Although Chen Yi lives in Kansas City, Missouri, where she has served on the faculty of the University of Missouri–Kansas City since 1998, she is originally from Guangzhou, the capital city of the most densely populated province of China. Her extraordinary life story is a saga of artistic devotion and perseverance.

The daughter of classical music–loving doctors, she studied violin and piano from age three and listened to her parents’ record collection. At 15 she was sent to work in the fields as part of the Cultural Revolution’s re-education program for young citizens corrupted by Western capitalist influences. More than a year later, after authorities heard her virtuosic violin renditions of revolutionary songs (the only permitted music at that time), they reassigned her to a Beijing Opera troupe in her hometown, where she served as concertmaster and arranger for the next eight years. In 1978 Beijing’s Central Conservatory reopened, and Chen Yi enrolled in the first class, along with composer Tan Dun and her future husband, Zhou Long. In 1986 she became the first female composer in China to have a whole concert of her symphonic music performed at Beijing Concert Hall.

Under the auspices of the Chinese-born American composer Chou Wen-chung, she then embarked on a journey to the United States to pursue a doctorate at Columbia University alongside a group of now famous émigré composers from China. In 1987, while she was a student at Columbia, China’s Central Philharmonic Orchestra performed her orchestral composition *Duo Ye* No. 2 all over the US, beginning at Avery Fisher Hall (since renamed David Geffen Hall) at Lincoln Center.

In the 1990s, Chen Yi served as composer-in-residence with The Women’s Philharmonic, and Yehudi Menuhin conducted one of her works at the first Lincoln Center Festival. Her subsequent accolades include the CalArts Alpert Award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Charles Ives Living Award, and The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s Elise L. Stoeger Prize.

*Duo Ye*, written while she was a student in China, is Chen Yi’s earliest piece for orchestra without soloist. (Her first work involving orchestra, *Xian Shi*, composed in 1983, was the first viola concerto composed in China.) It is based on Chen Yi’s solo piano piece, also called *Duo Ye* (1984), which had received First Prize in the Fourth Chinese National Music Composition Contest, in 1985. This piece’s success led the China Record Company to commission and record the chamber orchestra version before it received its first public performance the following year. This is the version you hear tonight.

Chen Yi subsequently created two additional versions. *Duo Ye* No. 2 (1987), for

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**In Short**

**Born:** April 4, 1953, in Guangzhou, China

**Resides:** Kansas City, Missouri

**Work composed:** 1985; commissioned and recorded by the China Record Company; based on an earlier solo piano piece, also titled *Duo Ye*, composed in 1984

**World premiere:** February 10, 1986, Beijing Concert Hall, by the Beijing Symphony Orchestra, Lan Shui, conductor (although it had been recorded by the China Record Company in 1985). The original solo piano composition received its first performance in 1985, by Chen Yi’s sister, Chen Min, in Beijing.

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances

**Estimated duration:** ca. 7 minutes
The Work at a Glance

The two-note “Duo Ye” motive is introduced by oboe and upper strings, expanding to a longer melody, a call-and-response with clarinet, bassoon, and tom-toms punctuated by snap pizzicatos (“Bartók pizzicatos”) in the cellos and basses. A French horn drone leads to another call-and-response, between strings and winds, leading to a romp for the whole orchestra. A contemplative passage follows, in which a Beijing Opera–esque melody (symbolizing the visitors from Beijing) passes from the flute to muted violas in counterpoint with the vibraphone, and eventually across the rest of the strings. An insistent vibraphone ostinato then accompanies the principal melody, which has now traveled all the way down to the basses.

Suddenly a new, highly embellished melody in the style of traditional Chinese mountain songs (shan’ge) emerges, first in the oboe, then flute, then in the two clarinets moving in parallel motion. (The paired clarinets evoke the sheng, a traditional Chinese free-reed instrument similar to the harmonica.) This freely flowing tune is accompanied by a melodic groove in the tom-toms and a repeating eight-beat pizzicato riff in the violas and cellos that forms a twelve-tone row. The groove is briefly broken and then shifts to another, even more propulsive five-beat rhythmic cycle in the second violins. Soon everyone joins in, and a loud thwack on the gong is followed by a potent restatement of the initial two-note motive. Frenetic figurations in the strings underscore successive iterations of the motive, leading directly to a dramatic block chord voiced across the orchestra that pounds in a seven-beat rhythmic cycle, interrupting a melody in the bassoon, cello, and basses. These various rhythmic juxtapositions are derived from traditional Chinese folk music practices.

