

My Experience in the Far East

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In 1970 Dr. Herbert Zipper, Austrian conductor, music educator and foundation consultant, created the Seoul-Taipei Music Fellowship Program which was sponsored by the John D. Rockefeller III Fund. Apart from his regular job as Executive Director of the National Guild of Community Music Schools in Evanston, Illinois, and conducting young people's concerts with his chamber orchestra in the Chicago area, Dr. Zipper had been making frequent appearances as guest-conductor with the orchestras of Seoul, Korea and Taipei, Taiwan.

The Seoul-Taipei Music Fellowship Program came about as the result of Dr. Zipper being repeatedly asked to send Teacher-Performers on oboe and bassoon to both countries. I had just graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music in May of 1970, and as a result of an emergency appendectomy in March of that year, I missed out on all the auditions for bassoon openings for the following season. Consequently, I thought I would be freelancing in Philadelphia for another year when, lo and behold, my teacher, Sol Schoenbach called me and told me to get in touch with Dr. Zipper. (At that time, Dr. Schoenbach was Executive Director of the Settlement Music Schools in Philadelphia, hence his friendship with Dr. Zipper of the National Guild of Community Music Schools.) Zipper told me to go to the Wellington Hotel in New York the following week as he was going to be there for a Music Education Conference. So, I went and was auditioned and interviewed by this extraordinary humanitarian and musician who hired me for the program, and I was off to one of the most exciting adventures of my life.

Dr. Zipper also chose Othello Jerol Clark, oboist, who had just graduated from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Jerry Clark had been a student of Darrell Stubbs, principal oboist of the Utah Symphony at that time.

The project was set up in such a way that one of us would spend 3 months in Seoul while the other was in Taipei simultaneously. We would meet in one of the two cities every 3 months for 2 weeks in order to perform chamber music together with the local Chinese or Korean musicians. Almost every musical organization in both cities participated in the project. We were called upon to perform as guest principal players and to coach the oboe and bassoon sections of the local orchestras which included the Taiwan Symphony Orchestra, the Taiwan Television Orchestra, the Seoul Philharmonic and the Korean Broad-

casting System Orchestra. Our pedagogic responsibilities included teaching at the Chinese Cultural College in Taipei, Taiwan University, and Guang Ren High School for Music and Art, Taipei. In Seoul we taught at the Yeigo High School for Music and Art, Ewah Women's University and Seoul University.

Needless to say, we were kept quite busy and the experience was very fulfilling. I shall never forget how respectful and disciplined my students were, and how welcome we were made to feel in both countries. Teaching the bassoon in the Far East requires a bit of an explanation regarding the state of the symphony orchestra as I found it there in the early 1970's. The very first symphony orchestra in China was the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra founded by British and French colonists in the mid nineteenth century. To my knowledge, western art music was practically unknown theretofore in the Far East. The Shanghai Conservatory was founded by Europeans as well and when communism overtook Russia in 1917 many Russian musicians, artists and intellectuals fled to China for sanctuary. Many of these musicians taught at the Shanghai Conservatory. The western instruments that the Chinese most readily adapted to were the violin and the flute, having only to switch from their own versions of these instruments to their occidental counterparts.

As a result of this, what I found on my arrival in both Taiwan and Korea were symphony orchestras with uneven development. The strings were far superior to the woodwinds and brass in both countries, with the flute and clarinet being the most advanced in the woodwind department and the brass playing the weakest. The percussion had a similar advantage to the violin and flute as both Koreans and Chinese have their own percussion instruments from which to switch to western models.

There was exceptional native ability and talent in all the sections of the orchestra. What they lacked was good solid formal training. At that time piano and violin were considered the two instruments worthy of study by the upper classes, many of whom sent their gifted children to the United States or Europe to study simply because they could afford it. The woodwind and brass players generally came from families of lesser financial means, another factor contributing to the uneven levels of playing in the orchestras of Korea and Taiwan at that time.

Since then, both Korea and Taiwan have joined Japan as the economic "tigers" of the Orient and as a

result many gifted woodwind, brass and percussion players have been able to study their instruments abroad and return to their countries to contribute what they learned to the symphonic scene there.

The formation of the symphony orchestra in Korea began around 1930, later than in China, due to the absence of western colonization. Since the end of the Korean War there had been much interest and enthusiasm in developing the orchestra there.

