

The School of Music delegation to China visits Tiananmen Square during their fall 2005 music exchange trip. The eight students and three faculty members pictured here are: (back row, left to right) Melanie Helton, Matthew Tuell, Lindsay Keselman, Richard Fracker, Corey Rivera, James Forger, Christopher Austrang, and Robert Parks, and (front row) Cheryl Kaski, Colleen Papa, and Brittne Tyl.



Music Bridges the Cultural Divide between MSU and Shenyang University

What started as a joke between friends turned into a successful collaboration between two countries and two educational institutions. Haijing Fu and Richard Fracker have been colleagues and friends since 1997. During a rehearsal at the New York Metropolitan Opera House in 2004, the two vocalists were chatting about their respective jobs and mentioned casually how much fun it would be to get their students together for some sort of collaboration.

Days later, they simultaneously went to each other with the same idea: a formal partnership between their two culturally different educational institutions. Fracker, a tenor and assistant professor of voice in MSU's School of Music, and Fu, an internationally renowned baritone and a faculty member at Shenyang Conservatory of Music in China, decided to create a program where selected talented students could meet, interact, rehearse, and perform together in a professional setting.

In the fall of 2005, eight students from each school were chosen through an audition process. The eight from MSU ranged from freshmen to seniors, with majors in music education, music performance, or both.

One objective of the program was to provide a professional environment where students could experience the life of a performer on the road. According to Fracker, students rarely get an opportunity to work under these conditions before they actually get into the field, so an opportunity like this would be invaluable. "A benefit for the students

was their ability to mimic the professional lifestyle, flying, rehearsing, and performing in a short time period," he said.

Other MSU faculty members involved in the exchange were School of Music Director James Forger, Assistant Professors of Voice Molly Fillmore (mezzo-soprano) and Melanie Helton (soprano), and Assistant Professor of Piano Marie-France Lefebvre. All faculty members held master classes in their host country, and the students participated in workshops.

The exchange began at MSU, when Haijing Fu traveled to East Lansing with the students from Shenyang in early October. The Chinese students, most of whom stayed in the homes of music faculty members, spent their time in rehearsals, master classes, and social activities, including a barbecue at Fracker's home and the MSU-University of Michigan football game.

The collaboration included multiple concerts both at MSU and at Shenyang Conservatory. The first concert in the United States featured faculty from both countries performing arias, duets, and a *Rigoletto* quartet, as well as both Western and Chinese music. The second concert was a joint performance at which all 16 students presented both traditional American and Chinese operatic literature.

A week after they arrived at MSU, the group from China returned home to Shenyang, accompanied by the MSU contingent of eight students and five faculty members. They repeated the East Lansing performances for the Shenyang audience

the following week. Between rehearsals and performances, the MSU group was treated with trips to Tiananmen Square and the Great Wall.

Both the Chinese and the American musicians overcame formidable cultural and language barriers during their respective visits. For instance, the Shenyang University performers, who typically sing individual recitals with little or no interaction with other performers or the audience, were initially a bit uncomfortable interacting and emoting in their MSU appearances, but quickly adjusted, according to Director Forger. And although none of the MSU students had any previous knowledge or experience with the Chinese language, they managed enough of it to sing after only a few rehearsals. And the Chinese audience was suitably impressed, said Forger. "The halls were filled to capacity both times and the applause was deafening."

Lindsay Kesselman, a senior in music education and vocal performance in the MSU School of Music, was one of the eight American students in the program. "There is no greater way to learn than to travel and be completely immersed in another

culture," she said, reflecting on her experience. "We, as musicians, had the unique privilege of traveling, being immersed, and also being in the position to give something back to the people we met there through our performances. The opportunity to sing the music of each other's traditions and also to share in music from the operatic repertoire, which was common to us both, provided ways of communicating emotionally, without requiring us to speak the same language."

Fracker also believes that the collaboration was a great success. "The personal cultural growth was immeasurable," he said, adding, "Lifelong incredible friendships have been made; there were many tears at departure." He hopes the program can be repeated in future years.

This partnership, which was the result of the hard work of students, faculty, and administration, was made possible through major funding from Jackson National Life and its Asian affiliate, Prudential Asia.

—Allison Citino

Series Looks at Mainstreaming Asian Culture and Traditions

The integration of members of the Asian community into larger mainstream cultures in the United States and elsewhere from both historical and contemporary perspectives was the focus of *Asia and the Diaspora: Traditions and Trajectories*. The program was funded by a grant of \$20,000 to the MSU Asian Studies Center (ASN) from the Office of the Provost as part of its Creating a More Diverse and Connected Community initiative.

The project's broad aims were twofold: to provide a forum for Asian Americans to examine their own history and identity, articulate and analyze issues directly affecting themselves, and promote discussion of their concerns; and to give students, faculty, and staff at MSU, as well as community members, a greater understanding of the issues affecting Asian Americans, their contributions to American life, and their attempts to integrate their values and cultures into the American experience. The program included speaker and film series, multimedia performances, and a day-long symposium exploring issues related to Asian American adoptees.

Although the first recorded settlement of Asians in the United States dates back to 1763, when Filipino slaves escaped imprisonment aboard Spanish galleons by jumping ship in New Orleans and fleeing into the bayous, most American history classes ignore the presence of Asians in America. Many of the topics covered in program presentations—from ethnic beauty pageants to transglobal marriages, Japanese internment camps in the United States, and Asian American

activism—are not commonly addressed in American schools.

The April 16, 2005 symposium *Beyond the Melting Pot: Asian Adoptees in the 21st Century* brought up issues that many of the adoptive parents who attended had not considered. By bringing together parents, adoptees, academics, and others interested and/or involved in adoption from Asia, the symposium provided an opportunity to discuss issues such as racial discrimination and multicultural identity candidly—issues that some may have found difficult to talk about otherwise.

Grant funds also supported Asian American activities at MSU and events in the Greater Lansing area. ASN played an important role in supporting Asian Pacific American Heritage Month (May 2005) hosted by MSU's Asian Pacific American Studies Program and the Asian Pacific American Student Organization. ASN also took part in the Asian Pacific American Forum hosted by Lansing Community College as well as cultural and educational activities at the Michigan Historical Center and Library connected with its special exhibit *Movers and Seekers: Michigan Immigrants and Migrants*.

The collective activities of the *Asia and the Diaspora* series provided area Asian Americans, as well as non-Asian Americans and others from a range of cultures and backgrounds, an opportunity to discuss common problems and issues, and created a synergy for continued meetings, conferences, and discussion.

—Khanh-Van Nguyen