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### Flavouring The Film Score: The Unique Music of the Erhu

An Interview with  
erhu virtuoso Karen  
Han

By Randall D. Larson

Karen Han is an internationally-recognized virtuoso on the erhu (2-stringed Chinese violin) who has performed as a soloist on a number of film scores, working with some of Hollywood's top film composers, including



Rachel Portman (**The Joy Luck Club**), Ryuichi Sakamoto (**The Last Emperor**), John Debney (**The Passion Of The Christ**), John Williams, (**Memoirs Of A Geisha**), and Hans Zimmer (**Pirates Of The Caribbean: At World's End**). In the latter soundtrack, her most recent film music engagement, Karen's music is heard on the cue "Singapore," which begins with a progressive tinge of Asian music, featuring strong bass koto notes and the smooth sonority of Karen's erhu, to represent Elizabeth Swan's (Keira Knightley) interactions with the persuasive Chinese pirate, Captain Sao Feng (Chow Yun-Fat).

Karen has performed in concert with the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic and other prestigious orchestras worldwide. The unique sound of the erhu (pronounced ar-hoo) is provocatively soulful, expressive of feelings and very close to a woman's voice. In addition to performing Western and Asian classical works, Karen has collaborated with jazz band Hiroshima and has been featured in solo concerts of wide ranging musical diversity. She is also very much involved with increasing awareness of Asian musical culture and the combination of East meets

West in musical interaction. "It is my desire and my responsibility to get closer the two great cultural traditions: that of the ancient East and of modern West," Karen has said.

Karen is married to notable sound supervisor/designer Paul N. J. Ottosson (**Spider Man 2/3**, **The Grudge**, **RV**, **The Messengers**, etc.) and lives in Los Angeles. In this interview, Karen describes her background as a musician, her experiences as a performing artist for film music recording sessions, and her interactions with composers like Portman, Debney, Williams, and Zimmer.

**Q: You first began playing the erhu at the age of six. What led you to that particular instrument?**

I was very much into the musical and dancing world when I was very little. According to my mom, I was always dancing/humming around the house. When I was nearly age 6, my father started to teach me to play the erhu, which he knew a little about. His theories were that (1) kids should learn music to be smarter; (2) a professional musician has a longer career life than a professional dancer; and (3) he could teach me without spend too much on tutoring expenses. Hence, even though I really didn't like to practice the instrument, I still followed my father's path and now I am so grateful for my father's wise decision. The erhu and the music world have become a very important part of my life.

**Q: How intensive was your training?**

The music/entertainment world is very intensely competitive everywhere! Other than following my father's high hope in me, I didn't want to be a great musician myself. However, one day, a dear friend of my father came back from Beijing and my father asked me to play a couple of pieces to show my skills. My playing impressed him. He volunteered to take me to Beijing (the Capital city of China) for a better education. With his support, I left home when I was 9, and started semi-professional private training classes with all of the best erhu Masters in Beijing. At age 10, after passing a competition of 1,000 competitors (same age kids from all over the China), I was one of only two erhu students accepted into the best music high school in Beijing that year. That started my early independent professional music training life.

The high school professional training in China was very intensive and very interesting. Along with all the students, I stayed in a dormitory with a total of 8 girls (double beds) in one room. Every day, the school shut down all the electricity at 10pm, and at 6:30am every morning there was a big speaker to wake us up. The teacher came to each room to make sure we are up and ready for the physical exercises. We didn't get the chance to shower everyday since we had no showers in the dormitory

building but we need to walk to another building, and it didn't operate every day. After breakfast, we started to go to classes – classes related to arts, history, and music. Hence, I never learned or studied mathematics and related subjects.

The major class on erhu is similar to a private class, but the competitive feelings really pushes everyone to practice harder on their own. The erhu Master gave two hour-long classes for each student every week. After the class, I normally practiced the instrument for 6-8 hours each day. Many times, I even put a candle (because of no electricity at night) in the practice room.

