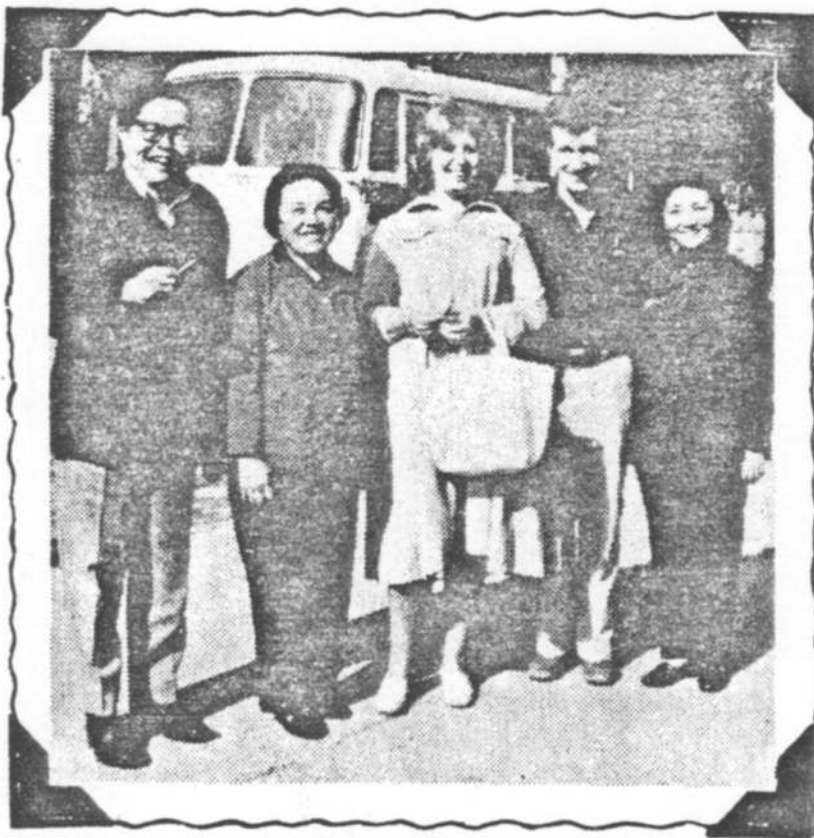


China Gets a Lesson From Beverly Sills



Beverly Sills and Schuyler Chapin with Chinese hosts—"Helping a new generation of Chinese singers in the art of western singing and opera"

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By SCHUYLER CHAPIN

At 9:27 A.M. on Monday, May 18, 1981 the wooden gates of the Central Conservatory of Music in Peking, China, swung open slowly to admit three gray 1950's Studebaker-type sedans. They moved cautiously along a very narrow road leading to the main administration building and on arrival quickly discharged their passengers. One of these, a tall amply-built exuberant redhead, instantly recognizable to half the people of the world, bounded up the front steps to

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the various officials standing there to meet her.

As hands were joined in greetings and friendship, spontaneous applause burst forth from students strolling about the courtyard. Heads appeared out of classroom windows, smiles spread as if contagious, conversation flew; there was an air of excitement for this was the day that had been promised, the day that Beverly Sills arrived, ready to give of heart and talents to help a new generation of Chinese singers whose interest and training might lead to a revival of western singing and western opera in the Peoples Republic.

Introductions were made all around, as our party consisted of Miss Sills's husband, Peter Greenough; their daughter, Muffie; my wife, Betty, and myself. Our visit had been arranged

by Columbia University's United States-China Arts Exchange Program under the direction of vice-dean Chou Wen-chung. With the touching reticence combined with eagerness that marks so many present day-meetings with the Chinese, we were all made to feel welcome and ushered into a reception room where, over the inevitable mugs of tea, the director of the conservatory, Shao Feng, himself a former singer and manager of the old Peking Western Opera Company, spoke of the difficult times of the past.

Stressing the problems of the cultural revolution, he made it very clear that they intended making up for the lost years by bringing their teaching and training up to new standards and he hoped that Miss Sills would be frank and professional in advising them. We were then led to a central classroom wall-to-wall with present members of the vocal and operatic faculty. The room itself was dingy and dominated by two old pianos, both, it turned out, barely in tune. Windows were opened to the outside and through them the cacophonous sounds of the conservatory could be heard in all fullness. Pressed outside, with their faces barely visible inside, were banks of students intent upon watching our proceedings.

Ground rules were set: Miss Sills would hear any student presented to her and pick five or six for a master class. She stressed that those she planned to pick would not necessarily be either the best or the worst but those with problems and strengths common to the art of professional singing. Before the morning was finished we heard more than a dozen students. With the appearance of the fifth student, a tiny girl looking all of 10 years old, who sang "Una voce poco fa" from Rossini's "The Barber of Seville," Miss Sills rose from her seat and went over to one of the pianos. With her wide and matchless smile she suggested that the girl might begin the aria again and as she did Miss Sills began singing along with her. By eye contact and body language she conveyed to the girl a different set of musical values, bringing the aria up to tempo and stressing the text.

