

## **Min Xiao Fen and Rez Abbasi**

Min Xiao Fen and Rez Abbasi offer a unique and masterful performance blending their sounds on guitar and pipa. Each has a deep connection to the music of their countries of origin which they explore through the traditions of jazz and its modern variations that absorb diverse influences and highlight improvisation. The first half of the concert features Min Xiao Fen and Rez Abbasi in duets and solo pieces. The second half is a screening of the film *The Goddess*, accompanied by the artists playing an original score.

**Min Xiao-Fen** grew up during the Cultural Revolution in the ancient Chinese capital of Nanjing, about 180 miles upriver from Shanghai. She began studying the pipa and Beijing Opera at age 10 with her father, a professor, educator and pipa master at Nanjing University. She was among just a few people studying Chinese instruments, as traditional Chinese music was banned during the Cultural Revolution and only Western instruments were played to accompany revolutionary songs.

At 17, Min won a coveted chair with the Nanjing Traditional Orchestra. Her intense musical training continued with several pipa masters until she became the orchestra's principal pipa soloist, touring extensively with the group for more than a decade.

In the mid 80's when China started opening up, contemporary western music began appearing in clubs. Having grown up solely on revolutionary songs, Min was drawn to this new vocal style and began imitating it. During the day she attended orchestra rehearsals but at night went to clubs to play the guitar and sing Chinese pop music. Sensing there was more for her to discover musically, she left China for the US, settling first in San Francisco where she worked as a soloist for many modern classical composers, then in New York City where she became immersed in the world of jazz. Improvising, initially terrifying, was a new and difficult challenge that she struggled with for 10 years before it became comfortable for her.

Describing her project of adapting a musical score to the 1934 silent film *The Goddess*, Min writes: "I have always had a special interest in Chinese music and films from the mid-1930s. That time in Shanghai was a so-called Golden Age, not only for the merchants and business class who helped put the city in a strong position as the country's economic and industrial center, but also for the musicians, filmmakers and other artists." During that time, a great jazz history had developed between China and America when the legendary trumpeter and composer Buck Clayton brought Kansas City Swing to Shanghai and began working closely with the father of Chinese popular music,

Lin Jinhui, a composer who contributed hundreds of songs to his country's musical canon. Clayton's influence on Li helped usher in a brief era of "Chinese jazz" and altered the course of musical history. In 1934 during this period of blossoming artistic growth *The Goddess* was released, a high point in early Chinese cinema. In one of the most powerful silent performances of all time, the beautiful and celebrated actress Ruan Lingyu plays the role of a nameless young "goddess," a word used to describe a prostitute in China.

Min comments, "When I decided to compose an original score for the soundtrack, a friend tried to help me locate a high-quality copy of the film. However, the original work had been dismissed as pornography during the Cultural Revolution and sustained considerable damage. We eventually found a remastered version, but it was a mess – the picture was not centered properly and the English subtitles were poorly translated. The film required endless hours of editing and adjustment before it was finally ready for viewing. My goal was to create an innovative, soulful score." About half of the music for the film was composed by Min, particularly the musical themes representing the main characters. The other half is improvised. To portray emotional expressions, Min makes strange vocalizations or uses Chinese syllables to sing in nonsense. "In my music, you hear all kinds of things – blues, pop, jazz, some Chinese elements - the combination of sounds is like an open dialog with the characters in the film."

**The pipa**, pronounced PEE- Pa is a plucked stringed instrument that has been played for 2,000 years, beginning in the Qin Dynasty (221 - 206 BC). Originally its sound box was round with a long handle and stretched strings. During the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 AD), a pear-shaped wooden body pipa was introduced to China from central Asia. It had 3 to 5 frets, was held horizontally and was played using a plectrum or pick. Played solo or with an orchestra, it became a principal musical instrument in the imperial court. The modern pipa is held vertically. It has a total of 30 frets, 6 large frets on the fingerboard and 24 frets on the sound box. Players use 5 finger picks on the right hand and employ more than 70 techniques to produce an array of sounds. Traditionally pipa players are skilled singers.

**The ruan** is a four-stringed moon-shaped lute with a straight neck and 24 frets dating back to the Qian dynasty. **The sanxian** is also an ancient Chinese instrument, with three strings, a fretless long fingerboard and a round sound box. It is commonly used for folk music. **The guqin** is a seven-stringed zither without a bridge. It has been played for over 3,000 years and is associated with the Chinese philosopher Confucius.

**Rez Abbasi** is a well known jazz guitarist, named a Guggenheim Fellow in Music Composition in 2021. Born in Karachi, Pakistan, raised in Los Angeles from the age of four, and now a long time New York City resident, he attended the Manhattan School of Music, focusing on both jazz and classical curriculum. He has studied the Qawwali and Indian Classical music traditions of South Asia, which can be heard in his music. But Indian sounds represent only one flavor in his playing rather than the basis of his style. “What makes my music work is that the influences of India penetrate it on an organic level. I listen to and study Indian music and then have it evolve through a modern jazz paradigm. When the Indian influence sneaks into my playing, it’s subtle, as opposed to a direct application of Indian musical principles.” Fusion sounds of the 1970’s and contemporary New York acoustic jazz also contribute to his deeply musical style. About playing music for *The Goddess*, Rez said, “Min wrote a score, but every time we play it, it is different. I play free interpretations of material that she wrote. We have the music in front of us, but we have performed it many times. We know it so well that we can watch the film as we play. Almost half of what I do sounds different each time we perform.”

*The Goddess* was produced in Shanghai in 1934 during a time of political turbulence. China was then a fractured nation, suffering the effects of a prolonged civil war after decades of infiltration by various European nations and Japan. The country’s film industry was also undergoing change partly in response to a growing mania for films in urban cities. During the Cultural Revolution scholars dismissed the film as decadent, but this only served to fuel the film’s mystique over the years. It now holds a place of great importance in China’s film history.

The film is a heart-wrenching tale about a single mother who raises a young child while working as a prostitute. It highlights the disparities suffered by the masses during a time of foreign occupation and domestic unrest. Shanghai’s glitzy, Art Deco skyline is portrayed in contrast to a portrait of wretched street-level existence. Ruan Lingyu, a star of Chinese cinema, projects melancholy and strength in the lead role. This and other film roles made her a symbol of 1930s womanhood and a central figure in a socially and politically progressive film movement. This was the first film by leftist writer-director Wu Yonggang, who continued to make films in China off and on until 1981, surviving the Communist takeover and the Cultural Revolution.