

Mass in Russia and Making Music in China, Summer 2002

A Personal Experience By Nanci Fleisher

This summer, while attending a Russian Orthodox wedding in the city of Vladimir (three hours south of Moscow), I had the opportunity to attend mass at Our Lady of the Holy Rosary. The church, with a congregation of about 500 families regionally, was re-consecrated in 1992. It was very moving to sing mass parts in Latin and recite prayers in English, along with the very small, Saturday night congregation, reciting the same prayers in their Russian tongue. After the mass, the five women, attending mass, and the African (Congo) pastor warmly welcomed me and told me something of the history of the Vladimir parish. It is heartwarming to know that Catholicism is making a resurgence (though hard-fought) in Russia. This was in sharp contrast to my experiences in China. One week after standing in Red Square in Moscow, I was standing in Tianeman Square in Beijing. I spent a week in Beijing before departing for Shandong province and the city of Linyi, where I taught vocal music for two weeks. With one catholic cathedral, St. Joseph's, open in Beijing, religion is still state run and mass at St. Joseph's is not authorized by the Roman Catholic church. In the Quangdong province city of Zhuhai, during the summer of 2000, we were told how the Chinese government supports the freedom of religious practice. However, no church can display a storefront, advertise, evangelize, educate, support any social ministries or draw attention to themselves in any fashion. Funny notions of religious freedom.

This summer, while teaching in the school of Shuangyueyuang, in Linyi, I saw no indications of the impact of religion, outside of historic, traditional faiths (Buddhism, Daoism, etc.) marketed by government. You can still buy a lot of incense and prayer beads and visit the temples (in Beijing) along with the rest of the tourists. As for my teaching experience, it was marvelous, filled with wonderfully receptive students of all ages. The Shuangyueyuang school is a private, provincial school (open to kids in the entire province if they can afford the tuition) of 4,000 students, K-12. I

taught American, regional folk music, poetry, and ethnic folk dances to 160 children, aged 9 to 19. (Interesting, the vast majority of the students were boys.) The students were grouped into 10 classes by English language ability. I also had a private lesson, in traditional Chinese flute, with the head of the music department and was invited, during the second week, to help adjudicate instrumental tests. In meeting with the music faculty, I discovered highly trained music teachers who were starved for exposure and training in western music teaching methods, primarily Kodaly. (I also received an open invitation to come back and facilitate the faculty while teaching Chinese elementary music, using western methods.) This interest in western musical pedagogy was consistent with my reception, and the huge interest in our music, displayed by the children. The kids loved "Red River Valley", "John Kanaka", "Oh Susanna", "The Titanic", countless other songs, poems by Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss, and a medieval, English Morris sword dance. Ultimately, I'd brought far more materials than I could use in the two weeks. This was based on my experience with my students two years prior, in Zhuhai, who were far more fluent in English. The Linyi students were not as fluent in English. However, this teaching experience, deep into eastern, central China, 10 hours south of Beijing, was in many ways far more meaningful. In an area where the people do not see western tourists or non-Chinese in general, my fellow American teachers and I were received constantly with great interest and genuine kindness. Aside from constantly stopping traffic and drawing stares, our contact with the people of Linyi was marked by a real interest in hearing about America and world events, allowing them the opportunity to practice speaking English and the sincere desire to share about their families and learn about ours. For me, the sharing was somewhat easier through the common language of music. One night, in Linyi Square, I was prompted to sing a Mandarin song, "Mo Li Hua" (Jasmine Flower) to a highly receptive crowd of several hundred people, who immediately began the traditional sway and clapping pattern as I sang. As I sang the song the second time, the people began to sing with me. We sang together and, as we came to the end of the song, we clapped and cheered and laughed with each other. Making music together in deep China isn't hard. Music is the language we all understand and share.

~Pax et Bonum

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"The ability to speak does not make you intelligent"

~~ Qui-Gon Jinn ~~