

Reviews & Insights

Roberto Fiore

NTU- Nantong University

China: A New World in Music. An In-Depth Look at the Reality of Classical Music in China

Abstract

The paper explores the phenomenon of classical music as a global cultural language, challenging its historical European supremacy in light of its extraordinary rise in Asia, particularly in China. Traditionally, classical music has been perceived in the West as an elitist and sometimes anachronistic art. In contrast, in Asia it has spread pervasively thanks to access to Western music education, the international circulation of musicians, and the opening of academic institutions, transforming from a peripheral phenomenon into a new epicentre of development. The analysis highlights how the expansion of classical music in Asia is driven by significant investment in cultural infrastructure and an impressive “soft power” policy. China has established itself as the world’s largest producer and consumer of musical instruments and has seen exponential growth in concert halls and symphony orchestras. This demand is also fuelled by families’ investment in their children’s musical training and the rapid growth of the recorded music market. The article underscores the differences between the Western approach (individualistic and performance-oriented) and the Asian model (collective, disciplined, and precision-focused), suggesting that the fusion of these paradigms could define a new global standard. It also points out that China is not merely emulating the European model but is forging its own “Asian symphonic musical identity” by blending traditional Chinese elements with Western compositional techniques. The figure of Mario Paci in Shanghai is cited as a historical example of Western influence and the training of local talent. In conclusion, the article proposes that Asia is not only a competitor but potentially the future of classical music, ushering in a “post-Western” musical era.

Keywords

Classical Music | China | Musical Globalization | Cultural Identity



This work is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Share alike 4.0 International License.

1. Introduction: Three Questions.

(i) Is art music, or commonly called “classical music“, a global cultural phenomenon?¹

So-called “classical music“ – a non-ancient definition that, as we shall see, requires profound disquisition – was born and developed in Europe over approximately six centuries, from medieval polyphony to the experiences of the late twentieth century. This long historical process gave rise to a historical musical heritage that we can now define as “European art music“: a varied and complex aesthetic language that has evolved over centuries, expressing different musical styles that have led to the creation of a vast and diverse repertoire, impossible to define within a single commercial genre.

“Classical music“, during the latter part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, has been considered by Western “popular culture“ an outdated musical language, distant and alien from common everyday sensibilities and needs, a music tied to its time but not artistically universal. In the East, however, access to Western musical education, the international circulation of musicians, the digitalization of content, and the opening of academic institutions have allowed a widespread diffusion of “classical music“ in territories once considered peripheral to the Euro-American cultural axis.

Over the centuries, European art music gradually developed, shaping a cultural heritage of extraordinary richness. From an elitist practice largely confined to the European continent, it transformed into a transnational phenomenon. Having already reached the Americas in the sixteenth century with European explorers, classical music did not face extensive adaptation processes: in the colonized territories, unfortunately, there were no indigenous musical structures comparable to those in Europe, which allowed for an almost natural extension of the aesthetic and formal characteristics of Western musical art.

The trajectory of classical music in Asia has been quite different. In this context, every new cultural element, especially if originating from foreign traditions, tends to be welcomed, assimilated, and reinterpreted according to local codes, in a process of profound dialogue and transformation. The spread of European art music in Asia, which primarily occurred in the twentieth century, encountered civilizations endowed with sophisticated cultural structures and autonomous musical identities, leading to reception phenomena far more complex and dynamic than the colonial model. From this perspective, it can be argued that art music should no longer be considered exclusively as an expression of a specific historical civilization, but rather as a global artistic language, capable of generating adherence, meaning, and creativity even within societies that do not share its origins.

¹ AMY LI, *The Historical Evolution of the Popularization of Classical Music and the Development of the Fusion of Multiple Musical Styles*, «Herança. History, Heritage and Culture Journal», VII, 4, 2024, pp. 113-125, <https://doi.org/10.52152/heranca.v7i1.810>

(ii) Europe and its cultural tradition: a primacy in question or a natural evolution?

