

*During the spring of 2010 composer Chester Biscardi traveled to Shanghai and Beijing, where he was a featured composer at the weeklong Beijing Modern Music Festival ([view schedule](#)). In both cities, he presented lectures, taught workshops and master classes, and oversaw concerts of his work. But that was the easy part. He also ate cow stomach, inhaled vast quantities of smog, and experienced firsthand the noise, pomp, and bureaucracy of modern Chinese culture. Biscardi recorded his impressions in an honest and detailed journal, excerpted here.*

## **Friday, May 14, 2010**

**4:50 p.m.**

### **Shanghai, China**

Arrived at Pudong International Airport at 1:30 p.m. and was met by two unbelievably nice and generous and fun graduate students: Su Xiao, a composition student of Jia Daqun, and Gaoyan “Nightingale” Xiazhi, a musicologist specializing in Romantic and 20th-century Western music. Language/communication is “interesting” and good-natured, and we muddled through somehow. They brought me via an hour-long taxi ride through endless rows of modern highrises (of course, there are 17 million people here!) and intense and dense smog and rain past the Expo, which was hardly visible, and the Huangpu River, to the Donghu Hotel, No. 70 Donghu Road.

**8:20 p.m.**

First impressions. Went for a walk around the neighborhood, down Central Huaihai Road to tree-lined Hengshan Road. An attempt at Paris, but it doesn’t quite make it. Dodging bikes and angry cars. Incense, the perfume of flowers, and exhaust all mingle together in a kind of stewed wetness. Dinner at The Dakota, a bar & bistro, across the street from the hotel. What a mix of things. English flying around everywhere. People seem to stand at attention in the few public places I witnessed today: guards at the airport, police at the top of the stairs of a subway station, the waiters in the restaurant.

## **Saturday, May 15**

**8:45 a.m.**

Down to breakfast in the main, oldest villa guarded by lions in front of which is a fountain of muses. A huge spread, most of which turned my stomach! Boiled eggs in tea, various rice and noodle dishes with meats, and unidentifiable soups, etc. At least not this morning on a jetlagged stomach.

**5 p.m.**

I take back what I said about Paris. After resting, lunch (Western!), and working on my lecture for tomorrow, I took a very long walk to really see my extended neighborhood of the French Concession. This is just a small, small sector of Shanghai but it seems to go on forever and is full of riches—art galleries, gated mansions, and heritage sites. But you have to pass new

construction of enormous—I mean enormous!—structures on sites where workers work 24 hours a day every day. Every chic store lines Huaihai and shoppers are everywhere. Nothing changes the fact that the air is heavy and full of dirt. It is hard to breathe. Everyone is coughing. Some wear masks. Some smoke cigarettes. Invigorating, amazing, enervating.

**Monday, May 17**

**12:45 p.m.**



A quick tour of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music with Xiao, a mix of old and then ultra-new buildings. There were almost life-size posters of my headshot all around campus! Unnerving and wild. Then met Linda, my translator, and a lot of other students. Linda's English is good, but it's going to be an interesting ride this afternoon from 2-4 p.m. when we try to get across what I'm trying to say. I'm already cutting huge areas of my lecture in my mind while I'm taking a brief rest. From lunch.

Finally met Jia Daqun, my host, the composer and Dean of the Graduate Study Programs (among a million other official government titles), at elementfresh, a neighborhood hangout. A dish with blood sausage and cow stomach, which he insisted I try: "You know that as a composer you need to be adventurous." Oh, Lord. I got the cow stomach down but not by much.

Maybe we're spoiled in the West re: personal space and need for solitude. Xiao walks me to the bathroom and waits at the door. He comes all the way up to my room when he brings me back to

the hotel. The first experience weird, the second nice in a way. I guess that's the way it is here.

### 9:10 p.m.

There were about 30 people at the lecture ("In Time's Unfolding: Influence and Resonance"). Linda introduced me—they applauded—and translated for me. After a brief introduction about myself and my interest in music from the East, I analyzed and played *Tenzone*, *Mestiere*, *In Time's Unfolding*, *Tartini* (which Beibei requested), *Piano Quintet*, and *Trasumanar* (which Xiao requested), and then sang "You've Been On My Mind" in my inimitable voice, coarser now for the Shanghai air.

