

Vancouver's first-ever Sound of Dragon festival of Chinese music fires up

by [Alexander Varty](#) on May 7, 2014 at 12:10 pm



Like many musicians, Lan Tung was drawn to sound as a young child.

“For as long as I can remember,” she tells the *Straight* from the East Van home she shares with percussionist Jonathan Bernard, “I always wanted to play music, wanted to learn an instrument before my family could afford to buy an instrument or could afford music lessons. So I started with whatever I could get my hands on.”

Music was also an escape, she adds, from the possibility of being streamed into an unfulfilling existence. Growing up in Taiwan, Tung was subject to an education system that didn't always listen to what students wanted; with her aptitude for figures, she could quite conceivably have found herself an accountant had she not taken her life, and the violinlike erhu, into her own two hands.

So it's mildly ironic that she's spent the last few months poring over spreadsheets and budgets—“I've been doing so much accounting you wouldn't believe it,” she says with a laugh—but the result should be worth it. The first-ever Sound of Dragon festival of Chinese music opens at the Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre this weekend, with Tung as its founder and artistic director.

It's an ambitious undertaking—and while some local musicians might say it's long overdue, Tung contends that it's more a case of the time being right. While there have been amateur

performers of Chinese music in Vancouver for more than a century, it's only now that the city supports a significant number of professionals.

"The growth of Chinese professional music here started about 30 years ago and now is reaching its maturity," she notes. "And with people continuously arriving here, there's always new energy and new input. There are also so many more collaborative projects now that you can program, so you have all these different ensembles and different projects and different repertoire. So if you look at the participants in the festival, we're trying to remind people that you're not only going to see Chinese musicians on-stage: you're going to see many different instruments and players coming from different backgrounds, all working together."

Tung admits that Sound of Dragon closely follows her own preferences, and in some ways it even mirrors her life story. After leaving Taiwan for Vancouver 20 years ago, she landed her first paid gig doing soundtrack music for a play with sitarist James Hamilton. If that was Canadian culture, she remembers thinking, she was up for it, and the cross-cultural aspect of Sound of Dragon is one of its strong points. Among the featured ensembles are the Vancouver Intercultural Orchestra, which brings together an array of Jewish, Persian, South Asian, and Chinese performers; the Big World Band, spearheaded by guitarist John Oliver and bassist Farshid Samandari; and two of Tung's own projects: the Orchid Ensemble, which fuses Chinese strings with Bernard's new-music percussion, and Proliferasian, an improv-oriented quartet that includes the exceptional trumpeter JP Carter.

More traditional forms of Chinese music are featured too. Tung enthuses about the virtuosity of both the Little Giant Chinese Chamber Ensemble, from Taiwan, and our own Vancouver Chinese Music Ensemble, while solo and small-group performances from some of B.C.'s best instrumentalists pepper the afternoon concerts planned for Saturday and Sunday. And while she doesn't want to play favourites, she stresses that one artist not to miss is Xiang Si-hua, a living legend of the zheng, or chinese zither.

"She's in her 70s now, so she represents a really authentic tradition," Tung notes. "She's lived in North Vancouver for more than 20 years, but outside the Chinese-music community very few people know that we have probably the best and the most famous zheng player of the 20th century living right in the city. She was there when the zheng was developed into today's form: she was the first one to test new instruments when they did crazy things like adding pedals or using more strings, and every zheng player studies her teaching book."

From hidden treasures to brand-new discoveries such as the young interdisciplinary troupe Hong Kong Exile, Sound of Dragon might be rooted in Chinese culture, but it's also an exciting reflection of Vancouver's diversity—and when all is accounted for, it looks like a gift.

Sound of Dragon runs at the Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre from Friday to Sunday (May 9 to 11).

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