

STORYTELLER IN SONG

Cloud River Mountain, a collaborative work by four Western composers, is based on Chinese myths and legends and features the expressive voice of Chinese folk singer Gong Linna. **Chen Nan** reports.

One day in 2011, while on a tour of China with four other international composers, the American composer Michael Gordon walked into a small music store filled with televisions, all playing different music videos. One in particular caught his attention. It was Gong Linna, a Chinese folk singer known for her expressive voice.

"I had never seen or heard anything like Gong Linna and I was deeply impressed by her performance artistry," recalls Gordon, who, through hand signals, asked the store owner to write down the name of the artist.

A few days later, Gordon attended a symposium on contemporary Chinese music, and one of the speakers was the German composer Robert Zollitsch, Gong's husband.

Gordon and Zollitsch kept in touch and decided to explore the possibilities of cooperation.

Along with fellow composers, Julia Wolfe — his wife — and David Lang, Gordon is the co-founder of Bang on a Can, a New York-based musical organization, which is known for projects such as the annual music festival, Bang on a Can Marathon, and the ensemble Bang on a Can All-Stars.

Gordon and Zollitsch collaborated on a 30-minute set of songs that premiered at the 2015 Bang on a Can Marathon.

This was later expanded into a 70-minute concert, titled *Cloud River Mountain*, which was performed at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater at John Jay College on July 14 and 15 this year, as part of the annual Lincoln Center Festival, which has been held since 1966.

At the concert, Gong performed 11 songs, with lyrics in both Mandarin and English, composed by Zollitsch, Gordon, Wolfe and Lang.

The four composers also collaborated on an instrumental piece. The music and lyrics were inspired by ancient Chinese poetry and myths, which was an idea initiated by Zollitsch.

"We did rehearsals from 10 am to 5 pm for about a week. With the diverse backgrounds of each composer, we had an amazing experience of



Chinese folk singer Gong Linna (top and above left) performs in the concert *Cloud River Mountain* in New York in mid-July. The concert was a collaboration of musicians from the West and East. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

cross-cultural musical communication," says Gong.

Born in Guiyang, the capital of Southwest China's Guizhou province, Gong started learning Chinese folk singing at a very young age and enrolled at the Chinese Conservatory of Music in Beijing at age 16.

"I performed not as a singer but also as a storyteller in the

concert. Sometimes I sang like one of the mythical figures with sounds of crying and yelling," says the 42-year-old singer.

Since each of the composers has a unique style, Zollitsch gave the composers different materials based on their own styles, Gong says.

For example, American

composer Lang, who won the 2010 Grammy Award for best small ensemble performance, composed *Moon Goddess*, which was inspired by Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet Li Shangyin's work about the goddess who lives on the moon.

Gordon composed the piece, *When Yi Shot Down the*

Sun, which was based on *Tian Wen* (Asking Questions to Heaven) by Qu Yuan, a poet during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). The piece tells the Chinese myth of a young archer named Hou Yi, who shot down nine suns to cool the earth.

"It was fascinating to explore Chinese culture and

the traditional Chinese vocal performance practices that Gong Linna brings to her singing," says Gordon, adding that Gong is the first Chinese singer they have worked with.

Zollitsch gave each composer the lyrics and a translation of the Chinese myths. "Then they developed their own ideas. It worked much better

“We had an amazing experience of cross-cultural musical communication.”

Gong Linna, folk singer

than I expected," says Zollitsch.

He also brought Chinese *sheng* (a traditional Chinese wind instrument) player Nie Yunlei to the project for the first time.

"When the sound of the *sheng* was mixed with Western instruments, such as an electric guitar and clarinet, it functioned as a secret ingredient, powerful and very Chinese," says Zollitsch.

The German composer grew up in Munich, Germany, and came to China on a scholarship to study *guqin* (the Chinese seven-stringed zither) in Shanghai in 1993.

Before settling down in Beijing, he researched traditional music in the Inner Mongolia and Tibet autonomous regions, while collaborating with a number of Chinese musicians. He met Gong in 2002 and they married in 2004.

In 2009, Gong received rave reviews after she released the song *Tan Te* (Disturbed) online. Composed by Zollitsch, the song uses sounds rather than words to convey different emotions and moods.

During the past few years, Zollitsch has been working on pieces inspired by poetry of the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties, hoping to both enliven Chinese music and bring back classical poems to a modern society.

"For years, we have been talking about reviving traditional Chinese music and bringing it to the world. The most important thing is to maintain the unique identity of Chinese music," says Gong.