In the midst of which I asked them to talk about themselves. At first they were shy and blushed, but then they couldn't stop asking questions! They like minimalism, tonal music, and pop. They asked questions about orchestration, about the "vertical" aspect of music, do I actually feel colors and how do I translate them into music?

Afterward they stayed around asking more questions and made it clear that they loved the music: "The *Piano Quintet* moved me so much. When you had just the strings I felt such sadness, such loss." This from Beibei, a violinist to whom I gave a copy of *Tartini*, and he went out and copied the quintet.

The lecture went on for 2-1/2 hours. At the end, one of the students who had been looking at me intensely said: "The white moons of your fingernails mean that you are very healthy." Is it so?

The master class was unlike any I've ever done. They had a video camera on non-stop and people were walking around photographing me from every angle. By 6 p.m. the jet-lag tiredness was almost unbearable, but there I was in front of another 30 faces waiting for something. And I think I gave them whatever it was that they were looking for, because there were smiles all around, laughs, another zillion questions.

I found the five students who presented me with their work to be diverse, very talented, and very accomplished. Although they say they like minimalism, tonal music, and pop, they presented scores that included trying to fit Chinese pentatonic scales with 12-tone Western chromaticism in a Webernesque-Bartokian mix.

I found myself encouraging them to break rules, using their imaginations in new ways to accomplish what conventional music does. They had so many questions about how to really evolve a piece, its form, should musical transitions coincide with visual ones? To which I replied by talking about Toru Takemitsu's scoring for *Ran*, for instance, as well as letting musical experiences overlap changes of scenes, etc. Finally, Xiao played me his award-winning *Brand II* that combines Western and Eastern instruments that was full of exciting, dance-like rhythms and almost Mideastern textures.



## Tuesday, May 18

**4:30 p.m.**

I can't imagine asking any of my students to go pick up a guest at the airport and then take care of them every step of the way for the duration of their visit! Xiao and Nightingale were at my hotel at 9 a.m. to take me via subway to Expo 2010. What I have not known until today is that they have been paying for all of my meals out of their own pockets, including those on our trip to Suzhou. The Conservatory covers certain things but not that. It's humiliating to me, but it's what they expect to do. The real thing, however, is that both of them—and the others like Linda—are just naturally generous and open and willing to be there for you. I am deeply touched by all of this. And I visibly see that they exhaust themselves in doing everything with perfection and detail and all smiles. There is a real shift in me since yesterday about the Chinese and their culture as I begin to feel more comfortable here.

**9:10 p.m.**

Shanghai is complex. I can't believe how transformative this experience is beginning to be. In my mind previously: China on parade—authoritarianism gone amok. Today: a city more Western than the West. Even old folk walk around like this is what they expected their future to be.

## Wednesday, May 19

**8:30 a.m.**

To the local Xiangyang Park earlier to see the folk doing Qi Gong. Not as choreographed as I had expected! Music and instructions coming from an old boom box cassette player. Lot of oldsters looking as though they're making up their own Gestalt movements. Well, they are. Only the

Buddha could possibly guess their form.

## Noon

Jia Daqun and I had a last meeting and tea (a sweet herbal tea for health, a box of which he gifted me). He is calm and soft-spoken and very warm. And very busy! I made the mistake of asking him the best way for me to make a quick visit to The Bund and Pudong and the financial center this afternoon. He immediately called Xiao—in spite of my protests (I really wanted to do something on my own at my own pace)—to accompany me not only to those places this afternoon but to take me all the way out to the airport tomorrow morning.

I told Daqun that it would be unthinkable for me to rely on my students to do even one of the many, many things that Xiao has done for me during this past week. American students don't know that kind of sense of respect. "In America, that's democracy, no? Here it's about family and brothers. We take care of each other. You were invited by the Division of Graduate Studies, and everyone is involved." His students engrave his works from his manuscript and do anything he asks of them. And he takes care of them in all ways: as mentor, friend, helping them get work.