B>Q: How did you begin to perform professionally and when did you start playing on motion picture soundtracks? After I graduated from the High school, I was automatically chosen to enter the best music college in China – the Central Conservatory of Music, where my school-mates were musicians such as Oscar Winner composer Tan Dun, Zhou, Long, Chen, Yi... all living in the U.S. now). At that time (late 1980s), China started opening its doors and people were starting to find jobs outside of the office. Many recording/film companies were looking for the cheaper/best performers to record the albums and soundtracks... from then, I don't know how many films/albums I've worked on but there was a lot! The 1987 Oscar winning movie **The Last Emperor** was recorded during that time in my school's recording studio.

**Q: How difficult is the erhu is to play, as contrasted with a Western violin or viola?**

Our tuning is a little bit different. We normally go a little more flat than in Western music. We've been trained, no matter if you're professional or classical, in a different pitch, so now when we have to follow all the rules of Western music, it's a little difficult. Also, in Asian music, we have a lot of free-bars, where the performer will improvise with their own feelings; there's a lot of that in Chinese Opera. On the rhythm side, we're not as sophisticated with the Western rhythms, so playing something like one beat for 7 notes is very hard for us. When you meet those challenges, it's really something.

**Q: With the range of the material you've done, from Asian music to modern jazz and orchestral film music, you need to be fairly adept to move from one style to the other.**

Definitely. I think I'm already much further along than the traditional erhu player. I don't have a traditional hand position any more, for example. The Western music requires me to play whatever the notes are, and my hand needs to be there to play it. That's harder for those of us trained in Chinese playing, but I've gotten used to it.

**Q: How does performing on a movie soundtrack differ from performing on a record album or playing on the concert stage?**

I think actually playing for soundtrack is easier than playing on stage or playing with a concert orchestra. In movie music, you don't have 23-minute cues like we do in concert music! You get a couple of seconds or a few minutes to play. I'm told, "This is a 30 second cue, and here's what I want you to do." Also, I've realized that I love film music, especially like John Williams' music, it really touches our heart. When I did John Williams' **Memoirs Of A Geisha**, I noted that there's a melody that for the whole film goes through all kinds of feelings. We recorded it so many different ways, and on some of them we played a little faster, because the character was happier at that time, and on some of them the scene required us to play slower, and all the bars were a little bit extended, but all the notes are all the same.

**Q: The music itself is the same but how you play it, it can have a totally different emotion.**

Yeah. That's the way.

**Q: How did your reputation as an erhu virtuoso for motion picture scores develop? How do you get requests to perform on movie score recording sessions?**

I think I'm very lucky. In the film music and musicians' world, we don't really go for resumes. If you have a good resume, that's good, but if you play better on other scores and you have albums or anything else, then people list you, and then they will just fall in love with you. And the next time they will use your music.

**Q: So it's more by reputation than by resume?**

Yeah. And I'm pretty lucky, because every time when I played, and I worked with different composers, and the engineers and arrangers, and they really like my instrument, they loved what I played, and then they tell other people. So when the composers are looking for this instrument, the first thing they're told it "just go to Karen, you can't go wrong!" So that's why I say I'm very lucky!

**Q: Do you usually record along with the orchestra or are you recorded separately and your performance is mixed in with the orchestra and other tracks?**

Most of the time, they record the orchestra first and then I will play as a soloist.

**Q: What are your recollections of performing on the Passion Of The Christ soundtrack for John Debney?**

First of all, he is very creative, and he used many different international instruments on that score. It has a very Eastern kind of feeling, so it was very easy for me to go into that mood, and to follow what he wanted to say.

**Q: The sound of the erhu is already appropriate to the idiom he's composing for on that score.**

I heard that John Debney was very happy as well as Mel Gibson with that. This is my second time played on a Mel Gibson film – the first one was **We Were Soldiers**. He really liked that instrument, I guess.

**Q: How tough is it to learn your parts when you're prepping for a session? Say you get a call and the recording session is on this date – do you get material ahead of time, or do you just show up for the session and then sight-read the music? How does that work for you?**

I normally prefer to have the music before the recording session, because it's easier for me to read and to get to know the music. Most of the time I require having the music before hand. But many composers don't have the music ready before your session, so then I will need to go there and sight-read. But I prefer to have the music with me and be able to play it a couple of times. That way it just becomes yours. I like to be prepared, but unfortunately many times you don't get a chance to do that.

