

# MELODY OF CHINA

**Art Form: Music**  
**Style: Traditional**  
**Culture: Chinese**

## MEET THE ARTIST:

The mission of **Melody of China** is to promote classical and modern Chinese music, as well as to provide quality entertainment that combines an ancient cultural tradition and the youthful, diverse culture of America. Founded in 1993 by *Hong Wang* and *Yangqin Zhao*, the group features members trained at some of the most prestigious music conservatories in China. Director Hong Wang, a multi-instrumentalist, educator and Chinese music specialist, plays the *erhu* (two-stringed Chinese fiddle), *sheng* (36-pipe mouth organ), flutes and percussion. *Yangqin Zhao* is a *yangqin* (hammered dulcimer) soloist; Hai Pu a percussionist; *Xian Lu*, a musicologist who plays flute, *xiao* (vertically played flute), *bawu* (copper reed bamboo flute) and *xun*; *Linhong Li* is *pipa* (Chinese flute) soloist; *Haiyue Zhang*, *ruan* (moon guitar) and *liuqin* (Chinese mandolin) specialist; and *Ganqin Zhao*, a multi-instrumentalist who plays percussion, *guzheng* (21-strand table harp) and *yangqin*, among others.

## ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Melody of China leads students on a fascinating trek through the music and unique, traditional instruments of China. Narrated by director Hong Wang, instruments such as the *ruan* (moon guitar) are featured as the ensemble plays evocative music like “Oceans of Happiness,” “Camel Bells and the Silk Road,” “Tumbling Walnuts” and “Join for Xin Jiang People.” Students are encouraged to listen for images behind the notes as they listen to “Squabbling Ducks” and “Horse Racing.” Basic elements of music like harmony, and various playing techniques are presented. A brief question and answer session allows students to explore specific areas of interest. Selected students are invited onstage to participate in the final musical presentation.



## PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Chinese music performed today can provide two delightful gifts for an audience, partly in thanks to the teachings of the ancient philosopher, Confucius. He taught that the sole purpose of listening to music was to calm the passions and clarify the thoughts. Thus, the traditional gift given by performers of music was tranquility for the mind and the soul.

The second gift available to modern audiences is enjoyment. Musicians can provide an increased awareness of ancient Chinese musical traditions, enlightenment about Chinese life and music, and pure enjoyment as listeners experience this special style of music. An ancient Chinese belief states that sound can have profound influence on all of us, and can shift the balance of the universe. If this is so, listening to the instruments and sounds of Melody of China is sure to be an uplifting experience.

Because the ancient purpose of music was to purify and calm, great attention is still paid to the playing of individual notes. The music is articulated carefully to evoke as much feeling and emphasis as possible. Primarily using the pentatonic (five-note scale), the heptatonic (seven-note scale) may also be used.

The instruments used to play the music of China are ancient, some over 2,000 years old. Following is a list of instruments you may see in the performance:

*ruan*, or moon guitar, has over 150 metal strings

*yangqin*, or butterfly harp, a dulcimer that is over 600 years old

*erhu*, or two-stringed fiddle played with a horsehair bow, an ancient instrument over 2,000 years old

*xiao*, a very long, vertical flute

*sheng*, or pipe mouth organ made with 36 bamboo pipes

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What do you remember from the performance? Select one song you remember and describe your reaction to the music and the instruments used to play the song.
- Was this style of music new to you? Where have you heard music like this before?
- Several times the musicians asked if you heard specific “life sounds” such as horse hoofs, ducks quacking, etc. played by the instruments. Did you hear the sounds? Did they make you laugh? Why?
- If you were going to learn to play one of the instruments you saw today, which one would you want to study? Why?
- Traditional Chinese music was meant to calm and clarify the mind. Why do you listen to music today? Do you use it to help you work? Go to sleep? To calm you down? To wake you up? What other ways do you use music?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SOCIAL STUDIES:

Music that mimics the sound of life is common throughout many cultures. Sounds effects can also be used to enhance literary drama. Working with a partner or small group, take a favorite story, fairy tale or piece of core literature. Make a list of the different sounds that are suggested as the story unfolds. Pay particular attention to doors opening, animal noises, nature noises like wind or rain and human noises like crying or laughing. Select or find instruments, household objects or other items that can create the sounds you have imagined. Decide who will read the story and who will “play” the sounds. Working together, present a reading of the story accompanied by the sounds you have discovered.



Ancient Chinese Flutes

Legend:

- ⦿ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- \* Connections, Relations, Applications

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⦿ There is an old saying that music can soothe a savage beast. Listen to several different types of music: popular, classical, rap, jazz, country, etc. After listening to each selection, write a list of adjectives or verbs that describe your reaction to what you heard. Try to describe your reaction in as many different ways as possible: intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and physically.
- Find China on a map. What countries line the borders? What bodies of water surround it or are within the country itself? Compare the size of China to other countries. What kind of resources are available? Approximately one billion, two hundred million people live in China. How does that compare with the rest of the world? With the United States?
- ❖ Think about the performance of Melody of China, and choose one song that you remember well or that you really enjoyed. Remember how the song was performed, what instruments were used, if it was sad, happy, funny, etc. After remembering what you experienced, “illustrate” the song you selected. You can draw the musicians playing, illustrate part of the song itself, or draw your reactions and impressions. Be careful to select colors, shapes and line that help to identify and illustrate the song you are trying to recreate. Caption your drawing.
- ⇒ Some of the songs played by Melody of China have wonderfully descriptive, often humorous titles, such as “Horse Racing,” “Squabbling Ducks” and “Tumbling Walnuts.” The title of each song helps the audience listen and appreciate the colorful images suggested in the music. Create a list of song titles that produce strong images in your mind, such as “Barking Frogs,” “Traffic Jam” or “Elephant Walking.” After you have made your list, select your favorite title and write a paragraph describing the instruments, rhythms and pitch you would use to play your song.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Yuan-Yuan Lee, Sin-Yan Shen, *Chinese Musical Instruments*. Chinese Music Society of North America; Woodbridge, IL, 1999.
- Dun J. Li, *The Ageless Chinese :A History*. Prentice-Hall, Inc., A Simon & Schuster Company, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1993.