



Violinists compete for chance to shine

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The China Conservatory of Music announced that the Global Music Education League Violin Competition will take place in Beijing from Nov 3 to Nov 13, with Wang Liguang serving as the president of the competition and violinist Huang Bin as the jury chairman.

Competitors, aged between 16 and 30, will participate in five rounds of competition. The winner of the first prize will be awarded \$100,000, a gold medal and a three-year touring contract with a major international artist management company.

“Competitions are great opportunities for classically trained musicians, especially young people. They are platforms on which musicians display themselves, meet people and can be seen by more audiences,” says Huang, who has won major international violin competitions and is now the director of the orchestral instrument department of the China Conservatory of Music.

She notes that applicants will submit online videos of their playing works by Bach, Mozart and Paganini, and 20 to 24 competitors selected for the first round of the competition will perform music works from different eras, including one music piece written by Chinese violinist and composer Ma Sicong (1912-87).

Six competitors will enter the first phase of the final round of the competition, performing a Mozart violin concerto with the Orchestra Academia China, and then three finalists will play with the orchestra composed of musicians from the Philadelphia Orchestra and Orchestra Academia China under the baton of US conductor Tristan Rais-Sherman in the second phase of the final round.

The competition will be co-organized by the Philadelphia Orchestra, one of the most popular Western symphony orchestras among Chinese classical music lovers.

In 1973, the Philadelphia Orchestra was invited by then US president Richard Nixon to visit China in the wake of his historic trip a year earlier.

Led by its musical director Eugene Ormandy, the Philadelphia Orchestra became the first US orchestra to perform in China since the founding of New China in 1949.

According to Wang, president of China Conservatory of Music, the music school has collaborated with the Philadelphia Orchestra, launching the inaugural China International Music Competition in 2019.

“The long friendship between the Philadelphia Orchestra and China will be celebrated again with this violin competition. We are very excited to participate again so that we can keep providing more training and development opportunities for these young musicians,” says Ryan Fleur, executive director of the Philadelphia Orchestra Association, in Beijing.

Workshops and master classes will also be held during the violin competition.

The violin competition, according to Wang, is the second competition launched under the Global Music Education League after the piano competition in 2019.

The Global Music Education League is a global nongovernmental and nonprofit academic organization established in September 2017 in Beijing, initiated by Wang, a prominent contemporary Chinese composer, and co-founded by 30 leading music institutions from North America, Europe and Asia. Now, the league has 85 member institutions in total.

“Young musicians benefit from working with world-class orchestras and conductors. The competition will be a platform for launching the great musicians of the future,” says Wang.

Seen from afar, Li Shaoyue wields a thin bamboo stick up and down inside a tiny glass vessel secured steadily in her left hand, as if trying to fish something out of it.

It is not until one gets close and sees the delicate patterns emerging from within the translucent glass, that the mystery reveals itself. It turns out there's method in all her seemingly random moves.

The air is still in her workshop in Zibo, East China's Shandong province, as the artist, who just turned 30, sits still behind a desk and concentrates on the glass bottle before her, from which vivid landscape scenery, animal and human images emerge from the inside.

Her stunning delivery of *neihua* (interior painting) with local characteristics that was named a national intangible cultural heritage in 2014 recently roused a wave of public attention, with more than 8 million views online.

“It's a bit beyond my expectation, but I'm glad so many people appreciate the beauty of the art,” Li says.

The craft requires artists to use a special bamboo pen with a hook-tipped brush inside a glass container that usually features a very small opening.

“The inner wall of those containers is often frosted, providing a rough surface for coloring, as a smooth surface cannot hold the pigments effectively,” Li explains.

Traditional snuff bottles were most popular for the art, but any glass items of the same texture can be used.

“The old-fashioned snuff bottles with interior paintings are now sought after as collectibles and gifts, while colored glazed beads featuring the art can be accessories,” Li says.

Compared with working on the paper, interior painting is much more complex.

“One needs to plan and conceptualize in advance, taking into account the curvature of the inner wall of the bottle. The process is intricate and requires dexterity and skill,” she adds.

All the lines and outlines in the art form require absolute precision.

“When drawing the lines, you need to go slowly without bending them. It requires a delicate touch and extensive practice,” Li says.

The mouth of a snuff bottle is

usually not big enough for a soybean to pass through. Consequently, the complex patterns drawn inside represent an extraordinary feat.

An artist has to apply sketching, stippling, cross-hatching (an artistic technique used to add shadow and dimension to drawn objects) and coloring to present the art.

Evolution of the craft

The development of snuff bottles was closely related to interior painting, says Zhang Guangqing, a national arts and crafts master.