When they'd both gone about halfway through the piece, Miss Sills stopped and asked whether or not the student understood the character she was playing. It was obvious that the aria had been learned by rote and that neither the girl's teacher nor the girl herself had the remotest idea about what they were singing. Patiently and with great good humor Miss Sills outlined the plot of the opera and indicated the character of the heroine. During all this her words were being

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translated by our musical interpreter Chen-fang Chang, known for some strange reason as "Kitty." Kitty was a musician and turned out to have had a professional career as a singer. "Kitty" was a nickname she had evidently acquired during those professional days. Her normal English was spasmodic and charmingly unreliable, but when it came to music she had no trouble at all. Because of this the whole room, and even the faces lined up outside in the courtyard, had little problem understanding what was being said. Miss Sills suggested that the student think about her new-found knowledge and come back to sing for us the next day.

At one point in mid-morning, when we'd heard about 10 students and were getting just a little ear-worn, a skinny young man came out and announced that he was going to sing Rodolfo's aria "Che gelida manina" from "La Bohème." We nodded politely and, giving a signal to his accompanist, he started. Before we knew what happened, the room was filled to overflowing with one of the cleanest and freshest lyric-beric tenor voices that any of us had heard in a very long time. When he came to the high C at the end of the aria he just opened his mouth and the sound flowed out. Miss Sills looked over at me and whispered: "He doesn't know it's supposed to be hard!" Following the "Bohème" aria, he launched into "Donna non vidi mai" from "Manon Lescaut" with equally stirring results. After both arias Miss Sills asked him if he knew any role all the way through. He smiled shyly and said "No."

And as if that wasn't unusual enough, he was followed by another young man who announced that he was going to sing "Ch'ella mi creda libero" from Act III of the "Girl of the Golden West." This one, too, opened his mouth and out poured another onrush of rich tenor sound. He rounded out his presentation with "Recondita armonia" from Act I of "Tosca." Miss Sills leaned over to me and murmured that perhaps Placido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti had better look to their laurels.

With the completion of the morning auditions Miss Sills picked six singers for the first master class, scheduled for the next afternoon, and agreed to hear another 13 students after a pause

a second master class. At lunch we discovered that the opera department was in desperate need of scores and records and video cassettes of actual stage performances. They had been working, for the most part, with scores that had been hand-copied from old Russian printings and with the few memories of some of the older members of the faculty as to what operatic life was like in the dim and increasingly distant past. It was plain to see that the conservatory was very glad indeed to have Beverly Sills in their midst.

The next day the six students picked for the first master class assembled backstage at the conservatory theater and waited, somewhat nervously, for the program to get under way. On-stage chairs had been set for the directors of the conservatory, the heads of the opera and vocal departments, our translator Kitty and Miss Sills and myself. A large, shiny and fairly new

'The students, faculty and visitors lapped it up.'

Petroff concert grand, mildly out of tune, was in place and I wondered — why a new Russian piano? I didn't have time for much speculation as the doors to the auditorium opened and waves of people poured into the seats. They were laughing and talking and carrying on with the high spirits of an audience expecting a good time. In brief seconds the theater was packed and Yi-shuan Yu, the 70-year-old vice-director of the conservatory, was introducing Miss Sills to thunderous and enthusiastic applause. This in itself was most unusual for China, where audiences generally tend to be circumspect and self-contained.

One by one the students came out to perform. After each presentation Miss Sills went to the piano and, with the help of Kitty and the accompanist, would sing through the particular aria

with the student, explaining the part and the particular operas as she went along. It didn't make any difference if the student was male or female; Miss Sills plunged ahead with her knowledge and experience and switched with ease from soprano to mezzo-soprano to tenor to baritone. There happened not to be any basses this particular afternoon, but had there been she would have pressed along undaunted.

There was only one moment of partial panic; all the singers we heard shared a common problem of breath control, and in demonstrating the need for full lungs and straight carriage, she happened to place her hand under the ribcage of one of the male singers. There was a murmur from the audience; the Chinese are very conservative about teaching each other, particularly the opposite sex, and for a moment I thought we might be heading for a little trouble. Quickly Miss Sills explained, through Kitty, that she was not making love but explaining where a singer's breath control had to originate. When the translation was completed there was a round of applause, polite, but perhaps with just a touch suspicious. In any event, it soon became obvious that what she was doing, with tremendous dignity and respect for the individual student, was bringing the art of operatic singing back to China and into the 1980's. The students, faculty and visitors in the auditorium lapped it up.