Xiao met me with a pianist friend, Xiang "Cathy" Xiao Qin, a really lovely person. I'm moving between horrified and ecstatic from moment to moment, but when they arrived my unease abetted, and we immediately started having fun. The subway to The Bund. Past the Peace Hotel where Noel Coward wrote *Private Lives* in four days in 1930 when he had the flu. Then, finally, the famous view of Pudong with the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, Jinmao Tower, and the bottle-opener Shanghai World Financial Center. Impressive if you could see through the dense smog or whatever it is. Hot and stinky day. A ferry boat ride across the Huangpu River and a walk along the boardwalk to look back at The Bund. A million pictures later we head home.

## Thursday, May 20

5:50 p.m.

### Beijing

Xiao came to pick me up, as diligent and kind as ever, and when we arrived at Hongqiao International Airport via taxi (the driver of which saved our lives when some madman crossed four lanes to get to the off ramp—and we were in his path) he walked me all the way to the security point beyond which he couldn't enter. We hugged, and when I looked back he was still standing there looking at me. I felt truly sad.

On the China Southern Airlines flight (two hours to Beijing) I just kept thinking about why I dislike and am so resistant to Chinese culture—the saccharine music and in-your-face sweetness of graphics and yet the seeming indifference that shows in many people's faces. Protection? How do I let all of this go so that I can have a genuine experience rather than wanting to reject it and go "home"—to my place of comfort? Then the intensely green Yen (bird) mountains come into view before we land. I know that I'm someplace very different.

Two Beijing Central Conservatory of Music students pick me up: a composer, Li Shaosheng, and Liu Yitian, who is specializing in all things solfège. Shaosheng is well dressed, wants to study in

New York, and already has a pedigree (studies in Vienna, major performances worldwide, Tanglewood next summer, knows Boulez). He has a million questions right out of the parking garage, including what kind of music young Chinese composers should be writing.

He has a car, and it takes just under two hours to get into the center of the city! The sun is out. It's 92 degrees. We pull into the Merchantel Hotel, No.2 Xi Bian Men Wai Da Jie, Xi Cheng District, which must be a godzillian star hotel. It's brand new and right across from the Conservatory. It feels like I've gone from abject poverty to the gilded cage. Shaoshen hands me tickets for all events, an envelope with \$1,000 American in it, and they both bring me to my room where I want to live for the rest of my life! From pimply-faced Xiao (whom I adore) to well-groomed Shaoshen.

First impressions of Beijing: bigger than God; more modern than any city I've seen, even though we did pass a 17th—century Tibetan Lama Temple. Most of the past has been erased here.

### **10:30 p.m.**

Yi Tian picks me up at 8 p.m. and we taxi to Hepingmen Quanjude Roast Duck Restaurant that is considered to have the best Peking Duck in Beijing. And it does. Even George Bush has eaten there and signed the wall! And why didn't I bring my camera? And we talk and laugh a lot. Out into the hot night and a stroll down to the Front Gate (Zhengyang Gate) and walk along the west side of Tiananmen Square all lit up (till 10 p.m. when the lights suddenly went off) past the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall. There has to be a better word than "imposing" to describe the whole area, let alone the Great Hall of the People.

## **Friday, May 21**

### **10 p.m.**

Yi Tian picked me up at 10 a.m. and we headed for the Forbidden City. There are 20 million people in Beijing and I think all of them were there today—in what became unbearably stifling heat. The Forbidden City goes on forever and one can't help seeing it now as a film set.





On the way back we went down the broadest and longest street in Beijing, the Dong Chang'an Jie, past new buildings that rivaled each other in breathtaking imaginative structure. It's impossible to stop to photograph anything in the insane traffic. Past the Beijing Hotel, the oldest Western hotel, from which the 1989 riots were photographed and videorecorded—photos and videos which have never been seen by the Chinese.