During the late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Matteo Ricci, an Italian missionary, presented snuff as a tribute to Emperor Wanli. In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the nomadic lifestyle of the Manchu people, who traveled on horseback, made snuff even more popular.

As a result, snuff bottles became a symbol of the aristocracy. However, with the rise of tobacco, snuff seemed to have, well, snuffed it.

But a surprising turn of events happened when the snuff bottles gradually lost their practical value. The aristocrats started to see them as playthings and added some bells and whistles, hence inside-painted snuff bottles coming into being.

“Interior painting once relied on a bamboo brush dipped in pigments, making it difficult to control the thickness of lines and variations in solidity,” Zhang says.

It was Xue Jingwan, a master painter, who invented the special bamboo pen in the 1950s and introduced the techniques of hooking, cross-hatching, rubbing, dotting, and coloring from traditional Chinese painting into inside-painted art.

This breakthrough improved the diversity of interior painting expressions, Zhang says.

As the country is paying more attention to its traditional crafts and has stepped up its intangible cultural heritage protection efforts, interior painting has been given a new lease on life and infused with modern elements.

In the past, the painting was done with ceramic pigments, which were fired. This presented a relatively rough glazed texture, says Li.

“Today, we use more vibrant and delicate traditional Chinese painting pigments instead,” she adds.

Eight years of practice have seen



Li get all the demanding skills down to a fine art, literally.

“The key during the creation is to keep a peaceful mind,” Li says.

Li was exposed to the charm of the art since childhood under her father, Li Huitong, a master of interior painting with more than three decades of experience.

She showed a great interest in painting, from initial doodling to advanced sketching. Dedicated training then gave her a sensitivity to shape, size and methods of graphically depicting spatial relationships.

The training paved the way for her study of porcelain art, with a focus on painting, at Jingdezhen Ceramic University in Jiangxi province.

After grasping essential sketching and watercolor skills, Li Shaoyue began to concentrate her mind on Chinese painting.

“My ultimate goal back then was to contribute to the development of ceramics,” she says.

However, images of her father holding her hand doing the interior painting frequently emerged in her mind after her graduation in 2015, especially after her father was yearning for her to return home and carry on the family tradition.

Moreover, Wang Xiaocheng, curator of the Shandong-styled interior painting museum, also hoped she could come back and contribute to the development of the art.

Li Shaoyue then followed her gut feelings and tried her hand at the local art, initially at Wang's museum.

Wang told her that he was looking forward to her giving expressions to more modern subjects in interior painting while carrying forward the traditional themes.

Honing skills

Years of professional art training enabled her to execute the drawing of human figures with power and precision.

Whenever she finished a piece, she would show it to her father for advice, which helped her to make great strides in her work.

“Li Shaoyue's fine brushwork, outlining, and rhythmic strokes in her ink paintings greatly resemble those of her father,” says Wang.

He considers her works an achievement of meticulous fine-line sketching.

Sun Hongwei, a local senior interior painting artist, says the lines Li Shaoyue draws are distinctively straight and unwavering, demonstrating true mastery of the delicate painting skills required.

Two years after Li Shaoyue made inroads in interior art, she won the gold prize at the China (Shandong) Arts and Crafts Expo in 2017.

She went on to reap top prizes in the following years for the designs and innovation of her works.

In 2021, she ingeniously used a Moutai liquor bottle, whose inner wall she polished with emery to obtain a translucent texture. Then, treating this liquor bottle as a canvas, she painted a flying celestial figure resembling those at Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, Northwest China's Gansu province.

The creative work was purchased by the liquor company.

Compared with the older generation of artists who tended to focus on traditional themes carrying historical scenes and stories, Li Shaoyue prefers to use modern and vibrant characters, as well as familiar aspects of everyday life, as the subjects of her artwork.

Under her father's guidance, she has broken new ground by integrating interior painting with exterior carving.

“It endows the work with a greater sense of depth and a three-dimensional quality,” she explains.

Now, the popularity of her interior painting videos has convinced Li Shaoyue to keep promoting the art and spread its charm to more people.

“The inheritors born after 1990 are few and far between, putting the art at the risk of discontinuation,” Li says.

Therefore, she has opened a training program with her father to cultivate potential inheritors while teaching the art at a local vocational school.

When she has time, she makes a point of traveling to historical sites, all of which she says have been a mine of inspiration for her.

“I'd like to see them in today's setting, so my work can record and reflect time,” she says.

“After all, intangible cultural heritage skills require both inheritance and development.”

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Top and above: Li Shaoyue's painted snuff bottles feature themes such as human images and landscapes. **Left:** Li demonstrates interior painting at a school in Zibo, Shandong province. **Right:** Years of practice have seen Li get all the demanding skills down to a fine art. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

