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MUSIC

Wu Man plays the pipa

By HILLARY HAUSER
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Because of love, Wu Man left her country, her family, and a promising musical career to follow the man who would eventually become her husband. At the age of 26 she left China, only to arrive at the opposite end of the world where people had no understanding either of her language or her art.

Most Americans she encountered had never even seen the instrument she had loved and played all her life: the pipa. Resembling a lute, this ancient, plucked-string instrument (which in China is as common as the violin), had been the focus of her musical devotions and her studies. At the time she left China, Wu Man had already gathered considerable recognition as a talented pipa artist. She was the first to receive a graduate degree for playing it, she had won prestigious competitions and she was considered a virtuoso.

Without the ability to communicate either in music or spoken language, Wu Man said her early days in America, only five years ago, were hard ones. She did not make music, she did not play, she "did not do anything, just learned English." For nine months she studied this new language, and during that time she also married her fiance, Peng Wang, who was studying chemistry at New York University.

As for her beloved music, Wu Man thought maybe she would "give it up."

Speaking by telephone last week from New York, where she was just about to go into rehearsal with the Kronos Quartet, the 31-year-old artist related, in impeccable English, the amazing story of what transpired during those early days in America. The story is amazing because now, five years later, her music career in this country has not only blossomed, it has exploded.

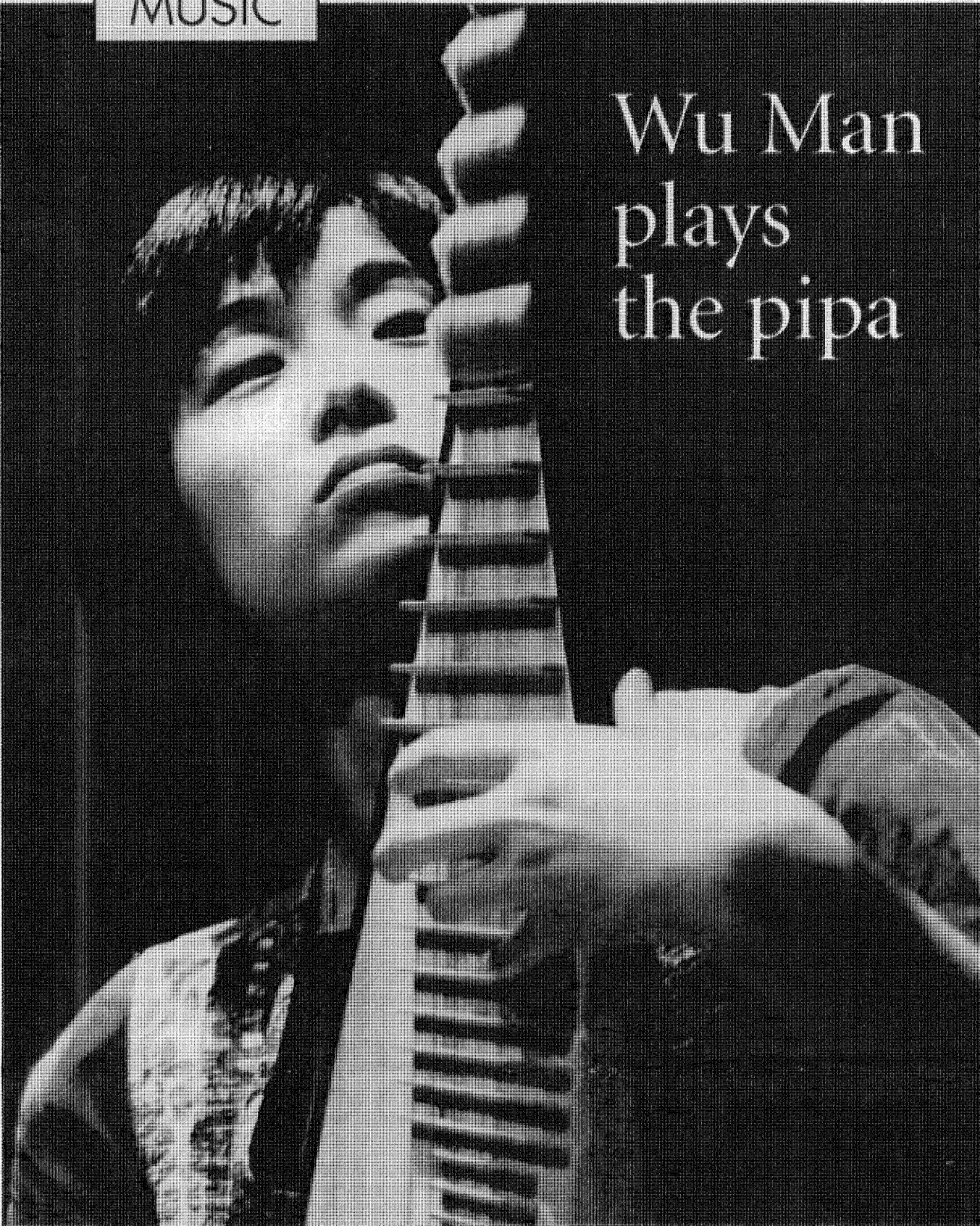
"In New York, I discovered in Chinatown a Chinese music group," Wu Man said. "I joined. We lived in New Haven, Connecticut, my husband was now at Yale. Every weekend I took the train to New York, to play with Chinese musicians. Day after day, week after week, I made contacts — and I started to play with other, non-Chinese musicians.

In 1992 she went to Pittsburgh to perform in the International Music Festival a "little concerto" with the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble. The Kronos Quartet was there, too.

Later, Wu Man received a phone call from that group's first violinist, David Harrington, asking if she might play with them. Wu Man laughed at the recollection. "At the time, I didn't know the Kronos!" Harrington asked if he could send her a CD and some material about his ensemble.

