

LO KA PING

Cantonese Musician

盧家炳——廣東的音樂家

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琴
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近代琴文集

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As one negotiates the curves of the narrow, treacherous highway leading from Kowloon through the mountains and farmlands of the New Territories in Hong Kong, it seems an unlikely route to a musical experience of the first order. Small herds of cows defiantly wander at leisure across the road, everywhere farmers labour in the fields, and tiny (but very tough) Hakka women in their funereal black-bordered straw hats and black pyjamas carry heavy loads which dangle from both ends of their bamboo shoulder-poles.

After passing by the walled village at Kam Tin (where descendants of the original Sung dynasty villagers still live) and through Yuen Long, the most prosperous town in the New Territories, the pathway to our destination is reached. A half mile walk through sugar cane fields, and we come to a gateway with the characters for "Mr Lo's English Academy".

We ring the bell, and soon Lo himself, a gentleman in his seventies, comes to welcome us. We stroll past barking dogs, roosters perpetually announcing dawn, and a scampering pet monkey; then we pass one or two miniature rock gardens built by Mr Lo himself and enter the living room, where Chinese folk instruments such as the *san syan* three-stringed banjo, *ban hu* and *ye hu*, coconut-shell violins, and *chin chin*, middle-range guitar, hang from the walls.

Upon finishing some earthy *lok-on* tea we are escorted through a large classroom lined with zoological specimens such as cats, frogs, and snakes preserved in jars. In the old-style dining room with its marble table and large carved chairs, there are many paintings and

fine examples of calligraphy scrolls, and a valuable *gu chin* (*chin* or ancient zither), the first of many to be found in Lo's home.

Upstairs we are shown the Taoist meeting-hall. Lo is not only a *chin* player and composer, teacher of English, school administrator, and village government official; he is a devout Taoist, an author of several tracts, and leads his own sect. As we observe the altar with its smouldering incense and offerings of oranges and bananas, we remember the many testimonials to Lo's healing powers, still in his possession, from his followers (both European and Chinese) in Canton. He believes that Heaven has granted him the power to learn anything he wishes, and, since he taught himself the extremely difficult art of playing the *chin*, we come to understand his faith.

Now we are admitted into the inner sanctum: Lo's studio. T'ang, Sung, and Ming *chin's* all in excellent condition since they are played almost every day, are all around us. I note that a favourite, named "Jade tinkling in high heaven", rests on the playing table. A little jade box containing Lo's complete repertoire—each title on a separate cardboard disc—sits behind the *chin*, along with an incense pot and a few green plants. At one time he knew fifty traditional pieces, now can still play fifteen from memory. In addition he remembers fifteen of his original compositions.

Before he plays for us he invariably closes his eyes (gaining composure and perhaps uttering a short silent prayer) and clears his throat. As he begins the traditional piece "Returning Home", one is struck by the character and virility in his playing. Rather

than finesse and elegance, such as a master from Soochow might display, his playing has more of Cantonese soulfulness and forthrightness. He is capable of continuing for as long as one cares to listen, and obviously takes an intense delight in performing.

The sound of the *chin*, for those who are unfamiliar with it, is, by comparison with most other instruments, muted and grey. This austere quality is perfect for its use as a conveyor of quiet, introspective moods. It probably has the softest tone of any instrument in existence, and it takes some time for one's ear to adjust to its level of sound and begin to enjoy it on its own terms. Its subdued sound makes it best suited for intimate and private performances—like the Western clavichord. Once one has entered its sound-world, however, one begins to distinguish between the various subtle and very special fingerstrokes and ornaments, all of which are fixed by convention and precisely described in handbooks. The frequently-heard harmonics (made by touching the string lightly with the left hand rather than pressing down firmly) are particularly beautiful; they ring like tiny, unearthly bells.

As we listen to this quiet music, we try to achieve a state of serene contemplation such as all the *chin* masters advocated. We might, as a help, remember the beginning of the *Poetical Essay on the Lute*, written by Hsi K'ang, who lived from 223 to 262 A.D.: "From the days of my youth I loved music, and I have practised it ever since. For it appears to me that while things have their rise and decay, only music never changes; and while in the end one is satiated by all flavours, one is never tired of music. It is a means for guiding and nurturing the spirit, and for elevating and harmonizing the emotions. . . ."

