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The online presentation of the Bright Sheng Collection at the Bentley Historical Library is one of many entries into the life's work of Bright Sheng (1955 - ), a premier contemporary composer who considers himself **"100 per cent American, 100 per cent Chinese."** The rich variety of media constituting the **Bright Sheng Collection** demonstrate the complexity of his creative and academic processes as composer, conductor, performer, scholar, teacher, and colleague. The site serves as an entrance way to this MacArthur Fellow's career by offering search avenues into samples from his archives of sound, image, and text.

The full archival collection to date encompasses a wealth of manuscripts and printed scores, reviews and tributes, correspondence and curricular materials, performances and recordings, and research material gathered along the Silk Road. Bibliographic and archival description in the site enable the viewer to discover what all is available within the Bright Sheng Collection.

Links to related sites offer further academic and commercial sources on Bright Sheng. As Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Music at the University of Michigan, Bright Sheng has established his archival collection at the Bentley Historical Library to preserve his creative process and to enable ready access to it, with additional content to arrive over time.

## Special Presentations



Biography by Pamela (Peng) Chen  
[English version](#) | [Chinese version](#)

[Bright Sheng's C.V. \[as of 2004\]](#)

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## INTRODUCTION



**Bright Sheng with University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman during the awards dinner where Sheng was bestowed with the Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professorship (2004).**

[Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 1, Photographs, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.]

At the time Bright Sheng chose the English version of his name, he was unaware of the multiple meanings of the word **'bright'**. His name in Chinese is **Sheng Zong-Liang**, and, according to Sheng, his given name means something like "bright lights." Based on this, he chose 'bright' because he once read a book that referred to an Englishman named Mr. Bright, so he thought it might be good to be known as Bright Sheng in English. He only discovered the connotation of smartness later.

Since then, the choice of name has proven prescient. Among Sheng's many honors have been a Distinguished University Professorship from the University of Michigan and the MacArthur Foundation's 'Genius Grant'. As a composer, his works have been commissioned by figures such as Yo-Yo Ma and the White House.



**Bright Sheng with President Clinton at a White House state dinner honoring Chinese Premiere Zhou Rongji, where Sheng's Three Songs for Pipa and Cello premiered (1999).**

[Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 1, Photographs, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.]

Sheng's renown may be attributed, in part, to his sound, a unique blend of elements from Western, traditional Chinese, and Tibetan sources. He serves as the Artistic Advisor to

the [Silk Road Project](#), which brings together musicians, researchers, and composers from the regions stretching along the ancient trade route. Additionally, many of his compositions use Tibetan and Chinese instruments.

**I am 100% Chinese.  
I am also 100% American.**

Explaining his influences, Sheng (in an interview with Michigan Today) reiterated a point he'd made earlier in the music publication Full Score:

"I am a mixture not only of Eastern and Western influences but of Tibetan and Chinese within the Eastern. Why shouldn't my music reflect that? People acknowledge "artistic license"; I embrace "cultural license"--the right to reflect my appreciation and understanding of both cultures in my work. ... I think less and less about whether some element I am using is Chinese or Western. I write whatever excites me while continuing to study both cultures."

**~Bright Sheng, interview in Michigan Today, Fall 1998.**

#### [Biography in Chinese](#)

More information on Bright Sheng's music, influences, and archival collection is found in the rest of this site. Additionally, links to outside websites--with information like tutorials on archival terminology, the Silk Road Project, the use of music and scores as primary sources, and Tibetan musical instruments--can be found on the [resources page](#).

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## CREATIVE PROCESS



**Left to Right: Margret Fieldman (Sheng's sister), Bright Sheng, Kurt Mazur (conductor), and Alice and David Cheng (Sheng's parents) after the premiere of H'un in New York City with the New York Philharmonic (1993).**

[Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 1, Photographs. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.]

This section provides a sample of the types of archival material that is included in the Bright Sheng collection at the Bentley Historical Library. The samples show the variety of media forms used in Bright Sheng's work process.

### Archival Material: Composition Manuscript

#### "My Song for Solo Piano"

1988

From Original Cover Reads:

"Work commissioned by The Serkin Commissions project sponsored by The Performing Arts Department of the 92nd Street Y, who gave the World Premiere Performance at 92nd Street Y, NYC on 12/11/1989. Premiere performances are also sponsored by the Kennedy Center, the Chicago Symphony, and the UCLA Center for the Performing Arts."

[View a digital version](#) of Bright Sheng's Composition Manuscript.

### Archival Material: Video-cassette

#### "Madame Mao"

View video clip from Bright Sheng's archival collection

#### ["Madame Mao" digital clip](#)

### Archival Material: Video-cassette

[Video clip of Bright Sheng greeting Aaron Copeland and Leonard Bernstein](#) at the Tanglewood Music Center when Sheng was a student in the Center's Composers' Workshop (1985).



