

Elegant Chinese Melodies of Spring and Love

Silk-string *guqin* music to celebrate Valentine's Day / the Chinese New Year

John Thompson, President, New York Qin Society

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In China today “New Year“ often refers to the Western New Year, while the traditional Chinese New Year is called “Spring Festival”. In 2016 the Chinese New Year/Spring Festival begins the evening of February 7th; Valentine's Day is February 14th. By playing in this one hour program *guqin* melodies of spring and love as published in 15th and 16th century scores, John Thompson commemorates both.

Guqin Silk-string Zither (絲絃古琴)

Guqin (“goo chin”) was the Chinese literati's musical equivalent to their classical painting, poetry and calligraphy; as such it has a timeless beauty and corresponding sophistication. From ancient times it was considered the “instrument of Confucius” and so it was important to write down its music. The music is written in a tablature that details tuning, finger positions, stroke techniques and ornamentation, but not rhythms. Finding the structures in the music enables bringing it to life. In 2003 UNESCO nominated the *guqin* part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, leading to a major revival of interest in the *guqin* as a musical instrument as well art object.

Performer: John Thompson (唐世璋)

Through over 40 years playing the *guqin*, John Thompson has become the best known player doing Historically Informed Performance of early *guqin* melodies. His website, www.silkqin.com, is generally acknowledged as being the most detailed source of information on early *guqin* music. He lived in Hong Kong for 24 years, working as Artistic Consultant to the Festival of Asian Arts, but now lives in the New York area.

Melodies:

Further detail at: <http://www.silkqin.com/01mywk/themes/programs/springlove.htm>

1. Thoughts of Spring (春思 *Chun Si*, 1525)

“*Chun Si*” often evokes images of a woman longing for an absent lover, but this upbeat melody instead has positive images of spring, with section subtitles such as “Mandarin ducks bathe in the warm water” and “Coming out of the forest a pair of cranes dance”.

2. Springtime River Melody (春江曲 *Chun Jiang Qu*, 1511)

This piece, from the earliest surviving collection of *guqin* songs, has three sets of lyrics, two of them concerning lovers. However, the melody works equally well as a purely instrumental piece.

3. Spring Dawn Intonation (春曉吟 *Chun Xiao Yin*, 1525)

As published here this melody is a prelude to A Pheasant Flies in the Morning (next).

4. Pheasants Fly in the Morning (雉朝飛 *Zhi Zhao Fei*, 1425)

In the well-known opera scene 琴挑 *Qin Tiao* a man courts a woman with this piece. It

describes a male and female pheasant flying happily as a pair. A man approaching middle age, seeing this, observes that in nature most creatures pair off, but he has not yet found his mate. Associated poetry suggests that this event took place in spring.

5. Song of Wenjun (文君操 *Wenjun Cao*, 1539)

Ancient stories tell of the famous poet Sima Xiangru (179-113 BCE) seducing the beautiful Zhuo Wenjun by singing for her a *guqin* song. In popular opera the lyrics have often been those of the present piece. The lyrics are as follows:

There is a beautiful woman, once seen she is unforgettable.
If one day I no longer see her, thinking of her leads to madness.
The male phoenix soars around, searching the four seas for his mate,
But unfortunately the beautiful woman is not at this eastern wall.

With *qin* instead of words, I unburden myself of these feelings.
When will you accept me, and relieve my restless anxiety?
A willing word will combine our virtues; hand in hand we'll be joined.
Otherwise I must go on flying, bringing depression (and) ruination.

6. Cry of the Osprey (關雎 *Guan Ju*, ca. 1491)

Guan Ju is the title of a poem in the ancient Classic of Poetry; the lyrics tell of a gentleman unsuccessfully pursuing a beautiful girl. In later versions such as this one the man is King Wen and he succeeds more because of his virtue than his ardor.

7. Mulberry Lane (陌上桑 *Moshang Sang*, 1597)

This melody is set to ancient lyrics, but again they need not be sung. They tell of the beautiful Luofu, who picks mulberries along the roadside. A wealthy lord comes along and tries to seduce her, but she rejects him, saying she loves only her husband.

8. A Male Phoenix Searches for his Mate (鳳求凰 *Feng Qiu Huang*, 1525)

The famous lyrics of this melody, dated from the Han Dynasty, are said to have been sung by Sima Xiangru to seduce the lovely Zhuo Wenjun (compare #5 above).

(Sung during Section 3)

This male phoenix has returned to his old home,
from roaming the four seas searching for his mate.
Time was not yet ripe, there was no way to meet her;
then what a surprise: this evening I come up to this hall,
and there's a dazzling maiden in the women's quarters.
The room near but she far: this poisons my guts.
How can we entwine our necks like mandarin ducks?
How can we flutter about, and together soar?

(Sung during Section 8)

Lady phoenix, lady phoenix: come with me and nest,
be supported, breed with me, forever be my wife.
Exchanging affection in a physical way will harmonize our hearts;
at midnight if you follow me who will know?
Our wings together will rise, fluttering as high we fly.
If you are unmoved by my feelings, it will cause me misery.