



CHEN GANG & HE ZHANHAO

“Butterfly Lovers” Violin Concerto

Chen Gang (Chinese: 陈钢; born 1935) is a Chinese composer best known for his work *Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto*. He is the son of songwriter Chen Gexin. Chen Gang started to learn piano and composition from his father and music teachers from a young age.

From 1955 to 1959, Chen Gang was a student at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, studying composition. In 1959, Chen Gang, together with another student, He Zhanhao, composed the violin concerto *Butterfly Lovers*.

The violin concerto won five Golden Record prizes as well as a Platinum Record prize. The Concerto has also achieved enormous international success. Chen is a professor at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

In his composition career, he composed and recomposed many classics in China, including *Butterfly Lovers*, *Miaolin's Morning*, and *The Golden Steel Smelting Furnace*. He also composed one of the most difficult violin solo pieces: *Sun Shines in Tashkurgan*.

The Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto (simplified Chinese: 梁祝小提琴协奏曲; traditional Chinese: 梁祝小提琴協奏曲), along with the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*, is one of the most famous Chinese works of orchestral music. It is an adaptation of an ancient legend, the *Butterfly Lovers*. Written for a Western-style orchestra, it features a solo violin played using some Chinese techniques.

The *Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto* is written in traditional 5-note technique (pentatonic scale), it uses many Chinese melodies, chord structures and patterns. This gives the piece a distinctive "Chinese" sound, though it uses tonal harmonies.

The *Butterfly Lovers' Violin Concerto* was written in 1959 by two Chinese composers, He Zhanhao (何占豪, born 1933) and Chen Gang (陈钢, born 1935), while they were students at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. The music did not attain popularity before the late 1970s, when China loosened its restrictions after the Cultural Revolution. Once released from censorship, it became an embodiment of China in transition. The work is a common feature in figure skating and in concert halls worldwide. This concerto is now often performed with Chinese instruments playing the violin part, the most common being Erhu, Pipa and Liuqin. In such cases the soloist is often accompanied by an orchestra consisting of Chinese instruments.

He Zhanhao is more widely credited for the composition of the concerto. However, his main contribution was the famous opening theme while most of the development was in fact written by Chen Gang. This was revealed in an interview of by China Central Television with several artists contributed in the creation and popularity of this piece of work in China and worldwide.

The 1959 premiere of the *Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto* featured 18-year-old violinist Yu Lina and took place in Shanghai as part of the celebration of the 10th anniversary year of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It was first recorded in 1959 with soloist Shen Rong on violin and the Symphony Orchestra of Shanghai Music Conservatory conducted by Fan Cheng-wu.

The concerto is in one movement, but is broken into seven distinct sections. Each tells a different part of the story of the *Butterfly Lovers*. Some of the melodies come from the Chinese Opera of the same name or from traditional Chinese folk songs. The solo violin of the concerto is symbolic of Zhu Yingtai, the story's protagonist, and the cello part is symbolic of Liang Shanbo, her lover.