After Lo has played, he chats with us about the centers of fine *chin* performance in China, speculating that even in contemporary China areas of such intense, specialised, and renowned musical activity perhaps still produce

expert *chin* players. They are Peking in Hopei province; Nanking, Soochow, and Yangchow in Kiangsu province; Taiyuan in Shansi province; Changsha in Hunan province; Canton in Kwangtung province; and Taiwan. Musical societies in each of these centers issued important publications and helped maintain high musical standards.

The experience of visiting a musician such as Lo and hearing him play is extremely valuable, because so rare, in present-day Hong Kong. He is one of the very few *chin* players of any skill in the colony, and in addition is an authentic representative of a very special type which is almost extinct outside China (and, after the Cultural Revolution, perhaps inside China as well): the gentleman-scholar who is also an excellent amateur musician, so evocatively described in R.H. van Gulik's *The Lore of the Chinese Lute*. Originally published by Sophia University in Tokyo in 1940, this masterpiece of scholarship has recently been re-issued by Charles E. Tuttle Co., in a new edition.

Lo never depended on playing or teaching music for his livelihood, as do virtually all other musicians in Hong Kong where the present situation of Chinese music is disastrous. Most of the better musicians have to play dinner music in the large hotels by evening or teach in the middle school and privately by day, or both. The purely commercial society of Hong Kong only seems to have a place for diluted Chinese "classical" music and semi-popular or outrightly commercial new compositions and arrangements. The government has taken no steps to preserve genuine Chinese cultivated music, and it is in danger of disappearing entirely.

Lo Ka Ping's career is deceptively prosaic, when we consider that he was born during the Ch'ing dynasty and lived through all the cataclysmic events of twentieth-century China. And his present life-style is a tribute to the tenacity of the Confucian tradition in the modern Chinese mind. Born in Canton on

February 22, 1896, he graduated from Ling Nam University when he was 22. He was an early spokesman for the value of Chinese music as part of a modern education. The title of one of his lectures, "Should Chinese Music be Taught in Christian Schools?" (1920), is indicative of the condescension of his listeners at that time.

From 1917-24 he taught English in several Kwantung middle schools, and in the following years was first an Inspector of Schools and then the Head of the Education Department of a district. He served for two years in the Militia Council of the Nationalist Government as a Major, and was on the teaching staff of the Sun Yat Sen University. 1929-35 was spent as Headmaster of several middle schools, in Singapore as well as Canton.

Lo passed the war years in Macao, where he taught English and authored a textbook, and when the war was over he came to Hong Kong. He held teaching posts in government schools in Yuen Long and was Headmaster of two other schools in the New Territories, and in 1964 he became the Principal of his own school where he now lives. In 1969, when he was 73, he retired from teaching, after a trip to the United States, though in the world of music he is still very active both as a player and collector of the *chin*.

The story of the *chin* is nearly as old as that of China itself. The earliest definite references appear in the *Book of Odes* during the Western Chou period (1122-770 B.C.). At that time the *chin* already had seven strings, and was frequently used in combination with the *se*, a larger instrument of 25-50 strings.

Both the *chin* and the *se* are in long zither shape, but their construction is completely different. The *se*, from which the later instrument *cheng* was derived, is a psaltery. That is, the strings have bridges and are plucked.

The body of the *se* is hollow and gently convex. It was a good orchestral instrument because of its large volume of tone.

The *chin* is made from an upper convex board of *ting* wood and a lower flat board of *tzu* wood. In the middle of the back is a sound hole traditionally called the dragon pond; closer to the player's left is another resonance hole known as the phoenix pool. Two anchor knobs are used to secure the silk or nylon strings. The strings are wound around the anchor knobs, then tuned exactly with the tuning pegs from which hang tassels.

The *chin* and *se* were used in Confucian ceremonial orchestras to accompany singers and as solo instruments. Throughout its history the *chin* has been associated with nobility and refinement, and an ability to play it, or at least deeply appreciate its music, was considered indispensable for any scholar or cultured person. It is frequently referred to in literature as the most poetic and subtle of all instruments. Confucius was one of the most famous players and composers for the solo instrument.