**Q: What are your memories of performing on John Williams score for *Memoirs Of A Geisha*? What were those sessions like?**

That was just a beautiful, fantastic memory for me. First of all, he invited me to play with Yo-Yo Ma and everybody at Royce Hall [at UCLA; where most of the score was recorded], but I had another engagement on that day; and secondly I told him that I felt it would be better to record the erhu separately from the orchestra – because when they record the orchestra, you don't really get the special sound from the erhu in the same way. So he rearranged to record the erhu at the studio at Sony Pictures. It was only him and I, along with a whole bunch of recording engineers and editors and mixers. That was really memorable for me; he was playing the other parts on the piano and showing me the movie, and I played my part. It was so touching, and he really liked it.

**Q: What kind of interaction did John Williams have with you during those sessions?**

He was mostly into how much it fit to the film. We did it very fast. They had booked the studio for two days, but we finished it after only one session. He was really happy with what I did, and he was asking me about my education with the erhu and about my parents, he was very happy and he wrote me a very nice note. That was a beautiful memory.

**Q: In *The Pursuit Of Happyness*, in addition to adding your flavor to the orchestral palette, you also performed the music heard from the street musician**

**who plays the erhu in the movie?**

Yes, there is an erhu player in the movie – he’s actually a player in the street that Will Smith walks along when he moves into Chinatown in San Francisco. When they filmed the scene and recorded the player in the street, they asked him to play something traditional that wouldn’t have any copyright problems. The gentlemen played a Chinese song but then they found out that the part he played still was copyrighted! So they asked me to watch what he played and replace it with new music. I composed a piece, about two minutes long that played in this scene, so I became a part of the composition for this movie.

**Q: You recently played on the score for Pirates Of Caribbean: At World’s End. What was that experience like?**

I knew of Hans and his music, but I never worked for him. I do think that his music is very beautiful, and often he includes Asian flavors in his scores. Hans had heard of me from Klaus Badelt, after I performed on the **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles soundtrack**. Hans had only written a few notes for erhu, no more than like eight notes for a scene with the Chow Yun-Fat character. So I came into his studio and recorded the eight notes, it took about half an hour. I was putting my instrument back into my car, when he called me back in and decided to have me play more music. I had almost left, but he had listened to the recording and told his assistant, “Ask Karen back, we have some more things for her to play!” So I came back in and played some other parts that he composed for me. Then I came back on another day for another recording session, because he wrote more. He heard the music and he knew what I can play, and he wrote more music for me. That was very nice!

**Q: How was he using your erhu in the film score?**

He was representing the part of Chow Yun-Fat’s character, the Asian gentleman in Singapore, who tries to seduce Keira Knightley’s character. My music is heard a lot in his scenes.

**Q: So it gave you the opportunity to rise to a higher level rather than just being a flavor in the orchestra; your performance is being associated with a specific character in the score.**

Yes. That happened with **Anna And The King** also. I represented the character played by Bai Ling, the girl who is becoming the monk. Any time she is shown, the erhu music is played.

**Q: Do you often go to see the films after you’ve recorded them, so see how your performance is used in the final mix?**

I don’t always see the screening or the premiere. Some times I do, but many times I don’t. So I don’t know how

every piece comes out.

**Q: For the ones you have seen, have you ever been especially pleased as how the erhu was represented in the overall score?**

Yes, my part in **The Joy Luck Club** was very special. Rachel Portman, the composer, had recorded an erhu player before me, and she wasn't really happy with the performer. She called the music contractor, Sandy DeCrescent, and asked her 'can you find me somebody else in L.A. who can play better erhu?' So they found me and brought me in to record the music in place of the original performance. It was two weeks before the release, and she was so happy, and she actually recorded a lot more erhu music than was originally intended. There were a lot of erhu parts in **The Joy Luck Club** score. Rachel invited me to the premiere because she was so happy with what I did. That movie was my lucky key to recording in Hollywood. From there, anybody who wanted erhu recording always would come to me. That's was very lucky for me!