All of this effort on the part of oriental countries in developing an art form totally foreign to their indigenous cultures certainly does inspire me to affirm that music, at least great western art music, is the universal language that inspires the hearts, minds and souls of all humanity. It is a great unifying force toward universal acceptance and brotherhood.

My first stop at the beginning of the program was in Seoul, Korea, while my oboist colleague, Jerol Clark, went to Taipei, Taiwan. The Korean bassoonists sounded remarkably good considering the fact that they were playing on store-bought machine-made reeds and were using fingerings which were an "any which way you can" system. They kept the whisper key locked and used their own system of "flick" key for the upper register. It would be better to say that instead of "flicking" the high A, B and C keys, they held them down as a part of their regular fingerings for almost all of the third octave of the bassoon, obviously because with the whisper key closed, the upper notes would jump down the octave if the "flick" keys were held down. This approach leads to some very unfocused sounding notes and questionable intonation in the third octave, as well as allowing the bad habit of not using diaphragm support to develop. Consequently, my first task was to teach them what the whisper key is and isn't for and how to use the "flick" key for venting slurred intervals instead of holding them down. At the same time, I got them started making their own reeds according to the American system of bassoon playing. They enjoyed the easy attacks and general response of the lighter reeds as previously they had been playing on something that resembled a blank with the tip somewhat trimmed for the initial release.

I later found similar problems with the Chinese bassoonists' approach to playing, in Taiwan, although in their case they played with the whisper key off in the third octave. There had been, or so I was told, a Russian bassoon teacher at the Shanghai Conservatory during the 1920's who had taught his system of bassoon playing to Chinese players from the mainland. All of the influence in western music from the Shanghai Conservatory and other parts of China came to Taiwan in 1949 when the Chinese Nationalists lost the Civil War and fled to Taiwan for sanctuary with President Chiang Kai Shek, the Nationalists' retreating

forces, and hordes of civilian mainlanders on their heels.

As for instruments being played by Korean and Taiwanese bassoonists at that time, they generally played on Schreibers, Kohlerts, and, on several occasions, I came upon pupils playing on "no-name" bassoons. These were said to be contraband, black-market instruments made in countries in Eastern Europe behind the erstwhile "iron curtain." None of the bassoons played by my pupils in either country had been tuned or sealed by an expert repairman. In spite of these handicaps they played remarkably well by tuning with their ears and putting their embouchures into outlandish contortions from note to note. Fortunately, being a native of Philadelphia, I had the great privilege all through my high school and Curtis days of being able to sit in Hans Moennig's shop for hours on end whenever I wanted to watch the master work. Gratefully, I had learned enough from these observations to be able to do some adjustments on my pupils' bassoons, albeit minor ones such as putting cork into tone holes and adjusting the mechanism of their bassoons somewhat for intonation and rattle of keys.

A common trait among all my pupils in both countries is that they wanted to study the most difficult works with me at the outset, such as the Mozart or Weber *Concertos*, Saint Saens *Sonata*, etc., without having any training in scales, arpeggios, or long tone practice. Nor had they studied the "bassoon bible," which for me, includes beginning with the complete *Weissenborn Method*, followed by *Milde Scales and Chords* plus Milde's two volumes of *Concert Studies*. In other words, they all wanted to be soloists without really having learned to play the bassoon! I quickly set about remedying this situation, to their great disappointment, by making them all start from the beginning so that I could teach them all the correct fingerings and correct use of the wind and diaphragm support. Of course, there was much loss of face involved at not being able to play their favorite bassoon concerto for me right away, so I told them that if they prepared one *Milde Scales and Chords* and one concert study every week then we'd work on their concerto at the end of the lesson. We rarely got to it! Near the end of 2 1/2 years there they were playing their solo pieces after having had a thorough basic and extensive training in playing the bassoon.

During my many engagements as guest principal bassoon/coach in the orchestras of both countries what came to my attention most was the need for improvement in the overall ensemble playing of the wind section. They played well individually, however, what was lacking was the fine tuning and blending needed to achieve a beautiful wind choral sound. What came to my mind, as at least a beginning to a solution to these problems, was the need to organize

woodwind chamber music groups and performances with the aim of developing more sensitivity to ensemble playing. The need was to develop the ability of each player to listen carefully to one another and approach his/her part in relation to the whole ensemble group.