For a long time, Europe has exercised an undisputed primacy in the creation, interpretation, and preservation of classical musical heritage. From its origins, cities such as Naples, Vienna, Paris, Berlin, Milan, St. Petersburg, Rome, etc., have been the driving centers of a tradition that has now reached the entire world. However, this primacy is no longer guaranteed today, neither culturally nor structurally. In Europe, for at least half a century, classical music has experienced an ambivalent situation: on the one hand, it continues to be supported by highly prestigious institutions; on the other, it increasingly appears as an elitist phenomenon, sometimes perceived as anachronistic, and constantly struggling to generate new interest, new audiences, and new cultural meaning. In my opinion, this is not merely a “decline” in an absolute sense, but rather a historical transformation that questions the meaning of art in contemporary European society, the balance between heritage and innovation, and the relationship between artistic production and economic ideas. The crisis of art music in Europe is not just a matter of numbers or funding, but primarily of cultural meaning:

- * What role should “classical music” and its related events play in people’s lives today?
- * What needs to change for it to continue to be part of European society in the 21st century?

In this context, the Asian phenomenon appears not so much as a threat, but as a mirror and perhaps an opportunity: to draw inspiration from the new, great phenomenon of “classical music” in Asia to re-read and transform the cultural meaning of an immense heritage that risks, otherwise, crystallizing definitively.

(iii) Is Asia the new epicenter of new classical music culture?²

The pulsating heart of this global mutation is undoubtedly Asia. Nations like China, South Korea, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia have embraced classical music with surprising dedication and rigor, building – in a few decades – an infrastructure and a musical culture that now competes in quality, number, and ambition with that of Europe and America. This phenomenon is no longer an isolated novelty as in the last years of the twenty-first century, but today it is a systemic process that continues to consolidate. During my first trip to China in October 2016, listening to a symphony orchestra in a small city in southern China, composed of 80% Chinese musicians, truly shocked me. The technical level, interpretive intensity, and cohesion of the orchestral group made me realize that European musical hegemony was no longer a given.

During my first trip to China in October 2016, listening to a symphony orchestra in a small city in southern China, composed of 80% Chinese musicians, truly shocked me.

² JASON STOCKINGER, *Classical music: The future of Western classical music is in Asia – specifically China, South Korea, Japan. Why is that?*, <https://welltempered.wordpress.com/>

The technical level, interpretive intensity, and cohesion of the orchestral group made me realize that European musical hegemony was no longer a given.

Since then, my professional experience in China has allowed me to observe firsthand an extraordinary transformation: the emergence of a robust, conscious, and creative musical scene that does not merely emulate European models but assimilates, reworks, and in some cases subverts them. Asia is no longer merely “the model apprentice” of the European tradition but is becoming an autonomous cultural laboratory, where the very grammar of classical music is being redefined.

From the training of musicians to the organization of symphonic seasons, to the composition of new works and the adaptation of the European repertoire according to local sensibilities, everything contributes to the birth of a new Asian classical music culture, aware of its roots but also projected towards the future. The question, therefore, is no longer whether Asia can compete with Europe in the field of classical music, but whether it has already become, in effect, the new epicenter of a global classical music, capable of speaking to the public with its own voice.

2. Classical Music Outside Europe: A Natural Extension and a New Pole of Development.

2.1 The expansion of classical musical culture outside Europe

Classical musical culture, always rooted in the history of Europe, has experienced a slow but constant geographical expansion since the 18th century, through colonial trajectories, religious missions, migratory movements, and later, the dynamics of the cultural industry. However, it was only in the 20th century that European art music began to develop with continuity and autonomy even outside the continent, laying the foundations for a true global reformulation of its identity.

The export of classical music initially occurred through academic and pedagogical channels: the founding of conservatories, music schools, and orchestras in North America, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania allowed the institutionalization of musical knowledge that progressively took root in new cultural contexts. In particular, the transmission of the Western repertoire, interpretive models, and teaching methodologies constituted a crucial factor in triggering a “tradition in translation”, capable of taking hold even outside its original habitat.

Today, classical music is played, taught, listened to, and supported by prestigious institutions worldwide. This does not imply a mere imitation of Europe, but a more complex process of assimilation, reworking, and, in some cases, radical transformation of its codes. From this perspective, it is necessary to understand the main actors of this dissemination and the cultural dynamics that have favored its success.