**Q: You also performed on the re-score by James Venable for Iron Monkey, which was originally a Hong Kong film that has its own score. They wrote a new score for its American release.**

Yes, I remember that. That was very pleasant recording. In the beginning, he called me and said they were going to rescore everything with a full orchestra along with my erhu, and he was very happy to have me to play on that. But it ended up that they didn't have enough budget for an orchestra, so in the whole score my erhu was the only live instrument – everything else was synthesizers and a fake orchestra! Some people heard that music and they really like it.

**Q: You mentioned recording for Klaus Badelt on the new Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie. How much did you perform on that score?**

I just played a little bit on that movie; just a few parts that were integrated into the rest of the score. That was very nice, and the composer was a very well trained composer from Germany, and he was an assistant to Hans Zimmer, so when I recorded **Pirates Of The Caribbean** with Hans Zimmer, Hans had said "yeah, I know you recorded that Teenage Ninja Turtle movie!"

**Q: Are there any other scores or composers that stand out most in your mind?**

I think each composer has their own style. Some are just very free and others are more specific in what they want. I've recorded with so many composers. They're fabulous, they're great. I recently recorded, for the Hong Kong museum, a cartoon film [called **Monkey Tails**] with Emmy Award winning composer Laura Karpman. Her music is

very new classical sounding, and she wrote a wonderful erhu part. I think it's fantastic to see the erhu used this way. But there's a lot of composers also who, while they like this instrument, they don't actually write notes for it – they would just say, "play something that will work with what we have..."

**Q: They just want you to improvise.**

Yeah.

**Q: How have you found the integration of the erhu with the Western orchestra in scores like *We Were Soldiers and Jade*, versus more obviously ethnic scores as *Joy Luck Club* and *Memoirs Of A Geisha*? Obviously the erhu brings more to scores like these than an ethnic place-setting.**

To me it's very easy to blend in. My goal is to have erhu be recognized as a world instrument. Because it has a very unique sound that listeners respond to, composers have used my instrument for those films that have nothing to do with Asia, they just feel that this music is much deeper and will touch other people's hearts. Also, I tend to play much differently than other erhu players, maybe because I've been living here so long, so I've really Westernized it. I play it a certain way. I want people to understand that this instrument is not necessarily only a Chinese instrument.

**Q: You also performed a vocal on *The Amazing Panda Adventure*. Have you performed any other vocal material?**

I did a couple songs for ***Kung Fu: The Legend Continues***. The funny thing is, when I sing, people think it's like an instrument. My voice is totally different when I sing, and it follows my erhu mood. It's very unique. But I don't sing that much any more. So I sung a couple title songs for ***Panda*** and ***Kung-Fu***. We almost got an album deal but we didn't make it!

**Q: Do you write songs?**

I'm not a songwriter, but I do compose some of my erhu music. I feel like it's my responsibility to bring erhu music to a different level. Since I've worked with so many different composers who don't understand much about erhu, I've wanted to collaborate where I wrote the erhu part, and the other people can write the other orchestra parts. That's my goal, to have better pieces. We don't have many good erhu pieces [in the repertoire].

**Q: What would you like to say to film composers as to how they can best utilize the erhu and its unique sound in their film scores?**

I feel like very fortunate that Hollywood composers enjoy the erhu music and have enjoyed what I've played. The erhu is able to convey the deeper feelings and more expressions, so that's why a lot of composers use it



instead of using violin, also because of the purity of the sound. So I just hope that more composers will write pieces and use the erhu not just for Asian flavors or Chinese music, but also treat it as normal music, as another part of the orchestra. I would really encourage the composers to try it, because it's so different and so unique, and the sounds that come out are very attractive. It has a unique capability to touch people's hearts when they don't expect it.

*For more information about Karen Han and about the erhu, please visit: [www.karenhan.com](http://www.karenhan.com)*

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