It is indigenous to China, and is perhaps the most peculiarly Chinese of all Chinese instruments. An ideology grew up around the *chin* as the dynasties passed, eventually encompassing, in addition to many other rules, the circumstances in which it should be played: there should be fine scenery, one should ideally have bathed before playing the *chin*, one should play under pines with cranes stalking nearby if possible, and so on. The cranes and pines, like almost everything connected with *chin* ritual, were richly symbolic: pines were the symbol of longevity and one's hand positions while playing should imitate the posture of the crane. *Chin* music is full of references to nature, and ideally a fine player should conjure up images of nature in a sym-

pathetic listener's mind.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the *chin* is its elaborate and difficult notation, which goes a long way toward conveying the complexity of the music itself. This notation is in special Chinese characters which are a kind of tablature, *i.e.* only the finger positions, type of stroke, which string to be played, and the ornamentation are shown. Pitch is not shown directly, and rhythm is not shown at all, since ideally each player is to create his own rhythmic values! (In practice, meter, tempo and rhythm are usually learned from one's teacher by rote).

Shown following this article are the first part of the traditional composition "Returning Home" in *chin* tablature and then in transcription in a special notation I have devised which gives all the information in the Chinese character and, in addition, precisely indicates pitch, meter, tempo, and rhythm.

Lo's valuable collection of *chin's* has dwindled from twenty-five to fifteen, but the remaining few are in beautiful condition, satisfying to both eye and ear. The price for an early Ch'ing or Ming dynasty *chin* is now around US \$700 and up, depending on its tone and many other factors. It is an indication of his character that Lo will only consider selling one of his *chin's* to reputable performers who come and play for him. As soon as he has parted with one of his beloved instruments, he all but goes into mourning. A few weeks later he will smilingly tell you he has just replaced that one with two more!

Just as the repertoire of a pianist or violinist tells everything about his musical taste, so it is for a *chin* performer. Lo's favourite pieces are usually quite difficult and lengthy and invariably express a lofty sentiment. A representative sampling would include: "Conversation between the fisherman and the woodcutter", "Phoenix on the red mountain", "The monk's prayer", "Teals flying over Heng Yang", "Sea fairy", "The Mongo-

lian trumpet" composed by Tung T'ing-lan of the T'ang dynasty and "Clouds over the Hsiao and Hsiang rivers" composed by Kuo Mien of the Sung dynasty.

Like many Western composers, Lo claims he composes best late at night, in the clarity of solitude. He has never dared to drive an automobile, because when a melody comes to him, it possesses him and he can think of nothing else. Some of his longest works were composed in only two or three days. His compositions are technically advanced, show strength and individuality, and demonstrate a capacity for extended structures which is, of course, largely intuitive. Some of his favourite original compositions are: "The lonely teal", "Composing poems underneath the moonlight", "The dream of the maid in the distant tower", "Meditation in the dead of the night" and "Wandering at ease".

Several of these compositions were heard in Lo's solo performance and in orchestral arrangement in the recent Symposium "Chinese Music: Past, Present, and Future" presented in Hong Kong City Hall on October 5th, 6th, and 7th by the Music Department of Chung Chi College in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. These performances confirmed our opinion that his entire output should be carefully studied and preserved.

After examining the milieu and life-style of this English teacher from Canton whose outward career has appeared so ordinary, one comes to appreciate his astonishing consistency and unity of purpose. Every object painting, book, carving, or instrument in his home complements every other and bears witness to his integrity and high ideals. His Taoism makes his music possible, and music is indispensable in his Taoist ceremonies. His is a home in which music naturally flourishes. That it has flourished is evident in his poised and subtle compositions and his skillful and inspired performances.

RETURNING HOME

by Tao Yuen-ming (372-427 A.D.)
of the Eastern Chin Dynasty (317-419 A.D.)

Translated by Lo Ka Ping

Home, Home, Home! As the garden lies bare,
Why do I not return home?
The stress of work being over,
Why should I be overwhelmed with grief?
I should realize that, in spite of a regretful past,
I may have a restored future.
Sometimes I've gone astray—not very far
I find I'm now in the right although I've erred in the past.
As my boat is gliding along on my homeward way,
The breeze caresses my clothes.