2.2 *The role of the United States in the 20th century: schools, institutions, and orchestras*

The first major extra-European musical hub was undoubtedly North America. The United States, from the second half of the 19th century and with greater intensity in the 20th, managed to build an extraordinarily effective musical system, based on three pillars: academic training, private funding, and large-scale cultural programming.³

Conservatories like Juilliard, Eastman, Curtis, and prestigious universities like Harvard or Yale welcomed – especially after the world wars – some of the most renowned European composers and musicians who found refuge or developed their activities in the United States by 1970. These include, in chronological order: Arnold Schoenberg, who arrived in 1933 and was active at USC and UCLA; Kurt Weill, who moved in 1935 and was associated with Juilliard and the Broadway theatre scene; Igor Stravinsky, who settled in 1939 and was associated with Juilliard; Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, who also arrived in 1939, taught at the Los Angeles Conservatory; Rudolf Serkin, pianist and pedagogue, who also arrived in the United States in 1939, taught at the Curtis Institute of Music; Paul Hindemith, who moved in 1940, founded an important compositional school at the Yale School of Music; Béla Bartók, who sought refuge in the same year and collaborated with Columbia University; Darius Milhaud, who arrived in 1940 and taught at Mills College; Bohuslav Martinů, who arrived in 1941, taught at the Mannes School of Music and Princeton; Nadia Boulanger, though not permanently settled, regularly held courses and masterclasses between 1938 and 1970 at institutions such as Radcliffe, Longy, and the Juilliard School. This sequence concludes with Luciano Berio, who in the 1960s taught at Juilliard, bringing with him the language of European avant-garde and contributing to the transatlantic musical dialogue of the post-war period. Their contribution helped create an American musical elite deeply rooted in the European tradition but endowed with superior economic and organizational means.

In parallel, major American orchestras – from the New York Philharmonic to the Chicago Symphony, from the Boston Symphony to the Los Angeles Philharmonic – established an executive and production standard that represented, for much of the 20th century, the new global centre of reference for symphonic music. Among the orchestral conductors who made American symphonic music great, Arturo Toscanini stands out, already famous in Europe, who permanently moved to the United States in 1939. He was a founding figure of the NBC Symphony Orchestra, with which he built an exemplary executive model for rigor and interpretive intensity. Bruno Walter, an internationally renowned conductor, left Nazi Germany and settled in New York in 1939, collaborating with the New York Philharmonic and other important institutions. Fritz Reiner, Hungarian by birth, became a pillar of the American musical system, conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra with which he set new standards of orchestral precision. George Szell, also Hungarian, was a central figure in transforming the Cleveland Orchestra into one of the most refined ensembles in the world.

³ BARRYMORE L. SCHERER, *A History of American Classical Music*, Naxos Books, 2007.

The United States managed to transform classical music into a national identity element, despite not having an indigenous tradition in this field. This phenomenon was based on a constant tension between fidelity to the European canon and a desire for innovation, often mediated by a pragmatic and strongly meritocratic attitude. The recording industry, radio and television broadcasting, the system of private foundations, and the role of the media contributed to building a cultured, widespread, and well-structured mass musical culture. In this process, a central figure was Leonard Bernstein, an orchestra conductor, composer, and immensely charismatic populariser, who managed to embody the synthesis between European heritage and American spirit. Through his famous Young People's Concerts broadcast by CBS and numerous educational activities with the New York Philharmonic, Bernstein made classical music accessible to a wide audience, promoting a true democratization of the symphonic repertoire. His work contributed to making classical music not only an artistic heritage but also a living element of American cultural discourse in the second half of the twentieth century.

2.2 China and Asia as a new protagonist of the twenty-first century: reception and transformation of the Music and Art.

From the last twenty years of the twentieth century, Asia began to emerge as a new protagonist in the field of "classical music", developing an approach to the study and interpretation of the Western repertoire that is both rigorous and systemic. The necessity of assiduous practice in studying instruments and the vast musical repertoire coincided with the methodical dedication towards a discipline or a specific area of Asian culture.⁴

The emergence of new economic and cultural contexts linked to this new field has led to China, South Korea, and Japan investing enormously in building a professional musical infrastructure, based on three fundamental elements: early musical education, import of Western know-how, and public and private support.

The reception of European musical tradition in Asia did not occur through mere imitation, but as a conscious process of acquisition and re-functionalization. European and American institutions played a crucial role in this process, training hundreds of thousands of Asian musicians who, once returned to their countries of origin, gave rise to orchestras, schools, and academies capable of competing internationally.

Departing for training and returning, a very particular social and cultural paradigm very different from the European one, where precisely in the twentieth century many Europeans permanently left Europe for the United States of America solely for economic reasons. Asian peoples have always emigrated for economic reasons, but from the late 1900s, a cultural and musical emigration with return began.

⁴ MAYA YANG, *East Meets West in the Concert Hall: Asians and Classical Music in the Century of Imperialism, Post-Colonialism, and Multiculturalism*, «Asian Music», 38, I, 2007, pp. 1–30.

In the case of China – emblematic for its scale and speed – there has been a true exponential development, which has seen “classical music” not only as a tool for cultural prestige but also as a vehicle for projection and identity consolidation

2.3 Globalization and the music industry: what role in the dissemination of classical music?

Globalization has contributed decisively to the dissemination of classical music, making it accessible, visible, and, in certain contexts, desirable. The internet, streaming, digital educational platforms, and social media have allowed millions of people to approach a musical world that, until a few decades ago, was reserved for a cultural and geographical elite.⁵

In Asia, this process has merged with a strong internal demand for cultural development. The music industry – from artist management to record labels, from international competitions to representation agencies – has promptly responded to this new demand, helping to create an extremely dynamic and continuously expanding Eastern classical music market.

The result is a global ecosystem in which the old European centres no longer dictate the rules but must negotiate their position with new interlocutors of equal weight.

2.4 Differences between the Western and Asian models in approaching classical music.

While sharing the adoption of the “Classical Music” tradition, the Western and Asian models diverge significantly. In the West, the approach is strongly individualistic and performance-oriented, with an emphasis on personal charisma, interpretive ego, and the value of personal merit. Musical training often integrates with an entrepreneurial vision of the artist, who must know how to “market” themselves in the global market. In Asia, conversely, a collective and disciplined model predominates, valuing precision, stylistic coherence, and technical excellence. The figure of the musician is often associated with values of discipline, modesty, and respect and love for the society through his mission of teaching.⁶

In perspective, it is precisely in the interaction between these two models that a new synthesis could emerge, capable of overcoming the historical limitations of both and giving rise to a new global paradigm for classical music in the 21st century.

⁵ PETER TSCHMUCK, *Creativity and Innovation in the Music Industry*, Springer-Verlag, Berlin 2012.

⁶ JOHN WARTHEN STRUBLE, *The history of American classical music: MacDowell through minimalism*, Robert Hale Ltd, 1995.

3. *Classical Music in Asia: Society and People, Roots and Development.*

3.1 *Society and Development: The Importance of Collectivity and the Role of the Artist between West and East.*

Being a music Maestro in countries like China is a sign of great knowledge and entails recognition from society. The long course of study required to reach such a high artistic level is considered a clear indicator of a person's value and prestige within Chinese society. It is not merely a matter of individual prestige, but also concrete proof of the value attributed to education and dedication. The role of the Master extends far beyond technical teaching: it becomes a symbol of discipline, culture, and social responsibility.⁷

In many contexts, they are invited to participate in public ceremonies, educational forums, community projects, and even cultural consulting activities for local authorities or educational institutions. It could be superficially said that "classical music" has often been perceived as a distinctive sign of progress, refinement, and belonging to a global modernity, and in this sense, it has also assumed an economic and symbolic value, becoming an integral part of soft power strategies, but my viewpoint differs on various points.

I believe it is reductive to limit the secondary aspects of art music to a symbol of power or a political tool. Music, especially in contexts like Asia, still retains a deeply educational and transformative function, linked to the construction of collective identity. It is a shared language, a common experience, a cultural code that enriches the values and aesthetics of an entire society. The idea of the intellectual, the Master, and Society itself in Asia diverges greatly from that in Europe and the West. Collectively itself has a very different intrinsic value, as do the roles that compose it. The artist and the intellectual are still considered key figures in a process of advancement and development and have the task of improving and developing it. In this context, the figure of the artist is neither marginal nor distant from the social fabric: instead, it is immersed in it, responsible for its balance and harmonious growth.⁸

The social and moral responsibility of the artist does not end with the creative act but continues in constant dialogue with the community, giving voice to its tensions, its dreams, its transformations.

The commitment, study, and cultural value of the individual artist are precious elements functional to the growth of the collective. The task of an artist and musician who is part of a community is to improve it in every way.

This simple but important vision, probably known to many, differs completely from the idea of European art in the twenty-first century. An art that too often has emphasized exasperated individualism, the search for rupture, the negation of the past. That important moment in the history of Western music, when music as an expression

⁷ JINYUAN YANG & JINHONG YANG, *Research on Traditional Philosophical Thoughts in Chinese Classical Music Creation*, «Highlights in Art and Design», IV, 1, 2023, pp. 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.54097/hiaad.v4i1.11561>.

⁸ DENG CONG, *Analysis of Aesthetic Education Elements and Values in Chinese Classical Music*, «International Journal of Education and Humanities», XVII, 3, 2024, pp. 86-91, <https://doi.org/10.54097/w8mt9a73>.

of a need for communication became music as an expression of an intention of incommunicability. The artist's ego, instead of opening up to the world, closed in on its own expressive solitude, often generating works that repel instead of welcoming, that alienate instead of drawing closer. During that period in the West, the destruction of various pre-existing musical categories as an attempt, experiment, and cultural imposition of a "New Musical", had the forced necessity and obligation to be "New". The dogma of destroying yesterday and today can lead to a simple non-being in the end, becoming merely an exercise without content.

Thus creating an absolute break with the musical past, what is considered the forced innovation of the twentieth century, in my opinion, led to rupture as a principle and not as a consequence of an artistic path, creating a communicative and cultural void. A void that contributed to the alienation of the public, the isolation of the artist, the birth of a self-referential elite. For many years I have wondered if precisely that moment in Western history when a change, a musical revolution, was manifesting itself, was in reality the moment when cultured music became "unreachable music". Perhaps the art of that specific period, with its intention of rupture, officially and conceptually ceased to be a representation of the "inner image" of human beings, to become an admissible, obligatory, necessary exercise in style to be accepted into the group of those who considered themselves the sole custodians of the sacred fire of "supreme culture". The great doubt that so much energy was not transformed into creativity, but only into an aesthetic experiment for its own sake.

In this sense, the comparison with the East is not only useful but necessary: to rediscover the value of collectivity, service, and dialogue. And to bring art, and music in particular, back to the center of people's lives.

3.2 Roots and Development: The arrival of classical music in China in the 20th century

The introduction of classical music in China occurred predominantly in the 20th century, as a direct consequence of complex historical processes linked to colonization, cultural globalization, and educational exchanges between East and West. Countries such as Japan, China, South Korea, and subsequently the nations of Southeast Asia began to learn about and receive Western classical music through the presence of Christian missionaries, European diplomats, and later through post-war American influences. Initially, classical music was introduced into conservatories and schools as part of a modernizing educational program, with the aim of "civilizing" according to European models. However, already by the 1930s and 1940s, the first generations of local musicians trained in Western style began to form, many of whom travelled to Europe or the United States for further training and then brought back to their respective countries not only technical skills but also a new cultural vision of music. This generated a process of appropriation and re-elaboration of classical music in an Asian key, giving rise to a new and hybrid tradition.