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American urges bar patrons in Beijing to tell personal stories

By CHINA DAILY

Sven Romberg narrated a personal story in public for the first time as a freshman at American University in Washington in 2005.

As part of an assignment on local culture in the US capital, he had visited a popular jazz bar called HR-57 Center for the Preservation of Jazz & Blues and bought a soft drink because he was then underage. He had expected to listen to jazz but a woman there walked onstage and said that the evening would be about storytelling.

"I was so terrified of public speaking," recalls Romberg, now 32. "I almost left, but ended up sticking around."

Romberg didn't tell a story that night but did so the following month at the same venue. He told his audience about his brother who "woke up" during a knee surgery.

Over the past three years, Romberg has been hosting weekly storytelling nights at

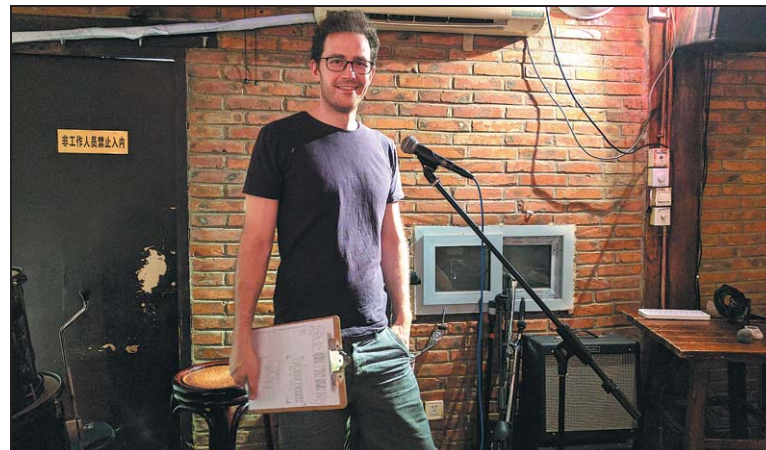
4corners, a hole-in-the-wall *hutong* (alley) bar-and-restaurant in Beijing, which mostly serves Canadian and Southeast Asian food. Every Thursday evening, he goes from table to table asking regulars and newcomers if they have a story to tell.

The venue's resident dog, Bojangles, commonly known as Bo, greets patrons at the door, while a board inside holds up the sign "Storytelling theme: Bully".

"Pow, pow," says Romberg, imitating a feisty young girl he once knew and punches the air in an attempt to teach the invisible bully a lesson.

He usually weaves his anecdotes with action and intonation. The night goes on as others recount and remember their own such stories — a woman who found out from her parents that she had bullied her brother during their childhood and a teacher who witnessed his students' pranks go wrong.

Although storytelling has



Sven Romberg hosts weekly storytelling nights at 4corners bar in Beijing. MARK MARINO / FOR CHINA DAILY

persisted since ancient times as a way of writing history, the act of telling stories in public settings and recognizing them as art is a modern movement, according to Catherine Burns, the artistic director for The Moth, a nonprofit. She says she

often hears about storytelling events from Australia to Antarctica.

"It makes sense to me that people who have all chosen to be in a very different part of the world, or the part they grew up in, would want to come to a bar

and tell stories and connect with each other," Burns says over phone from New York.

A top quality in storytelling is the speaker's willingness "to be vulnerable," she says, because many stories are about people's struggles.

If you go

Thursday storytelling begins at 9:30 pm. 27 Dashibei Hutong, Xicheng district, Beijing. 010-6401-7797.

"We hear again and again someone comes out to a storytelling night, they're feeling alone and ... hear a story that might have nothing to do with them but they'll find some connection ... and they go home feeling a little bit less alone," Burns says. "As the world becomes more and more digital, it's important to connect with people in a more direct way."

Before 4corners, Romberg, who grew up in Georgia and Tennessee, would host storytelling nights in his Beijing apartment with many people.

The crowd was different every time, he says.

"A lot of people assume

before they come for storytelling that it will be about China but almost overwhelmingly, the stories are about home and about travel," Romberg says. "Something about distance makes it interesting."

Tavey Lin, 4corners co-owner, says Romberg is a storyteller at heart — he wants to tell you about his life and interesting things that have happened to him.

"Our format is very off-the-cuff and we encourage that sort of atmosphere," says the 33-year-old.

Biology teacher John Mendenhall, who has watched Romberg onstage, says he is among rare hosts of such events in Beijing.

Aside from hosting the storytelling night at the *hutong* bar, Romberg occasionally runs workshops to help others improve their own storytelling ability and formulate narratives.

Mark Marino contributed to the story.