

by Tracy You
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Orchestra's historic return to Shanghai with local hero Ni Haiye

Shanghai's star cellist returns home with The Philadelphia Orchestra and tells CNNGo about her love of music and her hometown



The Philadelphia Orchestra comes to Shanghai 37 years after their historic 1973 concert, where they made musical and diplomatic history as the first American orchestra to tour the PRC.

Chinese classical music fans flocked to Shanghai's Expo Cultural Center this weekend for the historic return to China of the [The Philadelphia Orchestra](#), one of America's 'Big Five' ensembles.

The orchestra -- which at the special request of U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1973 was the first U.S. ensemble to play in China -- held two concerts for the [2010 Expo](#). It last performed in China for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and this year is the only international orchestra invited by officials to perform at the Expo Cultural Center.

Aside from enjoying a world-class performance, the audience was also keen to see (and hear) a hometown hero -- principal cellist (and Shanghai-born) [Ni Haiye](#).

She is regarded by [some media](#) as a youthful [Yo-yo Ma](#), who is considered one of the world's greatest cellists.



Ni Haiye is often compared to the revered cellist Yo-yo Ma.

From Shanghai to the world

Born in Shanghai to a family of musicians in the 1970s, Ni followed her mother's path and began studying the cello at the [Shanghai Conservatory of Music](#). After moving to San Francisco at the age of 13 to study at the [San Francisco Conservatory of Music](#), she was soon noticed by the American music industry at the Naumburg International Cello Competition in 1990, where she was awarded first prize.

After serving as the associate principal cellist for the [New York Philharmonic](#) for seven years, Ni joined the Philadelphia Orchestra when its former principal cello retired.

"To me, [the Philadelphia Orchestra] represents the highest standard of classical music in the world," she says. Getting the principal cellist seat was no easy task. She entered a national audition for the position in 2006, competing against 100 other soloists, eventually winning the job with her performance.

The two concerts in Shanghai last week, one at the 2010 Expo site and one at the [Shanghai Oriental Arts Center](#), were special to Ni. This trip brought her back to Shanghai, her hometown, as a Sino-America culture ambassador for the 2010 Expo.

"This is a sentimental tour to everyone, from the orchestra to the organizer and to me. Some of my colleagues this time were on the ensemble's first trip to China in 1973," she says. "Even the audience were extra engaged and supportive."

Giving back to Shanghai

"To me, [The Philadelphia Orchestra] represents the highest standard of classical music in the world."

— Ni Haiye, cellist, Philadelphia Orchestra

Although playing a packed schedule with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Ni still comes back to Shanghai once a year, mostly for performances, showing her deep bond with the city where she grew up.

"I miss my childhood in Shanghai, the old building my family used to live in, and all of my neighbors and playmates," she says, smiling as memories of her childhood return. "Whenever I come back, I always try to hang out with them again."

She is clearly proud of her Shanghainese heritage, and does her best to show gratitude to the city that raised her, by supporting budding local music students in master classes, like the one hosted by the Philadelphia Orchestra this weekend in Shanghai.

"I want to be a versatile musician, playing both recital and chamber music," she says. "At the same time, I would also love to teach."

After performing with The Philadelphia Orchestra this past weekend, Ni Haiye will be staying in Shanghai for an additional week and will give a master class to students at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music on May 11, and stage a recital there on May 13.



More about the Philadelphia Orchestra:

In 1973 the Philadelphia Orchestra, under Eugene Ormandy's direction, became the first American orchestra to perform in the People's Republic of China, at the special request of President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. Its first concert was in Beijing's Great Hall of the People.

During the Shanghai 2010 Expo, the Philadelphia Orchestra was the first and only international orchestra invited by the Expo Bureau to perform at the Expo Culture Center. It played a second concert later that weekend at the Shanghai Oriental Arts Center.

For more information on the orchestra, go to www.philorch.org

Tracy You is a bilingual culture and lifestyle journalist based in Shanghai. She is a fan of history, British TV and Wii Guitar Hero. She is now the Shanghai Chinese editor at CNNGo.

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