

SAYING IT WITH MUSIC

by Michael Saffle

Chinese musicians feted them, Chinese newspapers praised their "impeccable performances," and Chinese children stopped them on Peking and Shanghai streets to shake their hands.

In December and January the Audubon String Quartet, Virginia Tech's Quartet-in-Residence, became the first American quartet since 1949 to visit the People's Republic of China.

Winners of three international chamber-music competitions, the Audubon Quartet was founded in 1974 by Thomas Shaw, the ensemble's cellist and president of the Audubon Quartet, Inc., a non-profit organization represented professionally by Joanne Rile Associates of Philadelphia and New York.

The other members are first violinist Dennis Cleveland, second violinist Sharon Smith Polifrone, and violist Doris Lederer.

During 1979-80 and 1980-81, the Audubon visited Tech several times under a "mini-residencies" program underwritten by Tech's College of Arts and Sciences and the National Endowment for the Arts. Last spring the quartet was invited by Provost John Wilson to become Tech's first full-time resident performing group.

Audubon members began planning a trip to China almost three years ago, but fund-raising difficulties prevented them from visiting Peking and Shanghai unofficially in May, 1979. A China tour was one of many exciting activities the quartet discussed with Tech officials before their residency was approved.

"If we'd gone to China in 1979, we would have had to go as tourists," Shaw explained. "Invitations from China's Ministry of Culture to Western artists take at least two years to arrange, and in 1979 we'd only started making plans." Quartet members agreed that their new, long-term Tech affiliation helped them negotiate with the ministry on an official basis.

In November the quartet rather unexpectedly received formal invitations from Peking's Central Conservatory of Music and from government spokesmen to visit China for three weeks.

"We'd dreamed about traveling to China for years," Shaw admitted. "But the invitations caught us off-guard." Travel details had to be arranged at the last minute, and quartet members worked around the clock to solicit funds for tour expenses. Although visiting



experts in agriculture and engineering sometimes receive paychecks from the Chinese government for their services, mainland China maintains an economic "hands-off" policy toward Western artists.

Generous grants from Tech's Educational Foundation and Center for Programs in the Humanities were supplemented by contributions from Cameron Iron Works of Houston, Texas; the First National Bank of Christiansburg; and a number of private donors. These monetary contributions were supplemented by gifts from such American firms as Theodore Presser Music Publishers and Shar Products, Inc. Quartet members carried music and string instrument supplies to China in their suitcases, then presented them to the directors of the Peking and Shanghai conservatories.

Officials from China's conservatories and the Ministry of Culture asked the quartet to spend two weeks in residency at the Central Conservatory in Peking and a week in residency at the Conservatory in Shanghai. Concert dates were arranged in advance by ministry officials, but programming and lecture subjects became the Americans' responsibilities. Quartet members were also encouraged to relax and enjoy themselves between rounds of professional activities.

Many of the Audubon's most satisfying hours in Peking were spent coaching two student quartets chosen by the Conservatory and the Ministry of Culture to participate later this spring in the Portsmouth International String Quartet Competition in Portsmouth, England.

Quartets competing at Portsmouth may be called upon to play works by Haydn, Schubert, Bartók, Borodin, and Shostakovich, as well as Beethoven's "Harp" Quartet. Semi-finalists are given only two days to learn and perform a composition written solely for use at the competition. Audubon members were pleased that Chinese officials thought enough of the Audubon's victory at Portsmouth several years ago to choose their ensemble to coach Chinese quartets for this year's competition.

"We were also delighted by the Peking students' enthusiasm and technical skill," Shaw said. "Every Central Conservatory musician we worked with played with poise and dexterity, and intonation didn't give anyone too many problems."

Before coaching sessions began, however, neither student group played with much emotional conviction or demonstrated a developed sense of musical "space." Helping both Chinese ensembles achieve more deeply-felt, beautifully-paced performances became the Audubon's principal goal.

During coaching sessions, Audubon members stressed tempos and pacing. "At first, both student quartets rushed through delicate passages without giving the music room to breathe," Cleveland observed. "We had to make our pupils watch each other and give each other cues before ensemble problems started to disappear."

Other Audubon members discovered that their Chinese proteges had never been introduced to the concept of musical "courtliness." Consequently, the Chinese musicians felt uncomfortable with compositions which demanded "galant" or "flirtatious" pacing and phrasing.

"Haydn and Schubert slow movements posed real

problems," Lederer said. "For a while it seemed impossible to convince either quartet that Viennese classical music isn't mechanized, that it isn't all the same in terms of tempos and pacing."

Unusually passionate or powerful passages gave the Peking ensembles even greater difficulties. "Of course, after several sessions some works began to sound better than others," Shaw remarked. "By the end of the first week the all-boys' quartet was playing parts of Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' with verve and good ensemble. But the all-girls' quartet never quite caught the lush, romantic mood of the second Borodin quartet. Chinese musicians simply aren't used to expressing European feelings in music."

Coaching sessions and conversations with conservatory and ministry officials were made more exciting—if also more frustrating—by the presence of translators. Xu (pronounced "Sue") Ling-zhi, a recent graduate of Peking's Foreign Languages Institute, served as the quartet's official translator and accompanied quartet members almost everywhere.

"Xu couldn't be with us all the time, though, and sometimes other translators had to be located on short notice," Shaw recalled. Fortunately, many faculty members and students at both the Peking and Shanghai schools spoke a little English, and some were accomplished linguists.