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## INFLUENCES



### **Bright Sheng along the Silk Road in northwest China (2000).**

Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 20, Slides. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

As a composer writing Western classical music coming from a non-Western musical context, Bright Sheng has looked to other composers in similar situations for inspiration and ways of working. Sheng notes that he has been particularly influenced by the Hungarian composer Bela Bartok:

"Bartok saw the folk music's inherent beauty. To him, folk music was not a novelty but just as good as "high" art and he demonstrated that through his works. ... Bartok believed that there were three ways you could use folk music in composition. One is that you can use the folk melody with accompaniment. The second is that you could write in imitation of the folk melody - in the folkloric style. The third is that you don't deliberately write in folk music style but your music comes out with the flavor of folk music.

By then you have the spirit of folk music in your blood. ... My music falls somewhere between the last two steps, having gone through the first one. For instance, in the piano concerto I am working on now, I do not use any folk material or even try to imitate a folk melody. Most of the time, I do not even use the Chinese scale, the pentatonic scale. But hopefully it will sound like me, a Chinese born musician who is now living in the United States."

~Bright Sheng, *interview*, *The Journal of the International Institute*, Fall 1999.



### **Village peasants performing dolang mukam in Makit (Xinjiang province, northwest China) (2000).**

[Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 20, Slides. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.]

Sheng's own connection to folk music dates back from his youth spent in the remote northwestern provinces of China. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976, high schools and colleges were closed and young people were sent out to rural areas in order to work with the peasants. While the Cultural Revolution caused widespread devastation, performing artists were spared some of its worst effects due to the idiosyncrasies of Jiang Qing, Madam Mao.



During the seven years Sheng spent performing in Qinghai province, he took it upon himself to learn about the region and study and collect the folk music of the people:

"In addition to "regular" Chinese, the province is home to Tibetans, Chinese Muslims, Mongolians and even some Russian Cossacks. ... The ethnic backgrounds of the people were rich, but the people were poor. ... Their only entertainment was singing folk songs. One of the categories of folk song in Qinghai is called the hua'er, or flower, song. I got a chance to study them very well.

Each group there has its own folk songs in its own language, but everyone sang the flower songs in the provincial dialect of Chinese ... the songs were a jelling point for the different ethnic groups. They all lived close to each other; there was no ethnic tension or fighting at all before the recent Tibet conflict. In some of my compositions I use the melodic style of the flower songs. In my opera Song of Majnun, two of the main themes are based on Qinghai Tibetan motifs."

~Bright Sheng, [interview](#), [Michigan Today](#), Fall 1998.



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## COLLABORATION



### **Bright Sheng and Yo-Yo Ma after the premiere of Seven Tunes Heard in China for Solo Violon cello in Orange County, California (1995).**

[Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 1, Photographs. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.]

Collaboration is an integral part of working in the music world. Bright Sheng collaborates intimately with his professional colleagues, revising compositions to suit particular soloists or ensembles and co-writing his operatic and choral works with his librettists. As artistic advisor to the Silk Road Project, Sheng is also part of an international network of scholars and artists working together to explore the ways in which Europe, Asia, and the Middle East influenced each others' arts and cultures.



### **Left to Right: Bright Sheng, Aaron Copeland, and Leonard Bernstein at the Tanglewood Music Center when Sheng was a student in the Center's Composers' Workshop (1985).**

[Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 1, Photographs. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.]

For Sheng, another important relationship is that which takes place between students and teachers. When speaking about his experiences as both Leonard Bernstein's student and as a professor at the [University of Michigan](#), Sheng highlights the special understanding and compassion that comes with the teacher-student bond:

"An important part of what I learned about teaching comes from studying with Leonard Bernstein. He had a special way of approaching things as a teacher. He made things easier to understand. A good teacher explains things in very simple terms. He decodes it and makes you believe that everything he can do, you can too."

~Bright Sheng, [interview](#), [Journal of the International Institute](#), Fall 1999.

### **Bright Sheng's View on Teaching**

"As much as I value learning, I also value teaching greatly. Beyond the fact

that I feel the need to share what I have learned from my experience as a practical musician, I also learn from the students I teach everyday. These young, energetic people give me inspiration, faith and immense mental vigor.

Teaching keeps me in touch with reality and makes me aware of my place in society and in the world of arts. ... I also strongly believe that the student-teacher relation goes beyond the boundaries of the classroom. So I try to be personable when approached.

I pay attention to what they learn and how they develop as a musician, and take interest in how they advance and mature in the academic environment. This is because when I was a student, the teachers who influenced me the most were those who offered advice on my personal and professional development when I needed it the most."

~Bright Sheng, untitled essay on teaching, Bright Sheng Papers, Box 1, Articles written, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.



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## WORKS



**Production still from *Silver River*, performed at the Spoleto Festival USA (2000).**

[Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 20, Slides. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.]



**Bright Sheng with Leonard Bernstein and the performers after the premiere of *Arias and Barcarolls*, music composed by Leonard Bernstein, orchestration by Bright Sheng (ca. 1988).**

[Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers: Box 1, Photographs, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.]

The website of Bright Sheng's publisher, G.Schirmer, includes a full list of [Sheng's works](#).

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