It was in Seoul where I began organizing chamber music groups with this pedagogical aim in mind and all of the Korean woodwind players were very enthusiastic about the idea. Later on, Mr. Clark and I collaborated in a similar chamber music project in Taiwan where the concept was also well received.

With the enthusiastic help of Han Sung Lee, K.B.S. Orchestra's principal oboist, we organized a woodwind quintet which we called the "Seoul Woodwind Chamber Players." Several foundations and embassies in Seoul patronized our concerts and this enabled us to augment the group to play works like the Beethoven *Octet* and the Mozart *Serenades*. Our quintet toured all over South Korea playing in small cities like Quang Ju, Masan, and Chin Hae, exposing the public to music they had previously never heard. The highlight of my chamber music endeavors came about when both the American-Korean Foundation and the Asia Foundation in Seoul fully sponsored a summer woodwind seminar that we did on the southern tip of Korea in the coastal town of Chin Hae. It was in the summer of 1971 and our quintet along with our best students had all-day master classes for two weeks during which time there were several chamber music concerts of very varied repertoires. It was a wonderful experience for the students to be able to perform together with their teachers, and a considerable contribution was made to the standard of woodwind playing in Korea because of the generosity of the above-mentioned foundations.

In Taiwan, my oboist colleague, Jerol Clark, and I organized an all woodwind chamber music program which was sponsored by the Taipei government. After the well-received performance we were informed that wind repertoire of that genre had never been played in Taiwan before, so it was a welcome incentive for the local musicians to continue woodwind chamber music after Mr. Clark and I returned to the United States in 1973. In Taipei, we also formed a group of strings and winds and played concerts that included the Beethoven *Septet* and Alfredo Casella's *Serenata for Violin, Cello, Trumpet, Clarinet and Bassoon*.

Mr. Clark and I also played recitals together with piano in order to put a spotlight on the double-reed instruments and our purpose in being in both countries. At one point Taiwan Television invited us to perform the Cor de Groot *Serenade for Oboe and Bassoon* on a live broadcast, which gave our project national recognition. All of these opportunities to perform chamber music gave a lot of impetus to our

pedagogical work of popularizing the double-reed instruments and attracting new students to perform on them.

The John D. Rockefeller III Fund's goal was to foster exchange in the arts and sciences between the United States and countries in the Far East. Consequently, our most important responsibility was as cultural ambassadors representing America. Our job was to promote good relations between the oriental musicians and ourselves and to adapt ourselves to the two cultures in which we were living and working. This was very challenging and also very rewarding.

One of the biggest benefits of the project is that several Korean and Chinese wind players became interested in studying in the United States, and several of them went on to do so. Han Sung Lee, principal oboist at KBS was particularly interested, so on my return to America I recommended to Herbert Zipper that he be given the same grant that we had received to be able to study oboe at Temple University with Louis Rosenblatt, retired solo English horn of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Han Sung studied with Mr. Rosenblatt for two years and I had the pleasure of performing the Poulenc *Trio* with him at his recital. Later he returned to Korea with the Tabuteau school of playing which he propagated there among his pupils.

I had by then developed a fascination for all things oriental but was not to have another opportunity to return to the Far East until 1987.

At that time Herbert Zipper had been traveling to the People's Republic of China as guest conductor/educator for one month or more every year since China opened up to cultural exchange with the West after the Cultural Revolution ended. His annual visits began in 1980. Most of his conducting and teaching was in Beijing. When a new symphony orchestra was formed in Jinan, the capital city of Shandong Province, he was invited to guest conduct there. At that time, knowing of my interest in returning to the Far East, he proposed a six month "foreign expert contract to the director of the Shandong Cultural Department for a bassoon teacher/performer. The term "foreign expert" was used for all foreigners invited to work in China at that time. They were usually specialists in science or industrial fields whom the Chinese invited there in order to help them modernize their technology and get up to date with the western world's ways and means of production in many professions.