## **Saturday, May 22**

**2:15 p.m.**

Aaron Kernis, Yi Tian, and I out instrument shopping. I bought a sheng/sho-like instrument called a hulusi (with an accompanying CD and beautiful leather case), a whistle called xun, and a small rhythm block called muyu. Around the corner to a hutong and more shopping and a visit to an indoor market where half a cow carcass was just lying on the floor with flies buzzing about. Then to Baiyun Temple (White Cloud), a Taoist complex.

The best meal so far at Qiaojiangnan. A colorful and utterly distinctive array of dishes: Muslim lamb chops with hot pepper and cumin; chicken with ginger and bamboo shoots and chilies (old Beijing style); potted bean curd with three different sauces; cold sesame chicken noodles; sweet yams with celery; and stuffed and fried sweet lotus root.

**11:45 p.m.**

The Chinese clearly know what they're doing in a big way. Push the government to the background somewhat—or seemingly so—and put the businessmen in front. The opening concert of the Festival took place tonight at the new National Centre for the Performing Arts that is possibly the most brilliant architecture I've ever seen. The “egg” is surrounded by a moat. You have to go in a tunnel under the water, which you see floating above, in order to get into a complex maze of wood and myriad textured marble floors that crisscross and envelop the concert hall.

The evening started with a select group invited to cocktails and a banquet in the Western Restaurant. The guest list included a few of us Americans and a host of famous businessmen, actors, and athletes. I sat between Gao Min, former two-time Olympic medalist in diving, and Luo Yan, a movie producer who lives in Hollywood and is now producing a \$50 million movie about the history of Shanghai and its opium roots, Hugh Jackman or Clive Barnes possible leads.

Kelly Liu, a model and winner of the 2007 Miss International Beauty Pageant. Zhao Ruirui, the tallest Chinese person I've ever seen and champion volleyball player. David Li, the president of Greater China Region of UBS. Yuan Li, the famed actress from *Raise the Red Lantern*, who, of course, was stunningly beautiful—delicate and subdued in her demeanor, actually.

We were all introduced in Chinese and English. Place names were embroidered on our napkins along with engraved personal welcomes. During dinner people would just get up and walk around and talk to the other guests and then come back and continue eating—a Chinese custom to mix during dinner so that they can visit with everyone beyond their nearby dinner partners.

The concert was nationally televised. A woman came out and played the opening measures of Bach's D minor toccata on the organ with its vast array of pipes, and then the orchestra played several bars of the *Danse Sacrale* from the *Rite of Spring*, I guess to demonstrate the acoustics. Weird.

First Aaron's *Newly Dawn Sky*, beautifully performed. Then Ye Xiaogang's dynamic and exciting *Horizon*, followed by about 100 children from the far west of China singing two very nationalistic, hopeful songs. In-your-face stuff. A new commissioned work after intermission—Qin Wenchen's wandering, layered landscape for orchestra and electronics, *The Nature's Dialogue*—and the first movement of John Corigliano's *The Red Violin*, stunningly orchestrated and Samuel Barberesque. So, they got in a Pulitzer Prize and an Academy Award. Corigliano is admired here by the students. They are really impressed by and need to put the “famous” forward. When I was introduced my honorific was that I am an American composer who has a PhD from Yale!

## Sunday, May 23

9:30 p.m.

Breakfast with the group and then meeting up with Kit (Mitrapaap) Young (American pianist who played *Mestiere* years ago and I first met in Bangkok at the Festival in 2006) who took me to Zhongshan Park (Sun Yat Sen Park) next to Tiananmen Square. Beautiful rock sculptures, hundred year old trees, ponds, and thankful quiet. Long talks.

Subway—interesting to see an older one—back to the hotel and lunch in a café within the local



music store. Off to my first visit to the Conservatory and rehearsals of the quintet and viola piece. I was surprised at the level of preparation, understanding, and technical/musical acuity. The violist especially, Kang Wenting, who happens to be a friend of Kit, is outstanding.

## Monday, May 24

6:10 p.m.