Wu Man of course went on to play with the celebrated ensemble — a piece called "Soul," commissioned by the Kronos from the Chinese composer Zhou Long. It was well-received, and Wu Man said she thought, "Oh, great! Fantastic!"

After that, the Kronos Quartet was "very interested" in collaborating with her on future performances. She played with them another three concerts — Alice Tully



Wu Man performs Tuesday with the Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra.

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PEOPLE

Chinese pipa player gains fame in U.S.

MUSIC

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Hall in New York, and in Los Angeles and London. Listeners became fascinated with the music she produced on this unfamiliar instrument. She began to make recordings.

Today Wu Man performs with the Kronos Quartet regularly, and she also collaborates with groups like the New York New Music Consort, the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, the Japan America Symphony Orchestra in L.A. and the Lincoln Symphony Orchestra.

She will appear Tuesday night at 8 with the Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra, Heiichiro Ohyama conducting. The centerpiece of that program at the Lobero Theatre will be "Spring Night on the Moon River — Poems for Pipa and Orchestra," arranged by Zuqiang.

Ohyama said he first heard Wu Man in 1992 during the Wet Ink Festival in San Francisco, where he was conducting. "She is to pipa playing what Yo-Yo Ma is to cello — the best from the young generation in China," he said. Sitting next to her at a Wet Ink reception, Ohyama asked Wu Man if she would perform with his orchestra in Santa Barbara.

Wu Man said "Spring Night on the Moon River" is as well-known in China as the "Moonlight" sonata is in Western music circles. "If you studied pipa, you had to play this piece. It is very lyrical, very emotional. The left hand is very detailed, you touch the strings and slide up and down, and left to right. It has a vibrato, very oriental, Chinese sound."

The ancient work, passed from master to student for 1,000 years is full of "flowers and night — totally like a Chinese painting," she said. "I have a lot of influence from my father, who is a painter. I see, imagine, a lot in this music."

The only regret the artist has about living in America is that she hasn't seen her parents since she came here. She stays in contact with them at least once a month by telephone.

Born in the southern city of Hangzhou, Wu Man took up the pipa when she was 9 years old. "It was my second instrument," she said. Her first was the liu qin, which is basically a small pipa.

The pipa (pronounced "peep-a") is an ancient four-string instrument that in its present form goes back to the 7th century A.D. Historical literature indicates the earliest descriptions of the pipa from the Han dynasty (2nd century B.C.-2nd century A.D.). The instrument became highly popular during the Tang dynasty (618-906), and for the next thousand years played a large part in Chinese culture, closely linked to the self-cultivation (zither qin) of calligraphy, painting and Chinese chess.

"It was never played for entertainment," Wu Man explained. "It was played at home, in private. You had to wash your hands before playing. The younger generation is different."

The four strings of the pipa are commonly tuned to A,D,E,A. There are six wedge-shaped frets, as well as 28 smaller frets.

Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra with Wu Man

WHEN: 8 p.m. Tuesday
WHERE: Lobero Theatre
INFORMATION: 963-0761

Unlike some models of violins that have become more valuable with age (i.e. Stradivarius or Amati), pipas tend to wear out, become damaged. "A 17th century pipa you cannot play," Wu Man said. The instrument she presently uses is 10 years old.

She remembers her musical childhood with gratitude. "I was very lucky. In China, the government supports talented children, puts them in school for professional training. My parents didn't have to pay money for this." Wu Man's father, a painter, taught (and still teaches) at a university, her friends were all musicians, and she liked to sing, too.

At the age of 12, just three years after she began to play the pipa, Wu Man was chosen to enter the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. "It was very far away from home," she recalled. "I took a train — 22 hours — two times a year." Eventually she stayed at the conservatory for a year at a time, studying with four different teachers by the time she received her master's degree.

Her teacher in graduate school was Lin Shicheng, a celebrated master of the Pudong school. In the older days of pipa music, the repertoire was traditionally handed down from master to student, with the scores serving merely as a barebones aid to memory. Each school has its own repertoire. Today, much of pipa music is written down in Western notation style, but technique and interpretation is still passed down from master to student.

The difference in schools, Wu Man said, is "a difference in playing style — like there is French style and German style to piano music. It's hard to say what the difference is, but the Pudong school is mostly more detailed. It's strong and powerful, very detailed, very lyrical." After she graduated from the conservatory, Wu Man enjoyed considerable success as one of China's most brilliant pipa soloists, but

in 1989, Tiananmen Square erupted, launching a series of violent democratic protests across the country. Wu Man's fiance, Peng Wang, made immediate plans to leave China, and she followed.

Today, Wu Man and Peng Wang live in Boston, where he works as a research chemist. She is away from home a lot these days, but Peng Wang expresses pride and amusement at his wife's growing popularity. "I just stay here and answer the phone," he said.

"He's very supportive — he likes me to do what I like," Wu Man said. "If I stay home over a month, he says, 'Go out and do a concert!'"

And that is exactly what this pipa player does. After her New York

appearance with the Kronos Quartet she was scheduled to perform at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and on the following night with the Japan America Symphony Orchestra. After that, Santa Barbara. She likes this busy schedule. "I think if I had stayed in China, I wouldn't be having these opportunities," she said.

(The Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra program for Tuesday also includes "The Unanswered Question" by Charles Ives, Suite from "Pelleas et Melisande" by Faure, and the Symphony in D major ("Classical") by Beethoven. For tickets and information call the Lobero Theatre Box Office at 963-0761.)

JUMBLE

Answer:

DRIVEL FORGET MOTHER
POPLIN AGENCY IMMUNE

What the scholar of ancient tales was considered —

MYTH
INFORMED

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