

Photo by CARLO RONCHI



Everything is starting to come together for composer Wu Fei. In April, she performed at the Forbidden City Concert Hall. This month, she's going to Italy to promote her newly released CD, "A Distant Youth." But her seemingly sudden success is the product of years of hard work.

最近，青年作曲家吴非很忙。四月，她在紫禁城里的音乐厅完成了一场精彩的演出，本月，她将去意大利宣传自己的新专辑——A Distant Youth。看似突然的成功，其实源于她在音乐旅程上20多年的不懈奋斗。



# Practice Makes Perfect

完美，来自不懈的练习 EMILY PATTERSON (the United States) 白艾莲 (美国)

When Wu Fei was six years old, her father's friend visited the family. The woman played the *guzheng*, a classical Chinese stringed instrument. To assess the girl's musical talent, she asked Wu to sing and she felt Wu's fingers, wrists and bone structure.

After, the woman declared that Wu had to learn to play the *guzheng*.

Wu's father, also a musician, took the advice seriously. He found an excellent teacher—a professor at the music conservatory—to tutor his daughter. He forced Wu to practice daily. Today, Wu says she remembers little of her childhood beyond the hours spent practicing and the arguments she had with her father. "In Chinese culture," she says, "the parents

play a big role in shaping a path for a child. My mom and dad wanted to give me a bright future, so that I wouldn't have to live (a hard life)." Despite her bad feelings then, she is now grateful to her father for the discipline and persistence he instilled in her. Without it, she doubts she would have a career in music.

Wu practiced diligently throughout elementary and high school, and she was accepted into the composition program at the Central Conservatory of Music, China's top music school. Even though she was thrilled to be attending such a prestigious university, Wu had grown dissatisfied by her third year. She had mastered the technical side of composing, but when she listened to her music, she couldn't hear herself in the notes. Wu thought that getting out of China and seeing the world would help her figure out how to give her compositions an



original voice. She began looking into universities abroad, and she ended up at the University of North Texas' College of Music.

But traveling halfway around the world didn't help Wu find the solution—at first. “On the surface, it was different,” Wu says. “It had a different name and people spoke English. But when I got into the classes, it was pretty much the same.”

Wu's time at North Texas passed quickly, and she found herself nearing graduation. She couldn't decide whether she wanted to continue school, hunt for a job in the US or return to China. In her last semester, she attended a music festival, where she worked with Fredrick Rzewski, an eccentric, but renowned, composer in his late 60s. Wu asked him what she should do after graduation. He insisted that she choose one of two options: Pack up her *guzheng*, move to New York City and try to play in clubs, or enroll in the Mills College graduate program. Until that time, Wu had not heard of Mills, a small, women's liberal arts college in Oakland, California. But Wu listened to Rzewski, applied to Mills College and was accepted—with a scholarship.


Wu still knew little about the school when she arrived. At first, she was baffled by Mill's progressive structure; for example, the school enrolled some students, without formal music backgrounds, to study electronic music. But soon she was interested in learning new styles of music; improvisation intrigued her the most. For months, instead of trying to write new

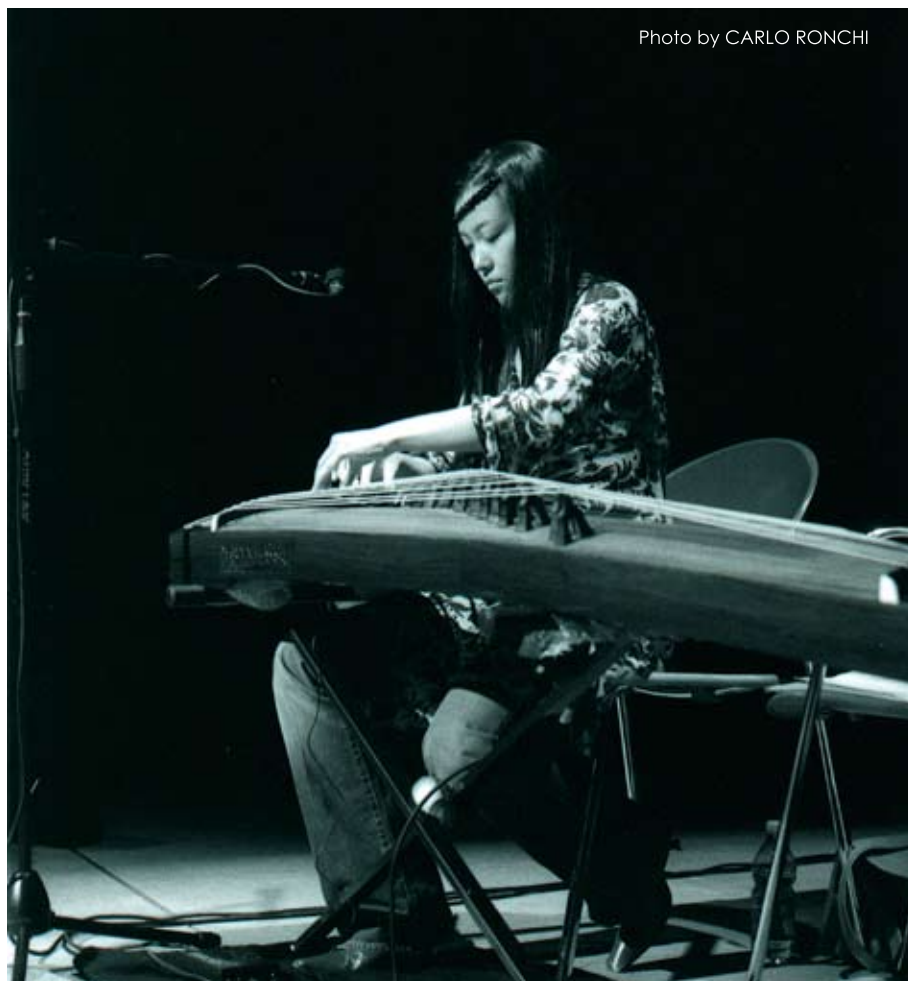
compositions, Wu would just sit alone and play freely on her instrument. “It was like writing in a journal,” she says, “like communication with yourself.” It was then, she says, that she began to shake off the rigid musical training that she had grown up with. “In China, it's all about technique. If you perform improv, people just think you are messing around on your instrument. They don't think you are expressing yourself.”

After graduation, Wu moved to Boulder, Colorado, a city known more for its ski resorts than for its art and music scene. Wu's fiancé, Parker Trevathan, also a musician, had moved to Boulder to start a band with a longtime friend, who was attending a local university.

Feeling stifled in such a small, wealthy city, Wu devoted herself to promoting her music. She contacted old friends and professors and, through them, approached record companies. Although most of the companies that she e-mailed never replied, one Italian producer, Giovanni Amighetti, responded to her.

Within weeks, Amighetti had agreed to work with Wu on her first solo album and, in June 2006, she traveled to Italy to record in his studio. Her CD, “A Distant Youth,” will be released in the US, Europe and Japan this month.

In March, Wu returned to Beijing. The main reason for the trip was her April 14 performance at the Forbidden City Concert Hall. She was selected to write a composition for, and perform with, the famous French percussion group Percussions Claviers de Lyon. The Beijing performance was just one of the big events occurring in her career these days. In addition to the pending release of her CD, she will tour Poland with other Chinese artists. “I must admit that I'm in a really adventurous time. If this was 10 years ago, it would be different. There's a lot of interest in Chinese anything now, and I'm so glad this is happening, because there's so many talented artists here,” she says. 



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