3.3 China as a case study: The Birth and Renaissance of Music

China represents an exemplary case study for understanding the birth and rebirth of the symphony orchestra outside its original European context. The journey began at the dawn of the 20th century with the gradual introduction of Western music through missionaries, cultural diplomacy, and returning students from abroad, who brought with them new skills and a modernizing vision. This ferment led to the founding of fundamental musical institutions such as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1927 and the National Conservatory of Music in 1938, which trained entire generations of musicians and systematically disseminated Western instrumental technique and aesthetics.⁹

A pioneering role in this context was played by the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, recognized as the oldest symphony orchestra in Asia. Its origins date back to 1879, when it was founded as the Shanghai Public Band by the Italian conductor Mario Paci. Under his leadership, the ensemble gradually transformed into a European-style symphony orchestra, performing classical repertoire and training local musicians with professional rigor. Paci's work was also instrumental in the founding of the Shanghai Conservatory itself¹³, helping to lay the groundwork for the modern Chinese musical system. The orchestra has maintained a benchmark role over time, evolving into one of the most important musical institutions on the continent. The true renaissance and "Sinicization" of classical music in China developed from the mid-20th century, when the orchestra was adopted as a vehicle for national and identitarian ideals. This led to the integration of instruments and melodies from Chinese tradition into Western symphonic structures, giving rise to a distinctly national repertoire, as exemplified in the famous "Yellow River Cantata". The adoption of the orchestra as a Chinese expressive medium has continued with the founding of numerous regional and national orchestras, including the China National Symphony Orchestra (1956), the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra, the Beijing Symphony Orchestra, and many others.¹⁰

3.4 The role of Asian governments in funding and promoting classical music.

Unlike many Western contexts where austerity policies have reduced public funding for culture, numerous Asian governments – particularly those of China, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan – have increasingly invested in the promotion of classical music as a tool for cultural and social development.¹¹

⁹ FAN JIANYU, KUI DONG, YI-HSUAN YANG & PHILIPPE PASQUIER, *A Comparative Study of Western and Chinese Classical Music Based on Soundscape Models*, 2020 ICASSP - International Conference on Acoustics, Speech and Signal Processing, pp. 521-525, <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICASSP40776.2020.9052994>.

¹⁰ NGUYEN ANH THUC, *Origin and cultural meaning of classical Chinese music and dance*, «VNU Journal of Foreign Studies», XXXIV, 6, 2018, pp. 34-40, <https://doi.org/10.25073/2525-2445/vnufs.4329>.

¹¹ XUE CHARLIE QIULI, SUN CONG & ZHANG LUJIA, *Grand theatres in China a Mosaic analysis of database*, «Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering», XIX, 6, pp. 700–713, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13467581.2020.1773272>.

In China, the investment has been monumental and visible. The construction of imposing and state-of-the-art concert halls in major metropolises is tangible proof of this vision. Consider the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in Beijing, also known as “The Egg”, an architectural masterpiece inaugurated in 2007 that houses opera, concert, and theatre halls, serving as an epicentre for classical music and performing arts in the country. In Shanghai, the Shanghai Grand Theatre, opened in 1998, is another significant example of this policy of creating high-level infrastructure. In parallel, direct financial support to national symphony orchestras such as the China National Symphony Orchestra and the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra ensures their vitality and ability to perform internationally. This commitment is rooted in government plans, such as the Five-Year Plans (e.g., the 14th Five-Year Plan 2021-2025), which often include specific chapters for the development of the cultural industry and performing arts, recognizing their intrinsic and strategic value. The widespread implementation of compulsory music education in primary and secondary schools completes the picture, cultivating new generations of audiences and talents.

3.5 Mario Paci: The Master of Shanghai and the Heart of Chinese Classical Music.

The history of classical music in China cannot be told without acknowledging the indelible imprint left by Mario Paci. Born in Florence in 1878, this talented Italian pianist and conductor not only dedicated much of his professional life to Shanghai but became a central and irreplaceable figure in the birth and development of the city’s orchestral and musical tradition, shaping generations of musicians and defining the path of Chinese classical music in an era of profound transformations.¹²

Paci arrived in Shanghai in 1919, at a time when the city was a vibrant international crossroads, a “Paris of the East” where different cultures met and merged. His reputation preceded him, having already consolidated his career in Europe. Upon arriving in China, he was appointed music director of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, which at the time was mainly composed of foreign musicians, largely Russian and Filipino, and served a growing international community.

Under Paci’s leadership, the orchestra flourished and transformed. He did not limit himself to conducting a European repertoire but embarked on a far more ambitious mission: to elevate the city’s musical level and train local talents. Paci was convinced of the potential of Chinese musicians and dedicated considerable energy to their education. He founded the Shanghai Public Band School, a music school associated with the orchestra, where young Chinese students could receive rigorous training in Western instruments. This initiative was revolutionary, as it provided the foundation for a generation of Chinese musicians who would otherwise not have had access to such a high level of musical education.