The original motive returns once again, now soaring in the high strings, against the sweeping of the lower strings, building in intensity. It all suddenly stops. A final, Stravinskyesque passage in a driving two-beat meter grows more and more forceful, but then dissolves as a lyrical melody makes a final return in the oboe before being drowned out by one final triumphant statement of the initial motive.

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\begin{array}{cccc}
\frac{2}{4} & \frac{5}{4} & \frac{1}{4} & \frac{1}{4} \\
1 & 2 & 2 & 2 \\
6 & 3 & 2 & 1 \\
6 & 3 & 2 & 1 \\
9 & 6 & 3 & 2 \\
\end{array}
\]

One of the original Dong folksongs that inspired Duo Ye, transcribed in Chinese notation in which the pentatonic scale Do Re Mi So La is represented as 1 2 3 5 6. A line below notes means eighth notes; two lines mean sixteenths. A dot means an octave lower. A slur between numbers is the same as a slur in Western notation.
In the Composer’s Words

Chen Yi has written the following about Duo Ye:

I took the element of the original singing tune, “Ya Duo Ye” (nonsense syllables sung in refrains), as a melodic motive to develop, and the dancing rhythmic chorale as the accompaniment. Developed from the primitive motive, the style of the lyrical melodies (in homophonic or polyphonic writing) and the hidden layers in the rhythmic patterns in the piece is mixed with high pitch mountain songs (with many grace notes imitating the speech-singing) and Beijing Opera tunes. The overall rhythmic arrangement is dominated by an application of a telescopic principle originating in Shifan Drum, a type of traditional percussion ensemble music in Southeastern China. The combinations and contrasts between parts, the meters designed and the numbers of note groupings, all are inspired by the original rhythmic organizations called The Sum of Eight and The Golden Olive, from folk music. The imagination of the primitive power, the high energetic spirit, and the charming folk singing as the soul of the music are represented in the composition.

When invited to comment on these performances, the composer said:

It’s a great honor and joy that the New York Philharmonic has programmed my Duo Ye for Chamber Orchestra this season. I’ve always known how great the Philharmonic is from the many concerts that I have attended, and I enjoyed a recording of their 1996 performance, with Chanticleer, of my orchestration of Alice Parker’s Singin’ in the Dark, a set of American folk songs, in Central Park. I am so grateful for the New York Philharmonic’s strong support for new music, their high spirit, and artistic quality.

large orchestra and containing substantial interpolations, established her reputation in the US. Finally, in 1995, she transcribed and adapted her initial solo piano work for solo pipa, the traditional four-stringed Chinese lute, also using the title Duo Ye. These performances of the chamber orchestra version of Duo Ye mark the first time that the New York Philharmonic has performed any incarnation of Duo Ye, though the Orchestra presented her chamber work At the Kansas City Chinese New Year Concert on a 2019 contemporary music concert.

Duo Ye is an amalgam of traditional Chinese and Western contemporary music, a synthesis that would become the hallmark of Chen Yi’s style. Described by some early reviewers as sounding like “Chinese Bartók,” Duo Ye is immediately striking upon first hearing, though it rewards repeated listening.

The work takes its inspiration from a folk performance Chen witnessed on a 1980s conservatory class field trip to a Dong ethnic-minority village in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of south China. The village leader sang the nonsense syllables “Ya Duo Ye” while a group of male and female farmers danced around a bonfire, singing those syllables as the leader improvised. The interplay between a short recurring motive (in this case, “Ya Duo Ye”), a variety of longer musical gestures, and propulsive movement became the foundation of Chen Yi’s inventive reimagining of this material for the concert hall.

Instrumentation: flute, oboe, clarinet and E-flat clarinet, bassoon, horn, woodblock, four tom-toms, snare drum, vibraphone, suspended cymbal, gong, and strings.

— Frank J. Oteri, a composer, music journalist, editor of NewMusicBox (the web magazine from New Music USA), and vice president of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM)