



## Xian XINGHAI

### *Piano concerto "The Yellow River"*

**Xian Xinghai** or **Sinn Sing Hoi** was a Chinese composer. He was among the first composers in his country to draw on western classical music and has influenced many later Chinese musicians. Xian composed in all the major musical forms (two symphonies, a violin concerto, four large scale choral works, nearly 300 songs and an opera), and is best known for the *Yellow River Cantata* upon which the *Yellow River Concerto* for piano and orchestra is based. Xian returned to China in 1935 to the Japanese occupied part of the country (known then as Manchuria). Using his music as a weapon to protest the occupation, he took part in patriotic activities. During the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), he wrote vocal works that encouraged the people to fight the Japanese invaders, including *Saving the Nation*, *Non-Resistance the Only Fear*, *Song of Guerrillas*, *The Roads Are Opened by Us*, *The Vast Siberia*, *Children of the Motherland*, *Go to the Homefront of the Enemy*, and *On the Taihang Mountains*, among others. He worked for film studios before going to the Communist headquarters in Yan'an, where he became dean of the Music Department at Lu Xun Institute of Arts in 1938. It is at this time that he composed the *Yellow River Cantata* and the *Production Cantata*. In 1940, Xian used the assumed name Huang Xun. In 1940 Xian went to the Soviet Union to compose the score of the documentary film *Yan'an and the Eighth Route Army*. Before departure Mao Zedong invited him to dinner. In 1941 the German invasion of the Soviet Union disrupted his work and he attempted to return to China by way of Xinjiang but the local anti-communist warlord, Sheng Shicai, blocked the way and he got stranded in Almaty, Kazakhstan. It was here that he composed the symphonies *Liberation of the Nation* and *Sacred War*, the orchestral suite *Red All Over the River* and the *Chinese Rhapsody* for orchestra. During Xian's career, he composed over 300 works and published 35 papers, including *Nie Er-the Creator of New Chinese Music*.

The ***Yellow River Piano Concerto*** is a piano concerto arranged by a collaboration between Chinese composers, including Yin Chengzong and Chu Wanghua, and based on the *Yellow River Cantata* by composer Xian Xinghai. It was originally directed by Jiang Qing, wife of Chairman Mao, and since its highly acclaimed premiere in 1970 during the Cultural Revolution the Concerto has become popular in China and around the globe. It is noted for its revolutionary theme that integrates a classic post-romantic music structure with passion, beauty and power, along with highly skilled solo phases. The piano concerto is meant to represent the very fighting spirit of Chinese people and the determination of a new-born nation, in the context of a long, vividly struggling history of the Yellow River. Xian Xinghai wrote the *Yellow River Cantata* at Yan'an in 1939, allegedly in a cave in just six days, during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). It is an eight-movement piece in which he used traditional folk-melodies and evoked the image of the Yellow River as a symbol of Chinese defiance against the Japanese invaders. During his stay in Russia, he edited and re-orchestrated the work, which was later modified by Li Huanzhi, Qu Wei, and Yan Liangkun. This edition aimed at furthering the energy and momentum of the music, and in this light the rearrangement of the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* thirty years later is merely a continuation of that same practice. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Xian Xinghai together with Nie Er (who wrote the Chinese national anthem, the "March of the Volunteers") were regarded by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai as "the people's musicians" and were the most prestigious composers of the PRC. Yet, even the *Yellow River Cantata* was banned from performance during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976); the Central Philharmonic Orchestra was forbidden to perform any Western orchestral pieces and its professional musicians were left with nothing to do. Under such circumstances, the pianist Yin Chengzong loaded his piano onto a truck and drove it to Tiananmen Square to accompany revolutionary songs that were sung at the time. He caught the eye of Jiang Qing (better known in the West as Madame Mao), which resulted in the work *The Legend of the Red Lantern* to be accompanied by the piano. However, Madame Mao thought that the work could be improved, thence the standard performing edition (1970) was created, a piece more politically loaded and musically more conventional. With the official end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* was banished from the Chinese concert stage, retaining a certain popularity outside China. Nevertheless, by the late 1980s it was filtering back into the Chinese musical mainstream, usually in the form of new performing editions, new recordings, and live performances by Chinese and Western artists. Apart from changes in the orchestration, the main differences between the various editions have been what the editors have done with the anthems integrated in the finale.