¹² STEFANIA STAFUTTI, *Mario Paci (1878-1946), direttore della Shanghai Municipal Orchestra*, in SCARPARI M., LIPPIELLO T. (edited by), *Caro Maestro... Scritti in Onore di Lionello*, v. 1, Cafoscarina, Venezia 2005, pp. 1083-1094.

His impact extended far beyond conducting the orchestra. Paci was an tireless mentor. Many of his students became prominent figures in the Chinese music scene. His role in training pianists such as Fu Ts'ong, who would later achieve international fame, is celebrated. Paci did not limit himself to technical instruction but instilled in his students a deep passion for music and an understanding of its spirit. He was known for his discipline, but also for his generosity and personal commitment to supporting his students.

His vision and work radically changed Shanghai's musical landscape. The orchestra's performances became first-rate cultural events, attracting an increasingly large and diverse audience. Paci introduced an ambitious repertoire, bringing symphonic works and concerts to Shanghai that had rarely been heard in Asia. He helped create a dynamic cultural atmosphere that would lay the groundwork for the city's subsequent musical flourishing.

Mario Paci's legacy is immense. Not only did he elevate the musical standard of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra (which would later become the renowned Shanghai Symphony Orchestra), but he also planted the seeds for the development of a solid tradition of classical music in China. His dedication to training local musicians has allowed generations of Chinese talents to emerge and contribute significantly to the global music scene.

4. The Real Data: Navigating the Evolving Landscape of Classical Music in China.

4.1.1. The Chinese Classical Music Boom: Data and Dynamics.

China has emerged as the world's largest producer, consumer, and exporter of musical instruments, accounting for over 60% of global sales. Historically, this dominance has focused on mid-to-low-range products, but a significant strategic shift towards high-end instruments is now evident, although this premium segment largely remains dominated by imported brands.¹³

This growing demand, particularly for Western instruments, is primarily fuelled by improving living standards and the increasing willingness of middle and upper-middle-class Chinese families to invest substantially in their children's personal development, including musical education.

The ambition to elevate China's artistic standing reflects a long-term vision that transcends domestic consumption, aiming instead to position the country as a significant exporter of high-caliber musical artistry and intellectual property, thereby challenging the historical Western dominance in the classical music sector.

The Chinese government has consistently increased its investments in cultural infrastructure, viewing these investments as essential cornerstones for national development and as integral components of its soft power strategy. This commitment is evidenced by a dramatic expansion of musical institutions and venues. Between 1998

¹³ Italy Trade Agency (ITA), Executive Summary China Musical Instrument Industry Report, www.ice.it

and 2015, over 360 major theatres were either constructed or renovated across China, potentially surpassing the total number of similar constructions undertaken in Europe over the past seventy years. Many of these theatres have become iconic cultural landmarks. Concurrently, the number of professional symphony orchestras in China has more than doubled in just five years, increasing from approximately 30 to 72 as of last year. Broader estimates suggest an even more remarkable growth – from fewer than 20 professional orchestras two decades ago to over 100 today. Leading institutions such as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music exemplify this trend, currently boasting a significant student body (2,493 full-time students, including 79 international students, as of 2025) and providing comprehensive educational programs ranging from elementary to doctoral levels.¹⁴

The scope and rapidity with which major theatres and orchestras have been constructed illustrate a state-driven, top-down approach to cultural development. The philosophy encapsulated by the phrase “build it and they will come” accurately reflects this strategy, indicating the belief that providing world-class venues and institutions will inherently cultivate a thriving classical music scene and audience, rather than waiting for organic demand to stimulate infrastructural development. This represents a distinctive characteristic of China’s broader “soft power” strategy.

4.1.2 Audience and Society Enthusiasm and Engagement.

The enthusiasm for classical music in China – particularly regarding high-profile events – is indisputable. A striking example is the Berlin Philharmonic’s residency in Shanghai in April 2024, during which more than 6,000 tickets for four symphonic concerts were sold out within just five minutes. This rapid sell-out demonstrates not only a substantial public interest but also an eager anticipation to partake in world-class classical music performances.

