstein, George Perle, Hugo Weisgall, Chou Wen-Chung and Jack Beeson.

"I lived in Flushing for many years when I first came from China," he said. "I supported myself by teaching kids piano in the area."

When Sheng first arrived in the U.S., he said that he was the



Photo courtesy of Min Xiao-Fen

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

first Chinese composer who tried to make a living at his craft. And he is happy to see that he is not the last one to do so.

Sheng is now an accomplished musician and composer who combines traditional

Chinese folk music with Western sounds. He became the Flushing Town Hall Resident Composer about two years ago and recently performed there in February.

"Culturally, we need to do something to unify," Sheng said

about why he gives back to the community through his music. "What happens with Queens is there are a lot of communities from different ethnic backgrounds."

Sheng, who parents still live in Flushing, said that one of the

best things about performing in Queens is the wide selection of talented musicians of all nationalities who play all types of instruments.

"We find the best players in New York City," he said. "The objective is to get the best musicians to play the best concerts."

Along with being an important part of Flushing Town Hall, Sheng is the Resident Composer for the New York City Ballet and currently is a member of the University of Michigan's composition faculty where he is the Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Music. Sheng has also worked as the Composer in Residence for the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Seattle Symphony Orchestra and the Washington Performing Arts Society.

Growing up during China's Cultural Revolution, Sheng learned how to be strong and push to achieve his dreams.

"Don't ever let anything break you," Sheng said. "One thing about this [the Cultural Revolution] generation is we're sort of flexible. It's very tough to break us because we've gone through a lot."

Although Sheng has already accomplished a great deal in his career, he hopes to continue to do new and exciting things and give back to his community.

"I hope I'm still going up," he said. "I think I'm content to a certain extent because I'm doing the things I love to do. There are always goals I want to achieve in my life."

"No matter what I do in the future I will never forget about music."

Bright Sheng