

## Musical Culture of China

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***Starry Sky* Lightens the Hearts of Music Lovers****Ben Gu**

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**Abstract.** The author begins with his own experiences as an amateur trumpeter during his school years, and explains the current situation of an amateur orchestra in China, especially in Beijing, and then tells about the formation and events of the *Starry Sky* Orchestra that include their classical music concerts and educational lectures. *Starry Sky* formed from the *Three Highs* Orchestra that was begun by the Vice Premier of China, Lanqi Li, in 2012. The new orchestra *Starry Sky* now comprises amateurs, or “lovers of music,” from the governmental, medical, engineering, academic and other professions, open to all who wish to join. The *Starry Sky* collaborated with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 2017. The amateur orchestra can promote the love for music of the public, and also improve the quality education of schools, which can also help the comprehensive development of students. Author Ben Gu, Ph.D. is a librarian, translator, and a trumpeter in Beijing, People’s Republic of China. He was a member of the *Starry Sky* Orchestra.

**Keywords:** Amateur orchestra, Education, China, *Starry Sky* Orchestra

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### A Personal Experience as a Music Lover

I was born and grown up in Shanghai, where the modern Chinese arts developed very early in the 20th century. Because my father is an amateur trumpeter and music lover, and also because I entered the Xincheng Middle school, which was the only student orchestra in the city in the 1970s, I began to learn music and became a trumpeter. At that time, music education was not developed in China. Therefore, very few people could learn music playing, especially with Western musical instruments. In this special historical period of China, university education was not in a normal situation, and students with music skills had the wish to enter various orchestras and army bands. Some alumni of my school orchestra were very lucky to become members of military bands and even of local orchestras. They wanted to recruit new performers from the very few schools with basic musical education. Just two years later, the national university entrance examination was resumed, and I entered an university and no longer pursue the music career. However, my love for music has been lasting for my lifetime, and I keep practicing trumpet and translating music monographs.

I wrote about my experience in the school in a collection of essays. [1, pp. 189–216] When I joined the *Starry Sky* Orchestra in 2022, I realized that many senior players had the same experiences with me, but they became army musicians and later continued to play music as amateurs after their retirement. Beijing is the city that have the national level orchestras much more than other cities in China.

There are also many amateur orchestras organized by schools, universities, regional cultural centers, etc., and also some freely organized bands, not to mention some bands in public parks, which were discussed by Joseph Kaminski. [2] Personally, I joined a wind band of young people, an orchestra of retired policemen, and the *Starry Sky* Orchestra. In this article, I would like to take the *Starry Sky* as an example to explain the general situation of amateur orchestras in China.

### Introduction to the *Starry Sky* Orchestra

This article is about a Chinese national orchestra, albeit an amateur community orchestra – The *Starry Sky* Amateur Orchestra. The orchestra consists usually of 60 members per concert, including on average 20 violinists, 4 violists, 6 cellists, 4 flutists, 4 clarinetists, 3 trumpeters, and 4 hornists depending on the actual requirements of a concert and the number of orchestra members who can volunteer for the concert. Most players are retired Chinese workers who joined the orchestra simply for their love of music. Some players are still working and cannot attend every concert. For most of the concerts in Beijing, the players come from Beijing and Tianjin.

The *Starry Sky* Amateur Orchestra (*Man tian xing ye yue jiao xiang yue tuan*) was founded in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Its predecessor was the *Three Highs* Amateur Orchestra founded in 2012 by Mr. Lanqing Li, Former Vice Premier.<sup>2</sup> The reason this orchestra was so called is because it consisted of high government officials (at the ministerial level), high military officers, and high (senior) professors and professionals.

<sup>1</sup> Yin yue dian liang ren sheng, man tian xing ye yue jiao xiang yue tuan jiang zou xiang li xian [Music Lightens the Life, the *Starry Sky* Amateur Orchestra will Play in Lixian]. *Zhong guo wang* [China.org.cn]. April 15, 2019. URL: [http://sc.china.com.cn/2019/wenhua\\_yanchu\\_0415/316167.html](http://sc.china.com.cn/2019/wenhua_yanchu_0415/316167.html) (accessed: 07.02.2025).

<sup>2</sup> Li Lanqing suo jian “San Gao” yue tuan jie san [The *Three Highs* Orchestra Established by Li Lanqing is Disbanded]. *Nanjing ri bao* [Nanjing Daily]. January 23, 2013. URL: <http://www.taihainet.com/news/txnews/cnnews/sh/2013-01-23/1015297.html> (accessed: 07.02.2025).

During his term as Vice Premier (1998-2003), Li was in charge of the sciences and education, and after his retirement he was still concerned with education, so he pushed the popularization of classical music in China.

