

Fang wins over the West

> BY TONY MONTAGUE

When Liu Fang moved to Canada from China in 1996, she wondered if she'd be able to perform professionally in her new homeland. A graduate of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, she was aware that her chosen stringed instruments, the *pipa* and *guzheng*, sounded very foreign to western ears—perhaps too foreign. However, Fang couldn't keep from playing and practising her art, and within a few months she gave a concert in Montreal. The response amazed her.

"I realized my performance could touch the heart of many people who were not Chinese," says Fang, reached in Beijing, where she's on a trip to visit family. "Until then I never thought I could live on my music in the West. This gave me a lot of courage to continue my career as a pipa soloist. Later on my husband quit his job and became my manager, and I began my international career."

Fang, who now lives in Montreal, has become recognized as one of the world's greatest pipa players. In 2005 she performed at the concert for the 60th anniversary of UNESCO in Paris. The following year she gained a prestigious Académie Charles Cros Award (France's equivalent of a Grammy) for her album *Le son de soie* (*Silk Sound*).

The title is a reference, in part, to the material formerly used for pipa strings. These are now made of metal, and struck, rather than plucked, with little plectrums attached to fingers and thumb. The lutelike instrument has been called a mini orchestra. It produces a wide range of timbres and sounds, from slaps to harmonics. Many of these can be heard in tone poems such as the martial "Ambushed From All Sides", a bravura piece that Fang plays.

"The pipa has existed in China



Montreal's Liu Fang, one of the world's great pipa players, thought she could never live on her music in Canada. But the response has amazed her.

for over 2,000 years, and its playing techniques are fully developed and very complicated—there are more than 70 recognized variations," Fang says. "To master these is a big challenge. For instance, the tremolo is played with all five fingers, each of which must give a clean sound with equal strength. But the biggest challenge is how to respect the tradition while keeping my own character. Good music should touch the heart and bring spiritual elevation."

When Fang performs this Saturday (April 25) at the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts, she'll also be demonstrating her command of the *guzheng*, the Chinese long zither, parent to the

Japanese koto. Each of its 20 to 25 strings runs over a movable bridge.

"I'm not sure of all the pieces I will do in Vancouver, but on the pipa I will include the popular folk tune 'Dance of the Yi People'," Fang says. "And on the guzheng I will do a beautiful piece by Zhao Denshan called 'Chanting of Tie-ma'. Traditional Chinese classical pieces like that are intimately linked to poetry and to various forms of lyric drama, and for me are more or less poetry without words. My inspiration also comes from painting, calligraphy, singing, and opera. And from nature—mountains and rivers are always in my mind when I play. Chinese culture is so deep in my blood." ♦