The audience for such events is not limited to major metropolitan centres. Over 40% of ticket purchasers for the Berlin Philharmonic’s concerts came from outside Shanghai, with many traveling from other provinces or even from abroad specifically to attend the performances. This willingness to journey considerable distances underscores the powerful appeal that classical music holds for a broad and devoted audience across China. This enthusiasm has contributed significantly to the robust performance of the broader music market. In 2023, China recorded the fastest revenue growth rate in the global recorded music industry, with a 25.9% increase, thereby solidifying its position among the world’s top five music markets.¹⁵ The rapid sell-out of tickets for the Berlin Philharmonic concerts offers compelling evidence of the intense demand for elite and internationally acclaimed classical music experiences.

¹⁴ Shanghai Conservatory of Music: Rankings, Fees & Courses Details.

¹⁵ Concert Halls in ASIA, <http://concerthall.asia/country/china/>.

The challenge for China’s domestic classical music sector, therefore, lies in expanding this concentrated enthusiasm into a more widespread and sustained engagement across all levels of performance and education.

To provide a quantitative overview of this “boom”¹⁶ and its nuances, the following table summarizes the key indicators of growth in China’s classical music market:

Indicator	Specific Data
Share of global musical instrument market	>60% (producer, consumer, exporter)
New piano sales (peak 2019 vs. 2022)	From 400,000 to 200,000 units
Growth in sales of traditional instruments (2018–2024)	15–20% annually
Recorded music revenue growth globally (2023)	+25.9% (China)
Professional symphony orchestras (5 years ago vs. today)	From ~30 to 72 (last year); from <20 to >100 (last 20 years)
Major theaters built/renovated (1998–2015)	>360
Full-time students at Shanghai Conservatory of Music (2025)	2,493
Berlin Philharmonic ticket sales in Shanghai (2024)	Over 6,000 sold in 5 minutes

Key Indicators of Growth in the Classical Music Market in China (2019–2024)

5. Conclusions – A Symphony of Cultures: East Meets West

It is increasingly evident that art music – once the exclusive heritage of European civilization – is undergoing a profound transformation, propelling it toward a new global dimension in which the cultural, economic, and institutional epicenter is progressively shifting toward China and Asia. This is no longer a matter of a peripheral region passively assimilating a Western model, but rather of a context in which the symphonic tradition is being reactivated, reshaped, and reinterpreted according to different cultural and philosophical coordinates. In this scenario, China is not merely replicating European organizational and educational models; rather, it is constructing its own symphonic language, rooted in an original interaction between traditional instruments, Eastern aesthetics, and Western compositional techniques.

¹⁶ Number of Chinese Orchestras More Than Doubles in Five Years, <https://symphony.org/number-of-chinese-orchestras-more-than-doubles-in-five-years/>.

The new generations of Chinese composers, conductors, and performers no longer view themselves as mere executors of an inherited canon, but rather as protagonists in a profound redefinition of the very meaning of art music.

This process also involves the audience, which in China is growing not only in numbers but, more importantly, in quality – demonstrating a desire for cultural participation that restores classical music to a central role in collective life. The interest in musical programs centred on historical narratives, social themes, and local identities suggests that China is developing its own conception of the relationship between art and society, one markedly distinct from the elitist perspective that often accompanies the reception of classical music in Europe.

Far from abandoning the Western repertoire, China adopts it as a point of departure for new explorations, crafting an intercultural symphony in which East and West coexist and mutually enrich one another.

In this context, Europe is called upon to reflect on its future role – not as the sole custodian of tradition, but as a dialogue partner in a global conversation that calls for renewal.

To speak today of a post-Western classical music is to acknowledge that its vitality no longer depends on a single centre, but on the ability of multiple cultures to appropriate and regenerate it.

The future of classical music, therefore, will not be determined by the preservation of an intact canon, but by its capacity to adapt, evolve, and resonate in new contexts. In this process of re-foundation, China now stands as an essential actor, capable of bestowing new centrality to art music in the twenty-first century.



This work is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Share alike 4.0 International License.