Prior to the 2012 Chinese Lunar New Year, Li discussed the idea of forming an orchestra with the musician Xiaowen Ye and other governmental officers. They thus organized an orchestra, the *Three Highs*.

Mr. Jianping Tang, the Dean of the Composition Department of the Central Conservatory of Music, had composed a piano quintet, *Jianzhen's Voyage to Japan*. On March 11, 2012 Mr. Ye and four other high officers performed it in Beijing on a concert of Tang's compositions. It had a great success and as a result, more and more people applied to join the orchestra. The orchestra thus came

to consist of more than 100 elite members from various professions throughout 16 provinces. The *Three Highs* orchestra finally made its debut on December 22, 2012, at the National Center for the Performing Arts, Beijing, but the orchestra was immediately disbanded.

Several months later, a new orchestra named the *Starry Sky* Amateur Orchestra was founded, consisting of the previous *Three Highs* members and newly recruited members. The new orchestra came to include less high officials and more senior professionals. With the development of the orchestra through the years, there are more and more young musicians, who add vitality to the group. The name *Starry Sky* comes from a poetic passage, "Gathering is a fire, scattering is a sky full of stars," signifying that the orchestra members come from different places and professions to become a united group (Photo 1).



Photo 1. A *Starry Sky* Concert at the Yuying School (April 6, 2023)

### Starry Sky's Musical Director

Mr. Xiaowen Ye has been the director of the *Starry Sky* Orchestra since its inception (Photo 2). He was the Executive Deputy Director of the Central Institute of Socialism / The Academy of Chinese Culture (2009–2016), and then the Vice Chairman of the Committee on Culture, History and Studies, CPPCC (2016–2023).



Photo 2. Xiaowen Ye,  
the Director of the *Starry Sky* Orchestra (May 2023)

In the 1970s, during his army years, he learnt a little about the violoncello, but he began to truly learn the instrument at age of 61. Ye believes that music is everywhere and can be practiced at any time. He wakes up early in the morning to practice, and he learns from many professional players whenever they have

time to teach. Everybody sees that whenever he attends meetings or conferences, he always brings his musical instrument with him. Ye is now the director of the orchestra and the principal cellist.

In the orchestra's repertoire, there is a piece entitled *Hong Yan*, [The Swan Goose] for violoncello and orchestra that was arranged by Professor Wantong Jiang, based on a Mongolian song especially written in 2014 for the *Starry Sky* Orchestra. Mr. Ye was the soloist.

The orchestra is also often conducted by Mr. Linlin Wang (Photo 3), who is the permanent conductor of the Chorus of the China National Symphony Orchestra, and sometimes conducted by Ms. Yujue Ji, also a permanent conductor of the Chorus of the China National Symphony Orchestra.



Photo 3. Conductor Linlin Wang (May 2023)

### Classical Music on Campuses

One of the main activities of the *Starry Sky* is the "Classical Music in Campuses" project. For example, some members of the orchestra visited the Northwest A&F University on April 28, 2014 and gave lectures on music education, human development, music and scientific

researches, helicobacter pylori, university life, the pursuit of elegance, resisting vulgarity, and playing the trumpet.<sup>3</sup>

During the concerts on university campuses, Mr. Ye shares his love for music and talks about the relationship between music, life, and his governmental roles.

Prof. Hao Liang is the present concert master while also being a principal gastroenterologist at an army hospital. On concert breaks, Liang often talks about the issues concerning public health and the love of music.

Mr. Dawei Hu is a senior engineer in an aerospace institute while also an amateur horn player. He combined his knowledge of music and mechanics and invented a newly patented model of French horn with bearings inside the rotary valves that won him a Gold Medal Award in May 2023 from the Beijing Association of Inventions.<sup>4</sup>

Recently the orchestra visited China University of Mining and Technology and the Xuzhou Institute of Technology, May 20 and 21, also visiting Nanning for two concerts in Guangxi University, June 10 and 11 (Photo 4).



Photo 4. The *Starry Sky* Orchestra at Guangxi University (May 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Man tian xing ye yu jiao xiang yue tuan 6 wei zhuan jia wei wo xiao xue zi zuo bao gao [6 experts from the *Starry Sky* Amateur Orchestra gave lectures for the students of our university]. *Northwest A&F University*, April 28, 2014. URL: <https://news.nwafu.edu.cn/xnxw/42591.htm> (accessed: 07.02.2025).

<sup>4</sup> Di 17 jie Beijing fa ming chuang xin da sai fa ming chuang xin jiang huo jiang gong gao [Announcement of the Prizes of the 17th Beijing Innovation and Invention Competition]. *Beijing fa ming xie hui* [Beijing Association of Inventions]. May 19, 2023. URL: <https://www.bj-fm.com/news/detail/514.html> (accessed: 07.02.2025).