Nevertheless, shouted comments by Audubon musicians and hurried translations into Mandarin sometimes turned coaching sessions into total confusion. "We did everything we could to get our ideas across," Cleveland said. Audubon members danced with students to demonstrate tempos, played with them to clarify phrases, and joked about performance problems.

Audubon members felt their students improved enormously during the American ensemble's two-week residency in Peking. "We had to keep reminding ourselves that the oldest student we worked with was only twenty-six, the youngest seventeen," Shaw emphasized. "None of these musicians has completed an artistic apprenticeship yet, and that's important. What talented students like these might sound like five years from now is anybody's guess."

Coaching sessions were only part of the quartet's activities in China. In both Peking and Shanghai, the Tech ensemble gave three concerts and played enough encores to make up another complete program. Two back-to-back concerts for faculty members and students at the Peking Conservatory were capped by a public concert in Peking's enormous Red Tower Hall. Both the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Bolshoi Ballet have performed there, and with room to spare.

"We were astounded when we saw the hall," Shaw admits. "An 1800-seat auditorium isn't the best place for a chamber concert. But what an honor!"

Many Chinese music-lovers must have been delighted that the hall was so large, though, because public-sale tickets were snatched up a few hours after an announcement of the concert appeared in the *Renmin Ribao*, or "People's Daily." Tickets for the Audubon's two public concerts in Shanghai's 1500-seat National Theater sold out even more quickly.

Audience response to the Audubon's programs varied considerably. Works by Haydn and Beethoven were extremely well received, and faculty members at



the Peking Conservatory were deeply impressed with Heitor Villa-Lobos' demanding Seventeenth Quartet, an Audubon specialty. Works by such American composers as Charles Ives and Ezra Laderman proved more problematic, however.

"No one, not even the Chinese professional performers we admired, got the jokes in the Ives First Quartet," Cleveland explained. "If you're not a New Englander, I guess you just don't see any reason to smile when a hymn tune like 'Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus' pops out at you through the confusing texture of Ives's music."

Laderman's Sixth Quartet (subtitled the "Audubon Quartet," and dedicated to the Tech ensemble) won praise from some Peking music-lovers and bewildered responses from others. Composed in 1979, the Laderman Quartet received second prize last fall when the Audubon performed it at the 1981 Kennedy-Friedheim Chamber Music Competition in Washington, D.C.

"We love Laderman's music, and we took the 'Audubon' with us to China to introduce a contemporary American masterpiece to Oriental audiences," Shaw confessed. "Unfortunately, a few Chinese musicians

weren't as impressed as we'd hoped they'd be with Laderman's complex dissonances."

China's "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" made it impossible to perform or listen to Western music anywhere in China from 1965 through the mid-1970s. "Peking and Shanghai students have a lot of catching up to do before a work like the Laderman Quartet can mean much to them," Polifrone said.

Between concerts and coaching sessions, Audubon Quartet members were provided with cars and drivers and were taken by ministry representative Lü (pronounced "Lee-oo") Zheng-wu to see some of China's world-famous sights. Day-trips to the Badaling Pass portion of the Great Wall, to the recently excavated Ming Tombs outside Peking, to the Dowager Empress's Summer Palace, to Fragrant Hill, and to the Forbidden City palaces of China's Ming and Chin dynasty emperors kept Quartet members busy snapping photos and collecting anecdotes for friends and family in the United States.

During their visit to Shanghai, the Tech ensemble was also taken on a harbor cruise and railroaded to Wuxi (pronounced "Woo-she"), a nearby city built on



The Audubon Quartet after their second Peking Conservatory concert. From left to right: Doris Lederer, Dennis Cleveland, Sharon Smith Polifrone, and Thomas Shaw.

canals and filled with factories manufacturing porcelain figurines and silk.

"By the end of our trip we felt we'd been everywhere and seen everything," Lederer recalled. "We ate lunches at Buddhist temples, shopped in Chinese department stores, and received diplomatic treatment everywhere we went. The people we met couldn't have been kinder or more helpful. I'll never forget them."

Quartet members were also permitted to visit the home of Chiu Pik-shuen and Wong Bing-wei, members of the Central Conservatory music faculty and relatives of Shaw's wife Theresa Shaw. Chiu and Wong cooked dinner for the quartet, helped them purchase souvenirs in local stores, and took them to a Peking acrobatics show.

"Visiting a private home in China is a rare privilege for Westerners," Shaw said. "I knew we were getting special treatment when Mr. Lü told me I could ride a bicycle around Peking at night and visit Chiu and Wong whenever I wanted to."

At the end of the Quartet's residencies in Peking and Shanghai, students and faculty members at both conservatories gave the quartet farewell parties, complete with refreshments, presents, and toasts.

"Nothing impressed us as much as those parties," Polifrone said. "We ate dinner at the original Peking Duck restaurant with the Minister of Culture, but the students' parties touched us much more deeply. Everybody showered gifts and love on us. I only hope we made a good impression in return."

Shaw was even more emphatic: "None of the Audubon's trips abroad can equal our tour of China. We've never had an experience like it, and neither has any other American quartet. We hope our coaching and playing have helped establish warmer relations not only between Tech and the Chinese schools we visited, but also between the people of China and our own land."

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Michael Saffle, assistant professor of music and humanities at Tech, was invited by Chinese officials and the Audubon Quartet to publicize the quartet's activities abroad and to lecture on American music at the Peking Conservatory and the Conservatory of Music in Shanghai.