This is surreal, actually, and if this doesn't change the way I live my life I don't know what it would take.

I got to the hall at 3 p.m. for my 3:50 p.m. talk at the International Forum on Culture, Fine Arts and Human Development. I wanted to give myself some time to acclimate to the event, the room, the cameras, the hordes of people. The room was full of whizzing computers and fanciful PowerPoint presentations. They changed the venue from the Great Hall of the People to the Conservatory. OK. I sit through one speech—in Chinese, of course (I was the only non-Chinese speaker on the program today)—and go out for a breath and bump into Hu Yongyan, the conductor, and then my translator, Ma (like “silence”, the space in between in Japanese). He tells me that they can't afford the simultaneous translation like they did yesterday for Aaron (whose topic was the history of the Pulitzer Prize). So, at a moment's notice I have to break the speech up into smaller groups so that he can translate appropriately.

OK. So, I sit through another speech. And then it was my turn. Oh, but it wasn't my turn. They decided to break for coffee and then immediately started setting up for the discussion of the panelists who had spoken before. But what about me? “After the discussion.” No apologies, explanations. Ye Xiaogang, the composer who runs the Festival and is overseeing the Forum, came in. I said that I needed to do other things this afternoon, find out about rehearsals that have not been set—no one gets back to me. He said perhaps I should do the speech tomorrow. I said, no. He, of course, has no idea how much I've suffered over deciding to do this, spending weeks and weeks writing it, and being nervous for forever about presenting it.

So, I agreed to stay and do it as the last speech after the discussion. But the discussion, slated for 45 minutes, was going on over an hour. When I asked when I'd go on, they asked me to cut the speech to 15 minutes—total! I said I'd do the entire speech (can you imagine cutting part of a poem, a novel, a piece of music?!) right after the discussion, but they said they had other speakers, too, and the audience demanded that the discussion continue. So, I said: “Let's just cut my speech.” “Come back tomorrow.” “No!” OK. Sorry.

Rude beyond belief. No apologies. I did get mad. Good for me, but “so what” for them. I'm going to live through this—become “stronger,” as they say. This is not a trip about enrichment of soul but perhaps a toughening of skin. [Read the speech Biscardi had planned](#)

## Tuesday, May 25

4:30 p.m.

Today made up for the nightmare. Master Class—“In Time's Unfolding: Influence and

Resonance.” Yi Tian brought me over to the classroom where there were 70 students waiting for me; some came all the way from distant provinces. And there was one woman from France who said she heard my music in Paris. I had fun with them and made them laugh and feel at ease. Talk of my background and then about influence and resonance (non-musical and otherwise) and memory. Played and explained *Tenzone*, *Mestiere*, and *Piano Quintet*. They really responded.

The Master Class was supposed to be an hour long, but the students wanted to show me their music. One guy showed/played me a work using the resources of the Pierrot ensemble that had some unexpected, eerie “voices”. A decent piece, but he cut off two climactic moments. When I asked him why, he said that it was written for a competition for works no longer than five minutes! Well, write an appropriately structured work for five minutes! A woman played an extended work for sheng and a newly invented sheng with two stringed areas and, therefore, two different tunings. As I was trying to pack up, students swarmed around me and asked for my card—I gave all that I had away—and wanted to copy my scores. I let some of them take them promising to return them at the concert tomorrow since I want to leave the scores with the Conservatory library.

Almost two hours into it Chen Yi called Shi Fuhong, the composer/theoretician and faculty member of the Conservatory who translated for me, to insist that I meet her in the lobby, where she sent me off with other Conservatory faculty and three Americans for an unbelievable and elegant dim sum (including an organic rice mix, who knew?) in a private dining room at Hongkong Tang Palace, a very posh place. I told the story about my experience yesterday, and, clearly, this is not an isolated experience! Then back to the Conservatory for a rehearsal of *Resisting Stillness* with a duo that plays it to perfection. Now a rest before a rehearsal with Luisa Sello of *Traverso*. I won’t hear *Tartini* until the dress rehearsal tomorrow at noon.