### Cooperation with the Philadelphia Orchestra

In 2017, the Philadelphia Orchestra visited Beijing and cooperated with the *Starry Sky* in the Concert Hall of the National Library of China on May 29.<sup>5, 6</sup> The program contained *Carmen* overture, *The Butterfly Lovers* (violin concerto), and *Defend the Yellow River* among others. Since I was a new member of the orchestra I did not have the opportunity to attend this concert, but I felt the excitement of some of the older members when they talked about this unique experience.

The solo violinist for the *The Butterfly Lovers* Concert was Mr. Shuchun Zhou, the editor-in-chief of *China Daily*. When he was a younger journalist 24 years ago, he wrote a report on the Philadelphia Orchestra's first visit to China, in 1973. He now met the orchestra, not for journalism, but for his love of music.

The Philadelphia Orchestra is a cultural and diplomatic symbol for China because it was the first American ensemble to perform in China after Former President Richard Nixon asked the Orchestra to visit China.<sup>7</sup> The cooperation between the Philadelphia Orchestra and the *Starry Sky* Orchestra therefore has a special significance.

As some orchestra members remembered, their performance with American musicians

was a very special experience, not only because amateur orchestra had very few international cooperation opportunities, but also because they were very happy to play with such high-level musicians.

### Recent Activities

I joined the orchestra in October 2022. I just love music and want to have more opportunities to practice the trumpet. The orchestra rehearses every Sunday in a school in Haidian District, and recent new pieces include *Die Fledermaus* Overture, *Dance of the Yao People*, and *Harmonious Music in China* (a Buddhist symphonic/choral work).

The orchestra was funded by the China National Arts Fund for the concert tour project, "My Motherland and I,"<sup>8</sup> mainly covering travel expenses and venues. Generally speaking, the funding is not easy to be approved. It was successful because of its perfect design, its high quality and its purpose for the education of students.

Recently, the orchestra had the following activities:

On November 3, 2022, the concert entitled "Music Enlightens Life, My Motherland and I," was held in the Concert Hall of the National Library of China. During the concert, there also was a ceremony for the donation of music

<sup>5</sup> Man tian xing ye yu jiao xiang yue tuan xie shou Feicheng jiao xiang yue tuan zai guo tu yi shu zhong xin ju xing gong yi yan chu [The *Starry Sky* Amateur Orchestra and the Philadelphia Orchestra played together at the Arts Center of the *National Library of China*]. National Library of China. January 06, 2017. URL: [http://www.nlc.cn/dsb\\_zx/gtxw/201706/t20170601\\_148817.htm](http://www.nlc.cn/dsb_zx/gtxw/201706/t20170601_148817.htm) (accessed: 07.02.2025).

<sup>6</sup> Man tian xing ye yu jiao xiang yue tuan xie shou Feicheng jiao xiang yue tuan feng xian yin yue sheng yan [The *Starry Sky* Amateur Orchestra and the Philadelphia Orchestra Offered a Musical Banquet]. *Ren min zheng xie bao* [CPPCC Daily]. September 06, 2017. URL: <http://mobile.rmzxb.com.cn/tranm/index/url/whkj.rmzxb.com.cn/c/2017-06-09/1583565.shtml> (accessed: 07.02.2025).

<sup>7</sup> New film highlights Philly Orchestra's impact on classical music in China. PhillyVoice. May 04, 2021. URL: <https://www.phillyvoice.com/philadelphia-orchestra-documentary-china-classical-music/> (accessed: 10.02.2025).

<sup>8</sup> Guo jia yi shu ji jin (yi ban xiang mu) 2022 nian du zi zhu xiang mu ming dan gong shi [Announcement of the Projects Funded by the China National Arts Fund]. *Guo ji yi shu ji jin* [China National Arts Fund]. January 03, 2022. URL: [https://www.cnaf.cn/project\\_detail/2362.html](https://www.cnaf.cn/project_detail/2362.html) (accessed: 10.02.2025).

manuscripts and historical photos by seven artists.<sup>9</sup>

On January 18, 2023, the New Year Concert of the Orchestra was held in the Concert Hall of the National Library of China (Photo 5). It included Huanzhi LI's *Spring Festival Overture*, Johannes Brahms' *Hungarian Dance No. 5*, *The Red Detachment of Women* (Suite from the ballet), Johann Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz*, Shiguang Wang's *The Song of Yangtze River*, Yongcheng Qin's *My Motherland and I* (piano, violin and cello), Yuan Mao's *Happy*

*New Year* (violins), the final movement of Antonín Dvořák's *Symphony No. 9* (From the New World), Lu Zheng's *Happy News from Beijing* and finally the encore *Ode to My Motherland*.