The Shandong Cultural Department approved Zipper's proposal and he contacted me with the offer which I enthusiastically accepted. The Asian Cultural Council in New York sponsored my round trip ticket to China and the Chinese government paid me a

salary plus all room and board expenses at the nicest hotel in Jinan. The salary was 800 yuan per month, or the equivalent of \$200 U.S. per month, which was considered a fortune since the Chinese at that time were never paid more than 200 yuan a month. Since mu food and lodging were all taken care of my salary was more than ample. In effect, other than guest conductors and soloists, I was the very first foreigner contracted as a member of a Chinese orchestra since 1949 when all foreigners other than diplomats were expelled from the country.

What I encountered in the orchestra there was similar to the level I had heard in Taiwan and Korea 17 years before. I arrived in March of 1987 and there was no heat in the rehearsal hall. Heat was only for concerts, making intonation a more than major problem. The government owns everything including the musicians' instruments and concert attire. The bassoons were all generic "no name" iron curtain instruments in the Jinan orchestra, albeit bassoons are now made in Beijing and in Shanghai. Jinan is a very provincial city and the bassoonists were basically beginners with no conservatory training whatsoever. Beijing, which is several hundred miles north, has the Central Conservatory and Mr. Liu Chi, principal bassoonist of the Central Philharmonic was the teacher there. He is also a composer and has recorded the Mozart *Bassoon Concerto* with that orchestra.

Jinan being a provincial capital, my only students there were the two members of the bassoon section so I had plenty of time to spend with them and again employed the "bassoon bible" of Weissenborn and Milde Studies, slow scales and long tones. I observed the same need for improvement in the ensemble playing in the wind section as I had in Korea and Taiwan. As a consequence, I organized an octet and we performed the Mozart *Serenade in E flat* with me as conductor/coach. This was a great help in developing the individual player's ability to listen to one another and work on blend, tuning, and the finer points of ensemble playing in a more intimate setting than an orchestra allows.

The orchestras in China play a very limited repertoire of the classics, including a great deal of Beethoven, Brahms and Mozart. They do play selected 20th century works, especially Shostakovich. About half of the music the orchestra play there is by modern Chinese composers and is very "Communist Revolution," patriotism oriented.

The Mandarin dialect of Beijing, which has been the national language in China since 1908 when Sun Yat Sen formed the first Republic after the fall of the Ching Dynasty, served me quite well. I had learned spoken Mandarin during my years in Taiwan and in a provincial area like Shandong province no one other than the hotel staff spoke any English.

After my six month "foreign expert" contract finished I spent another 6 months in Shanghai where I also taught and performed with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, the oldest orchestra in China. That orchestra has a very good string section and I was able to coach the bassoon section as before, in addition to giving them individual instruction.

Since China opened up in the 1980's many very talented Chinese bassoonists have gone to study in the United States, including Lin Ming Shu, former bassoonist of Central Philharmonic in Beijing, and Liang Ping from Shanghai. Both of them were studying with Bernard Garfield at Temple University when I did my Master's program there.

The vast majority of Chinese musicians who have gone abroad to study also pursue their careers in the west and I know very few who have returned to their motherland to share their training with their less-fortunate compatriots. Of course, this is understandable since salaries and living conditions are so much better in the west at this time. This is unfortunate because the Chinese are not only extremely talented musically but are very disciplined and hard-working, and all they need is a high standard of training in music to enable them to eventually build world-class orchestras. If foreign-trained Chinese musicians would return to their country to devote themselves to teaching and performing what they have learned in the west this would happen in very few years. Also, the improving economy in China will soon enable them to purchase superior instruments so that they will have no obstacles to musical progress.

During my stay in China I noticed that almost all the bassoonists played on manufactured reeds ordered from foreign countries. As I said before, the instruments are owned by the government and their small salaries do not permit the purchase of gouging machines, profilers, shapers, and most of the other tools so necessary for making and personalizing reeds for the individual. I'm sure that with the improving economy this will also change for the better.

The years I've spent in the Far East have been some of the most rewarding in my professional and personal experience and I hope to have another opportunity to live and work there in the future. It would take at least another article to delve into all that I learned about Chinese and Korean culture and all that I learned about their customs, traditions and ways of thinking. It is my hope that I have contributed a small part to their desire to excel in western art music and that this writing will inspire my western double-reed colleagues to create opportunities for themselves to travel there and share their knowledge with people so eager to learn, improve and attain international recognition in the world of music. ❖