I seem to change my pronouncements about how I feel about this experience every second. From yesterday’s “I will never come back to China” to the fact that today has been “beautiful” because, in fact, I love to teach and interconnect with students and make music and all of that. That’s what’s important. Wherever. Can one have hope in the new generation of Chinese?

Interesting that after lunch the American ‘cellist, Hamilton Cheifetz, remarked about the omnipresent watchfulness of the Chinese. If you’re a white man in this society you are in many ways watched like Black Americans are in ours. I’ve seen that when I’m just wandering alone in the hotel or in a bathroom. Hotel workers have stopped me to ask what I’m looking for. Freedom and Democracy in America, even through these worst of times, is still an amazingly precious thing.

## Wednesday, May 26

4:15 p.m.



A rampage of color and noise and silence and flashing cameras! I'm SO thankful that the two weeks ended up with the events of today. Got to the noon dress rehearsal to find out it had been changed to 12:30 p.m. Should I be surprised since yesterday's *Tartini* rehearsal at 5 p.m. was cancelled, and I'm waiting for the two faculty members who will play that work—both just back from major tours—to arrive? They finally do. We work quickly. Then the quintet comes in. We do the same. And the viola piece. And I run over to another building to hear Luisa as she just finished Alfredo Casella's work and dives into mine, which she plays with abandon and passion and gorgeous sounds and lines. She said in the way of the introduction: "He likes to sing and give space to the music."

The faculty performers were the least prepared but still did a knockout job on *Tartini*. The pianist was a bit aggressive, as was Luisa's accompanist. It seems that Chinese pianists—at least the ones I've heard here so far—are either very aggressive or a bit timid. The guitar duo was breathtaking in its delicateness and shape and utter beauty. Wenting played the viola piece with such poise and sheer beauty that it took my breath away, too. The piano quintet was convincing although short of being a perfect performance. It didn't matter, because the emotional directness and line blew people away. Ah, and me, too. I am so thankful.

# 2010.5.22-5.28

## 2010北京现代音乐节 BEIJING MODERN MUSIC FESTIVAL

美国作曲家切斯特·比斯卡迪作品专场音乐会

### SPECIAL CONCERT OF CHESTER BISCARDI'S WORKS

时间: 2010年5月22日 14:00  
19:00 May 22nd, 2010

地点: 中央音乐学院音乐厅  
Institute for Contemporary Music Concert Hall of CMA

切斯特·比斯卡迪 Chester Biscardi

美国作曲家切斯特·比斯卡迪(Chester Biscardi, 1964)毕业于美国威斯康星大学, 后在加州大学伯克利分校攻读作曲硕士学位。他的作品包括交响乐、室内乐、独奏、协奏曲、歌剧、电影配乐等。他的作品以其独特的旋律和深刻的内涵而闻名。他的作品包括《小提琴和钢琴》、《中提琴之声》、《钢琴五重奏》等。

1 【塔蒂尼】  
为小提琴和钢琴所作  
Tartini for Violin and Piano  
小提琴 / 林朝阳 Violin LIN Zhaoyang  
钢琴 / 曲晨 Piano YOU CHEN

2 【凝固的寂静】  
为双吉他所作  
Resisting Stillness for Two Guitars  
吉他 / 陈川 吉他  
Guitar CHEN Chuan XU Tuo

3 【中提琴之声】  
为中提琴和钢琴所作  
The Viola Had Suddenly Become a Voice  
for Viola and Piano  
中提琴 / 康文婷 Viola KANG Wending  
钢琴 / 段群松 Piano DUAN Binyan

4 【钢琴五重奏】  
为钢琴、双小提琴、中提琴和两把大提琴所作  
Piano Quintet for Piano and Violin, with Violin,  
Viola and Violoncello  
钢琴 / 段群松 Piano DUAN Binyan  
小提琴 / 陈川 小提琴 Violin TANG Yun MA Weng  
中提琴 / 康文婷 Viola KANG Wending  
大提琴 / 王翰斌 Cello WANG Zhen