I mean to ask the pilgrim the way,
But I regret that the light is dim.
And then suddenly I see the sight of my house.
Being happy, I run toward my manservant
Who greets me while my younger son waits at the gateway.
Though my three paths are getting bare,
The pines and the chrysanthemums still stand.
I then enter the house with the lad, arm in arm
And I find a full bottle of wine therein
From which I get a drink alone.
Looking at the branches in the courtyard, I enjoy myself
And, leaning against the south window,
I am content, for although my house is a little small
It is quite comfortable to me.

Traditional
Transcribed from
the performance of
Lo Ka Ping by
Dale Craig

RETURNING HOME

Adagio Maestoso (♩ = M.M. 60) Andante (♩ = M.M. 44)

Part I

String tuning

Here the top two rows of symbols refer to the left hand, the bottom two rows to the right hand. T — thumb, R — ring finger, O — open string, IX — ninth stud. For the right

hand, the fingers which play are indicated beginning with the thumb as number 1, index finger as 2; the symbols beneath the numbers describe which way the finger strokes

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So prepares a vigorous stroke with left thumb on sixth string at the ninth stud

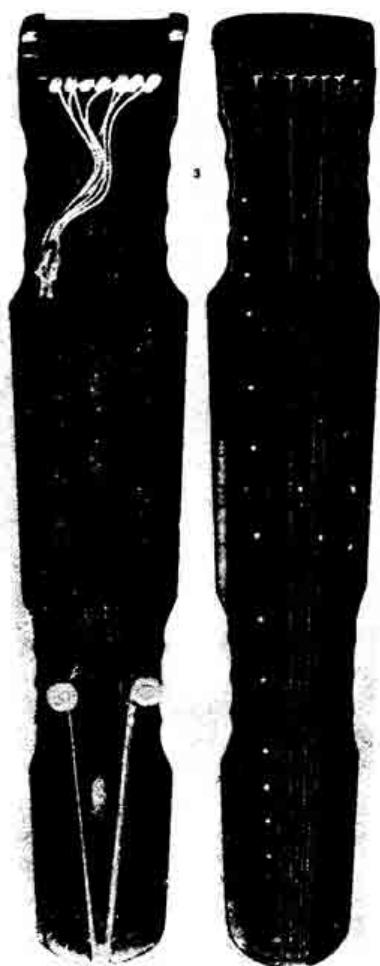


A special stroke in which right-hand second and third fingers move toward each other, producing two tones simultaneously

The left ring finger presses the fifth string at the tenth stud, and the seventh string is left free



Another double-tone stroke with the second and seventh strings, left middle finger crossing the second string at the seventh stud



1 鳴蜩

Ming tyau, "Singing cicada". A pre-Ming *chin* which, like several others, has been in Lo's possession for over twenty years. It has anchor pegs of jade, tuning pegs of translucent horn, and the usual mother-of-pearl studs along the top. About 1950 it cost Lo HK \$1,600 and is now virtually priceless

2 九霄環珮

Jyou syau huan pei, "Jade tinkling in high heaven". Ming dynasty, belonged to the King Yi Wang. Very fine, resonant tone. It has gold studs and cost HK \$5,000 about 50 years ago, is now priceless

3 鳴鳳

Ming fung, "Crying phoenix bird". Sung dynasty, has Han dynasty anchor pegs for strings and white jade tuning pegs. In 1950 Lo paid \$1,600 for it

4 韶鳳

Shau fung, "Phoenix singing the pure music of the Emperor Shun". Ming dynasty or older. This was given to Lo by a member of his Taoist sect 30 years ago, and he refuses to even put a price on it

5 八極引

Ba ji yin, "Song of eight directions". T'ang dynasty. The name of this *chin* arises from the story of the legendary Emperor Hwang Di, who allegedly wrote a piece of the same name celebrating his travels in many directions. This *chin* was owned by the famous *chin*-maker Shr Syi Sying, who inlaid the name of the *chin* with mother-of-pearl and his own name with silver. Ivory tuning pegs and anchor pegs. The "plum flower" design in the lacquer cracks, clusters of tiny circles, is one means of verifying its age, since it only appears on the oldest *chin*'s. *Ba ji yin* was once buried with an emperor, according to Lo

