



Nov. 17, 00

By Lindy Li Mark and Weihua Zhang

Strings Calligraphy, an ambitious, multimedia program featuring music by Chinese expatriate Gang Situ, was presented at the Yerba Buena Center Friday and Saturday. The title and theme, taken from the program's third of three Situ compositions, inspired the calligraphic set design, the choreography, and the accompanying performance of the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company. On the musical side, the performance drew on the playing of the New Century Chamber Orchestra and *erhu* soloist Jie Bing Chen.

Situ, trained at a Russian-style conservatory in China (like many of his generation), has embraced the compositional styles ("serious") of the contemporary Western establishment after coming to America. However, only in his *Strings Calligraphy* third composition — when the program moved beyond Western modernistic idioms (whatever they might be) and drew upon indigenous Chinese art forms in a multimedia presentation — did the evening become exciting.

With *Strings Calligraphy*, Suite in five movements, we saw — projected against a drop over the heads of the standing orchestra — enlarged ink brush calligraphy, executed mostly by set designer Lampo Leong, with a few panels of classic script in block characters culled from historical sources. (Matthew Antaky did the lighting.) On the panels, fading in and out and changing periodically, were recognizable words in the highly cursive script, such as the Chinese character for dance, along with abstract lines, streaks, and curves sweeping across the screen.

In front of this calligraphied backdrop and sometimes behind a scrim, members of the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company struck sinewy, angular poses, moving in slow motion from one tableau to another. This company has come a long way since it first began presenting Chinese "folk" dance programs in the Bay Area. Cai has creatively adapted Chinese dance movements into a distinctive modern dance style.

In the last, wholly vigorous and rhythmic movement of *Strings Calligraphy*, Cai's adaptation of traditional Chinese ribbon dance movements was especially striking. Here, black and white silk sashes several yards long were attached to the dancers' hands. With carefully executed arm and hand movements these sashes swirled and gyrated in the air in time with the music, at times evoking the artist's brush stroke across the page. The lighting on the ribbons gave them an extraordinarily surreal and charged effect, enhancing the music.

The placement of the dance platform slightly behind and high above the heads of the standing musicians was a stroke of genius. It allowed the central place of the music to be preserved, not hidden in some pit, while transposing the dance into moving pictographs on a wall. Highly effective!

The solo *erhu* part was played by Jie Bing Chen with great virtuosity. A two-stringed viol with a bamboo tubular body the size of a soup can, the *erhu* can produce a sonority disproportionate to its size. In *Strings Calligraphy*, several duets between the violin and the *erhu* brought out the contrasting tone colors of these bowed strings. The violin has a thinner, silky quality, whereas the *erhu* has a robust earthy timbre, making for a nice dialog.

The *erhu* nowadays is generally played in violin style, with long, smooth bowing and intense vibrato, as was the case here, until the last movement, when Chen showed that she has what it takes in the indigenous *erhu* style: short, energetic strokes exploding with biting attack on the notes. At last, a Chinese instrument was allowed to show its true colors in a contemporary composition.

The first of the Situ compositions on the program, *Xuan*, a pleasant rondo, was played by the Alexander Quartet with sensitivity and good humor. It opened with a simple, languid four-note melody on the violins, awakened by a pulsing rhythmic motif on the lower strings. This pair of motifs binds together the intervening thematic material. The contrast between slowly drawn-out melodic lines, some parallel, some contrapuntal, followed by a vigorous rhythmic section or punctuated by an underlying rhythmic motif constitutes the stylistic signature of Situ.

This contrast was employed repeatedly throughout the program. The second offering, *Gallop*, scored for string orchestra in three movements, presto–largo–allegro, exhibited the same pattern but with greater elaboration. *Gallop* was played with fine intonation and great ensemble by the New Century Chamber Orchestra, led by Krista Bennion, with the players following a Baroque practice that might seem to contradict its name.

According to the scanty 78-word program notes, Situ, like several other Chinese expatriate composers, draws inspiration from the lines and shapes of Chinese calligraphy. However, there was no explanation of how the lines and shapes are related to his compositions. For example, *Xuan* and *Gallop* were played against a projected backdrop of Rorschach-like wings of dark clouds with blue and white patches, the graphic artwork of painter-calligrapher Leong, also an expatriate Chinese. There were amorphous shapes but no lines. Yet the rondo form and the gallop rhythm are quite distinct, and there are definitely melodic lines.

This performance exemplified some of the strengths and weaknesses of an expatriate Chinese composer's attempting to combine indigenous Chinese art forms with contemporary Western styles of composition. Each piece by itself was

indeed original and quite pleasing to the ear, but together they seemed rather thin on ideas. The combination of graphic art and choreographic movement certainly added excitement and caught the audience's attention. Yet somehow the parts did not quite hang together. Nevertheless, such collaborative creativity is definitely a positive trend, and deserves wider support from the public.

(Lindy Li Mark, Ph.D., is professor of anthropology and department chair at California State University, Hayward. She also studied ethnomusicology for her M.A. degree.)

(Weihua Zhang is a graduate of the Central Conservatory in Beijing and holds a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from UC Berkeley. She teaches piano in the San Jose area.)

©2000 Lindy Li Mark, all rights reserved