



NAXOS

BRIGHT SHENG

Let Fly – Violin Concerto
Zodiac Tales – Concerto for Orchestra
Suzhou Overture

Dan Zhu, Violin
Suzhou Symphony Orchestra
Shanghai Symphony Orchestra
Bright Sheng

Bright Sheng (b. 1955)

Let Fly • Zodiac Tales • Suzhou Overture

Let Fly – Concerto for Violin and Orchestra
(2013)

The title for this work came from two places of inspiration. Firstly, it is an aural depiction of the image of the violin melody just 'flying off' into the air, an everlasting memory from when I first saw Gil Shaham (who is a dedicatee of the work) perform at a concert. The second came from a childlike rhyme I wrote when my daughter Fayfay (homophone for 'to fly' in Chinese) was born, the first phrase of which appears several times in the composition.

The work is simply structured: three movements in one, with a cadenza between the second and third movements. The soloist is encouraged to write his or her own cadenza, of no more than one to two minutes, ideally based on the materials which have appeared up to this point of the concerto.

The work was commissioned by BBC Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra and Singapore Symphony Orchestra, and written for Gil Shaham.

Concerto for Orchestra: Zodiac Tales
(2006, rev. 2016)

Every Chinese person is born in a zodiac year that is symbolised by a specific animal that then accompanies them throughout their life – the mouse, the buffalo, the tiger, the rabbit, the dragon, the serpent, the horse, the ram, the monkey, the rooster, the dog or the pig.

We know, however, that the Chinese did not create the first zodiac cyclic calendar. Many other ancient civilisations such as the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Indians and the Babylonians all cultivated the concept that the planets in the heavens were divided into twelve constellations, represented by twelve animals, although some of these animals were different from those in the current Chinese myth.

Approximately four thousand years ago – around the time that belief in the zodiac reached China – the Chinese

started studying astronomy and astrology. The first detailed writing in Chinese literature did not appear until the Eastern Han Dynasty (23–220 AD), however, well over two thousand years later, when Chinese philosopher Wang Chong discussed nature and the twelve constellations in his treatise *Lunheng* ('Weighing the Measurement'). Since then, the legends of astrological animals have appeared throughout the history of Chinese literature, and some of the most vivid images of these largely fictional tales provided me with points of departure for this composition.

I. *The God of Rain*

According to Chinese tradition, the Rain God (dragon) symbolises the highest celestial power. Its appearance is a combination of nine animals – the head of the *qiu* (a Chinese mythical animal somewhere between a small lion and large dog), the antler of the deer, the eyes of the rabbit, the ears of the bull, the body of the serpent, the belly of the giant clam, the scales of the carp, the paws of the eagle and the palms of the tiger. Among the twelve it is the mightiest, who rules the affairs of rain and water. Throughout history, the Chinese have built temples to honour the dragon god, praying for a good season of rain for crops and for protection from flooding.

II. *Of Mice and Cats*

A pair of mice can reproduce almost a thousand young over the period of a year, and each three-month-old mouse is mature enough to reproduce again. In this movement, I see the growth from one mouse to hundreds, and then to thousands, all in one place.

The cat did not make it into the zodiac because of the mouse – they were good friends at one point. But when the Jade Emperor (a god-like figure in Chinese mythology) summoned the animals to his court for zodiac designations, the mouse intentionally did not wake up his sleeping friend. Arriving first before the Emperor, the mouse was chosen as the first of the twelve zodiac animals. The cat and mouse have been enemies ever since.

III. *Three Lambs Under the Spring Sun*

The ram is the sun god. The image of three lambs resting under the spring sun signifies happiness and an abundant harvest.

IV. *The Elephant-Eating Serpent*

Although not as powerful as the dragon, the serpent is known for its ability to swallow bigger objects than the size of its own body. Thus, a Chinese metaphor describing a person's extreme greediness is 'a serpent who craves to eat an elephant'.

V. *The Tomb of the Soulful Dog*

The notion that 'a dog is Man's best friend' has also been part of Chinese culture for a long time. The most well-known fable is about the dog belonging to Emperor Liu Bang, the founder of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). In the legend, the Emperor's dog saved his master's army by sacrificing himself to put out a fire set by the enemy as they besieged the Emperor's troops. Emperor Liu later buried the dog in a serene ceremony and built a tombstone inscribed with 'The Tomb of the Soulful Dog'. This movement was written in memory of my mother Alice Cheng who was born in the year of the dog, and passed away on 8 February 2005. It is built on the passacaglia of a Buddhist chant sung by three nuns at the death bed of my mother.

VI. *The Flying Horses*

The heavenly horses could travel as much as a thousand miles a day across the sky – an image that is truly exciting – with thousands of them dashing over the horizon together.

The 2006 version of this work was commissioned by The Philadelphia Orchestra and Christoph Eschenbach. Five movements of the work were premiered by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and Leonard Slatkin on 30 January 2014.

This is the revised 2016 version, premiered by the National Symphony Orchestra with Christoph Eschenbach conducting his final concert as its music director on 15 June 2017.

