

# Rare music venture has strings attached

MUSIC

Sally Course

IN the quiet of a workman's lunch break on Cheung Chau, a rare sound floats down the Peak Road. Meditatively, the soft music hangs in the air. John Thompson, artistic coordinator of the Asian Arts Festival, is practising his guqin (pronounced *goo-chin*) again.

Popular knowledge of the traditional seven-string Chinese instrument has never been encouraged until now. In ancient times, use of the guqin was confined to Confucius, poets and scholars. Played as a solo instrument and occasionally to accompany a singer, it had a sound thought unsuitable for most people to hear (including kings, legend has it). The guqin was used mainly to calm the player down, although sometimes those with the proper respectful attitude to the music were allowed to listen.

But, says Mr Thompson, it is time a wider audience enjoyed the pleasures of this music. With the ultimate aim of producing recordings and transcriptions of guqin tunes, he has set about

A sample from *Shen Qi Mi Pu*, the Handbook of Divine and Marvellous Secrets.

learning the complete *Shen Qi Mi Pu*, a handbook of pieces that have not been heard for more than 500 years.

It has not been easy. The hand-me-down practice which dictated that students learnt pieces by copying their teacher meant that little was actually written out. The only things put to paper were certain hand positions and fingerings. Besides this

tablature which requires knowledge of a special Chinese script, no time values are attached to the notes.

"There are various reasons put forward for this," explains Mr Thompson. "One is that it was an added complication denoting the time, another is that the feeling was that as every performance was a personal one, it should be up to the performer to

decide how it should be played.

"The most probable, however, is that when learning a piece by imitation, it is easy to remember the melody and thus the rhythm. But the fingerings are more difficult to retain. So, these are what came to be written."

Accurate interpretation is therefore a problem. The scanty collection of recordings of indi-

vidual pieces from the *Shen Qi Mi Pu* helped Mr Thompson initially when he set out on his project but subsequent study revealed that musicians altered the handbook tablature when melodic sounds didn't fit in with their own view of the piece.

This meant relearning some of what he had already accomplished, and has slowed down his progress in learning the 65 works of the notebook. But with the help of Tong Kin-woon, head of Chinese Music at the Academy for Performing Arts, and the memory of an electronic synthesiser, Mr Thompson has painstakingly translated the text into musical meaning and now feels happy with 20 pieces.

It's been a long process. With a BA in music, a Masters in Asian studies and further work in ethnomusicology (the study of music and society) to his credit, he started his guqin studies in Taiwan 12 years ago. Three years later, having learnt all 30 pieces his teacher could give him, he began his quest in Hongkong.

"When I first set out with the instrument, I gave myself a programme; to learn the way my teacher plays, learn the older music and its tablature. Then, having learnt the language of the instrument, to write my own music for it and hopefully help get the guqin going again."

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John Thompson: 12 years' study of ancient instrument. —Picture by LINCOLN POTTER

There are signs that interest is picking up. In China, which positively discouraged the instrument after 1949 because of its associations with Confucianism, an annual Guqin Music Transcribers Conference has been inaugurated and many new notebooks containing the tablature published. Playing with traditional silk strings, however, is still not favoured as their quiet tone emphasises that in the past it was only played for oneself.

As Mr Thompson points out, guqin tablature offers a far easier way in to mediaeval music than staff notation.

"So much has been done on early Western music and yet recreating it depends on interpreting one line of music which stood not only for separate parts but different instruments. With the guqin, it is one line for one instrument alone, so basically it is all already there, simply waiting for people to explore it," he says.

## Musicians mourning Arnold

SECOND OPINION

Keith Anderson

THE sudden death of Denis Arnold in Budapest at the end of last month will have saddened many musicians.

In 1975 Arnold succeeded Joseph Kerman as Heather Professor of Music at Oxford, where he continued to inspire enthusiasm in his own particular area of study, music of the late Renaissance and Italian Baroque, and to demonstrate an unusually wide interest in music of other periods.

His earlier career had been at the university of his native Sheffield, where he was an undergraduate, and later in Belfast, at Hull and, as professor, at Nottingham.

The chair of music of Oxford takes its name from William Heyther, in a characteristically deviant spelling, a member of Westminster Abbey Choir from 1586 for nearly 30 years.

He was given a bachelor's degree and a doctorate at Oxford by the useful practice of acclamation and at his death in 1627 endowed the university post of choragus or choral conductor, later transformed into a professorship.

The Heather Professorship has often brought its holders the distinction of knighthood. With rumours of rationalisation to be imposed, perhaps, on the British colleges of music, come still more rumours of rationalisation in other areas of higher education.