On February 23, 2023, the orchestra held a music salon at the National Library of China to commemorate the 150 anniversary of Qichao Liang, a notable scholar and former director of the library. With the accompaniment of the music, librarians, children and orchestra members recited some of Mr. Liang's poems, proses and letters.<sup>10</sup> A similar event was held



Photo 5. The *Starry Sky* New Year Concert at the National Library of China

<sup>9</sup> 7 wei zhi ming yi shu jia juan zeng yin yue shou gao lao zhao pian deng gei guo tu, kan kan you sha [Seven Famous Artists Donated Music Manuscripts and Historical Photos to the National Library]. *Jing bao wang* [Beijing Daily]. April 11, 2022. URL: <https://news.bjd.com.cn/2022/11/04/10209003.shtml> (accessed: 10.02.2025).

<sup>10</sup> Liang Qichao dan chen 150 zhou nian ji nian lang song yin yue sha long zai Guo jia tu shu guan ju ban [The Music Salon to Commemorate the 150 Anniversary of Liang Qichao was Held in the National Library of China]. *Zhongguo ri bao* [China Daily]. February 23, 2023. URL: <http://ex.chinadaily.com.cn/exchange/partners/82/rss/channel/cn/columns/h72une/stories/WS63f75c3da3102ada8b2306a7.html> (accessed: 10.02.2025).

in Beijing Yuying School on April 6, for schoolers to learn Mr. Liang’s family tradition, domestic discipline, and patriotism.<sup>11</sup>

On April 14, 2025, the orchestra entered Beijing Institute of Education, Shijingshan Campus, for a concert specially for teachers and students in Shijingshan District. The performance was interluded with several humorous speeches by players in the orchestra. Mr. Hao Liang, the principal violinist and a gastroenterologist, talked about the relationship between music and health. Mr. Dawei Hu, a hornist and engineer, talked about his story of invention, innovation and improvement of the French horns. Mr. Bojun Li, an bassoonist and cardiothoracic surgeon, told the story of his love for during the school years. The audience not only enjoyed

the music, but also were encouraged and moved by their speeches for their charms of personality. Although they are non-professional amateur performers, their music skills are almost professional, and their have all achieved high level in their own professional domains.<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusion

The *Starry Sky* Amateur Orchestra is a good example of “lifestyle” that tells people no matter what you do in your profession, the love of music is common and this love of music along with professional accomplishments are mutually beneficial. The orchestra continues to promote the love of music in China, and its cultivation of good taste, sincerity, and dedication among young people (Photo 6).



Photo 6. The author, Be Gu, in the Trumpet Section of the *Starry Sky* Orchestra (November 2022)

<sup>11</sup> Jia feng jia jiao yu jia guo – ji nian Liang Qichao dan chen 150 zhou nian lang song yin yue sha long gong yi huo dong ju ban [Family Tradition, Domestic Discipline and Patriotism – Music Salon to Commemorate the 150 Anniversary of Liang Qichao]. *Ren min zheng xie bao* [CPPCC Daily]. April 06, 2023. URL: <http://www.rmzxb.com.cn/c/2023-04-06/3325980.shtml> (accessed: 07.02.2025).

<sup>12</sup> Ye yu jiao xiang yue tuan zhan zhuan ye yan zou! Shijingshan qu shi sheng shang qi yin yue si zheng ke [Amateur Orchestra Showed Professional Performance! Shijingshan Districe Teachers and Students had a Ideological Class]. *Xian dai jiao yu bao* [Modern Education News]. April 17, 2025. URL: <https://www.phwz.net/news/1zwRPQLjDP.html> (accessed: 29.05.2025).

Amateur orchestras have been developing rapidly in the past decades, and are expected to develop further. Unlike the situation 40 years ago, many professional musicians are participating in music education in their spare time, and national and international music exchange activities are much more than before.

In China, school and university students pay most of their attention to the studies of their ordinary courses and sometimes neglect the importance of sports and art cultivation, which seem not to help their academic records and future occupations. The government promote “quality education” to change this situation, but it’s not very effective. The organization of student orchestras and the campus concerts by senior professionally successful amateurs will help to change their ideas, and guide them to develop not

only academically, but also physically and psychologically.

As Mr. Zijia Zhang pointed out in his new book, [3, Preface] although amateur orchestras had developed greatly in the past 30 years, there are still some problems in the organization of the orchestras, compared with the counterparts in Western countries. We have still a lot to do to promote the love for music in the public.

Mr. Peng Cao, a notable conductor at his age of 100, established an amateur orchestra in Shanghai in 2005, and still conducted for it recently. He thinks that there is no differences between amateur and professional orchestras. [4] Ms. Xiaoying Zheng, another notable conductor, has always been making her efforts to popularize classical music, especially opera. [5] With the efforts of so many musician, classical music will be loved by more and more Chinese citizens.

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