Suzhou Overture (2019)

Suzhou is one of the oldest cities in China with nearly 3,000 years of history. Remarkably, the remains of the ancient city have been preserved to this day, as well as the profound cultural heritage of the city. This unique chronicle enables Suzhou to connect the past to the present. Today, modernity and the past coexist and complement each other. Like the world-renowned Suzhou artisanal craft of double-sided embroidery, the city fuses present and past, and enjoys quiet and leisure in its vigorous 21st-century modernisation.

In *Suzhou Overture* I tried to embody this old/new sentiment: traditional nostalgia and lyrical melodies are woven together with modern rhythmic vigour, from slow to fast all in one long phrase, reflecting Suzhou's continuous cultural creativity from the ancient to the present.

The work was commissioned by the Suzhou Symphony Orchestra.

Bright Sheng

Dan Zhu



Praised by *The Strad* magazine, Dan Zhu is recognised as one of the finest musicians on the international stage today, performing internationally in North America, Europe and Asia. He has appeared with orchestras under the direction of Zubin Mehta, Philippe Entremont, Jacek Kasprzyk, Krzysztof Penderecki, Carl St. Clair, Muhai Tang and Long Yu, and has given masterclasses at the Salzburg, Tanglewood, Verbier, Marlboro, Schleswig-Holstein and Spoleto Festivals among others. Recent highlights include concerto appearances with Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Camerata Salzburg, the National Symphony Orchestra at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Prague Symphony Orchestra, and appearances at Lincoln Center in New York, the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing and collaborations with Michel Dalberto, Peter Frankl, Richard Goode, Lang Lang, Tzimon Barto, Kun-Woo Paik, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Nobuko Imai, Gary Hoffman and Mischa Maisky among others.

www.danzhumusic.com

Suzhou Symphony Orchestra



Co-founded by the City of Suzhou and the Suzhou Industrial Park in 2016, the Suzhou Symphony Orchestra has positioned itself as one of China's most dynamic orchestras. Characterised by experience combined with youth, the musicians of the orchestra represent 21 countries/regions across four continents. Under the stewardship of music director Chen Xieyang and chief conductor Xu Zhong, the Suzhou Symphony Orchestra has conceived daring, illuminating and entertaining programmes that encompass a broad range of repertoire with stylistic diversity and technical rigour.

www.suzhouso.com

Shanghai Symphony Orchestra



The Shanghai Symphony Orchestra is one of the earliest and best-known orchestras in Asia, through which Chinese symphonic music has developed. Spanning three centuries, the Shanghai Symphony has embraced a new era under the directorship of Maestro Yu Long. It has played a major role in collaborations between world-class musicians and institutes, gaining a reputation as the most authoritative interpreter of Chinese symphonic compositions.

www.shsymphony.com

Bright Sheng



Bright Sheng is one of the leading composers of our time, whose stage, orchestral, chamber and vocal works are performed regularly by the greatest performing arts institutions throughout North America, Europe and Asia. A MacArthur Fellow, Sheng has created an *oeuvre* with a strong synthesis of Western musical tradition which makes his work distinctive and original. Sheng himself admits: 'I consider myself both 100% American and 100% Asian.' In September 2016, in a co-production with the Hong Kong Arts Festival, with sold-out runs at both cities, the San Francisco Opera premiered Sheng's commissioned opera *Dream of The Red Chamber* featuring a libretto by David Henry Hwang and Sheng, based on a Chinese novel by the 18th-century writer Cao Xueqin. In September 2017 he conducted a tour of the production in China. In addition to composing, Sheng enjoys an active career as a conductor and concert pianist, and frequently acts as music advisor and artistic director to orchestras and festivals. He is currently the Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Composition at the

University of Michigan, and Sohmen Professor-at-Large at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology where, in 2011, he founded *The Intimacy of Creativity – The Bright Sheng Partnership: Composers Meet Performers in Hong Kong*. Sheng was born on 6 December 1955 in Shanghai, and moved to New York in 1982 where he pursued his graduate works and studied composition and conducting privately with his mentor Leonard Bernstein. Bright Sheng's music is exclusively published by G. Schirmer, Inc., and his discography spans numerous albums.

Inspired by the image of a violin melody ‘flying off’, Chinese-American composer Bright Sheng’s virtuosic three-movement concerto *Let Fly* interweaves Chinese and Western classical elements. Vivid legends of astrological animals inform *Zodiac Tales*, a tour de force concerto for orchestra. Reflecting the city of Suzhou’s ancient, continuous cultural heritage, traditional nostalgia fuses with contemporary rhythms in the exciting *Suzhou Overture*.

BRIGHT SHENG

(b. 1955)

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| 1 | Let Fly – Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (2013) | 27:36 |
| | Concerto for Orchestra: Zodiac Tales (2006, revised 2016) | 30:17 |
| 2 | I. The God of Rain | 5:12 |
| 3 | II. Of Mice and Cats | 3:15 |
| 4 | III. Three Lambs Under the Spring Sun | 2:19 |
| 5 | IV. The Elephant-Eating Serpent | 4:33 |
| 6 | V. The Tomb of the Soulful Dog | 9:22 |
| 7 | VI. The Flying Horses | 5:33 |
| 8 | Suzhou Overture (2019) | 9:46 |

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDINGS

Dan Zhu, Violin 1

Suzhou Symphony Orchestra 1 8

Shanghai Symphony Orchestra 2–7

Bright Sheng

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