As we reconvened the next morning the crowds outside the audition classroom had swelled to a small, friendly mob. Another 13 students sang for us and again six were picked for the second master class. By the time we were ready to proceed, the theater, which had been quite full the day before, was now so packed with humanity that we began to worry about fire and accidents. As we walked into the building through the auditorium on the way to the stage the applause, smiles and greetings that wafted our way were joyful and very touching.

With one day's master class under our belts we began the second by keeping careful note of each student's name. First up was soprano Zhang Feng-yi who started with "Vissi d'arte" from "Tosca." Miss Sills sang along with her, explaining the drama

of the aria and shaping the student's interpretation. As with all singers Miss Zhang had no idea at all what "Tosca" was all about. Miss Sills explained the opera, the character of Tosca and the particular drama of the aria itself. Combining explanation with demonstration, Miss Sills soon had the girl singing with considerable Italian passion and a free-flowing line.

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Miss Zhang was followed by baritone Liu Ke-qing singing an aria from Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro." His sound was initially absolutely wrong for Mozart; he had no sense of the difference between the Classics and the Romantics. Miss Sills explained that Mozart was more rigid, more mathematical, in his demands upon singers whereas Puccini left a lot of room for emotion. She explained the requirements for Mozart singers: discipline and precision. She stressed that with these elements the emotional qualities inherent in the music would take care of themselves.

Mr. Liu then sang the Serenade from "Don Giovanni" and even while having listened carefully to Miss Sills's comments on Mozart failed to grasp the difference between the central character of Figaro and the lover-lecher Don Giovanni. She explained the difference by getting Mr. Liu to clap his hands in a tap-tap rhythm to represent Figaro and a stroking motion to depict Don Giovanni. There was considerable applause from the audience as the difference between the two characters became clear and Mr. Liu asked if he might repeat the Serenade. In doing it a second time he became the Don, with gestures and smiles and

seduction in his voice. Once again the eagerness and talent of the students was vividly spotlighted; Miss Sills and I exchanged glances and began to realize that despite all the difficulties of getting this trip organized it was turning out to be well worth the effort.

Our sensational tenor of the day before, whose name turned out to be Cheng Zhi, was next up and the qualities that had impressed us yesterday were now to be discovered by the theater audience. When he finished his "La Bohème" aria, pandemonium broke loose. Cheng himself, flushed with a combination of pleasure and embarrassment and because the applause continued for some little time, managed to take a few awkward bows. Miss Sills's comments were succinct: learn repertory.

What we heard and saw emerged from raw talent. He came from a country farm community and had been selected by his commune for training. He was assigned to the Philharmonic and because of this the conservatory refused to help him saying, in effect, that he could not both train and perform. The way this situation was described to us made it very plain that neither organization had any use for the other, and that this poor lad was caught in the middle. But "poor lad" may be a little naïve in describing Wang Chien, who made it very clear to us that he wanted to study in America. He stuck to our collective coattails with the persistence of glue, showing up for every picture-taking session and turning up backstage at the conservatory when Miss Sills and I had completed a joint lecture about American musical life. "I wonder if there is a Chinese word for chutzpah," Miss Sills asked after Mr. Chien had traced us down in some out-of-way moment in our schedule, adding that "already he's a tenor!"

The conservatory students themselves, we were surprised to find, were a lot less interesting than their northern colleagues. After the first students sang and six had been chosen for a master class, it was obvious that the quality was not at all what we expected from the most sophisticated city in China. At the master class itself Miss Sills was diplomatic, spoke about singing problems in general, and when

three absolute beginners unexpectedly appeared on the stage she simply stated that they all had talent but were not yet ready for professional comment.

All told we heard something over 50 students between Peking and Shanghai and there was little doubt in our minds that the potential for a rich Western operatic life is very much on the Chinese horizon. How determined the Ministry of Culture is to have such a life remains a mystery. Certainly opera will not be a major factor if politics enters the artistic process, and we had the feeling in both cities that the bureaucrats were only too ready to make all the decisions. But perhaps the overall problems of the country will engage their attention and leave

'Miss Sills had the girl singing with Italian passion.'

the musicians and the singers to get on with their professional tasks in a proper and creative manner.

Of course the debates are endless about what the future holds for China. Some think Den Xiaoping and his colleagues, in the rush to repair the damages of the cultural revolution, have unleashed forces within the country that they will not be able to control. These forces, foreign technology and foreign culture, both inseparable, might form a domination every bit as powerful as the old-line imperialism of the "foreign dogs." And then there is the possibility that with renewed freedom old lusts and ideological scabs, barely beneath the surface of the country, may again bring on serious internal conflict.

But for us in the arts, and especially for an outgoing, strong, funny, passionate and proud American named Beverly Sills, the contact with Chinese counterparts showed simply that art truly does reach out over ideology, and touch the human soul. ■