



Pipa

Dreams

Globetrotting polymath **Li Daiguo** is quietly inventing new uses for traditional Chinese instruments

Li Daiguo insists that he is not a virtuoso. He does a journeyman’s job with an odd dozen instruments and vocal styles, he asserts, listing violin and viola, an assortment of Chinese flutes, Shona mbira, beatboxing and overtone singing among his stools. But he’s now settled on the pear-shaped pipa as a primary tool. While he may not rank among the classical pipa masters, he’s found his own voice on the instrument, pushing its sonic capabilities beyond anything that’s been previously attempted on it.

Like many first-generation Chinese Americans, Li began studying violin and piano while he was still in grade school. Growing up in Oklahoma, he was attracted to regional styles such as bluegrass fiddling that would draw him away from the classical world. “The essential part was learning how to swing with the bow, to improvise through chords, how to have a sense of humour,” he says.

Li earned a scholarship for violin performance at a university in California but promptly strayed from the symphony orchestra track. “My violin teachers had very good things to say to help me with technique, but they never understood what I was doing, and they definitely didn’t approve,” he recalls. “One of my teachers said, ‘You can’t play all these instruments

or you’re just going to be a dabbler.’” For a while, the academic environment discouraged spending time on new instruments and playing styles.

Nevertheless, his previous studies in pipa and the two-stringed erhu led him to try his luck in China after graduation. He moved to the Western Chinese metropolis of Chengdu in 2004, and today he lives in rural Yunnan Province. Arriving with only a viola, Li made personal friendships within Chengdu’s underground music scene that eventually led to a creative rebirth. “I started to get back into the instruments that I had been using before,” Li remembers, “and it became very clear to me that I could have my own sound. And I knew what that sound was, so I just went after it.”

Over the next decade, Li got to collaborate with like-minded Chinese artists such as Yan Jun and classical gu qin soloist Wu Na. He gradually built a resume of solo and ensemble performances alongside compositions for modern dance, video art and performance art. On his own time, he focuses on three core instruments: pipa, cello and the mbira, the last being a newer passion.

Li’s unique combination of skills and styles has culminated in a distinct voice for his pipa playing,

which he is now confident in broadcasting. In April, he quietly self-released *Li Shurui*, an eight-track solo pipa album named after his partner, an established visual artist in China. His cello and pipa can also be heard on *Free World Music*, a recent collaboration with Brooklyn trombonist Rick Parker.

Li Shurui, in particular, is astonishing, an apotheosis of Li Daiguo’s eclectic influences and interests. His study of African rhythm had taken him to Zimbabwe, where he absorbed the work of mbira masters. What did he bring home? “The polyrhythms in African music,” he says, “the importance of their texture and the rhythms going against each other. “When I’m thinking about techniques for pipa, the rhythmic side of things,” he continues, “I’m thinking about the instrument like you would think about an orchestra or a drum group.”

Li Shurui is a beginning. “This is where I am on the pipa now,” Li confirms. “I’m pretty sure it’s very different from any other pipa album, but for me it’s really a baby step. I’m going to keep developing this for decades.” □ Li Daiguo’s *Li Shurui* is released via yoo-pay.cn. His album with Rick Parker, *Free World Music*, is released by eleven2eleven and Very Special Josh Feola

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