

Sun Tzu's Art Of War reimagined in music and dance

CONCERT

THE ART OF WAR

Calista Liaw & Friends
Esplanade Recital Studio
Last Wednesday

Chang Tou Liang

Sun Tzu's *The Art Of War* is often used by gurus of management, business strategy and self-empowerment.

Calista Liaw, a third-year student at Yong Siew Toh Conservatory and professional erhu player, has envisioned its essence as a multi-disciplinary work of music. It has become a metaphor for the struggles of life, as neatly encapsulated in her pre-recorded preamble in Chinese.

Lasting some 45 minutes and unfolding in four discrete chapters composed by students of the conservatory, *The Art Of War* was both a sonic and visual spectacle. Performers included Liaw herself on erhu, Liu Jia Qi (cello), Jacky Ng (suona/guan), Jeremy Wong (pipa) and Lee Yu Ru (percussion), conducted by Ding Yi Music Company's Detric Wong.

Five very athletic dancers performed movements choreographed by Gin Lam, and were outfitted by fashion label Lontessa, looking like extras in a *Star Wars* set – quite appropriate given the subject.

Each of the four chapters was prefaced by a quote in Chinese from Sun Tzu, and their not necessarily accurate translations and elaborations in English, some of which bordered on gibberish.

The Chinese, however, have a term “*ji hua*”, meaning laying plans or meticulous preparation, which ensured each part flowed seamlessly into the next.



Erhu player Calista Liaw has brought together artists in a collaborative effort.

PHOTO: WAYNE CHNG

That was the title of the first piece, composed by Chua Zi Tao, which opened with Ng's mellow guanzi accompanied by Lee's percussion. The martial air was fulfilled by all five dancers, their pugilistic poses and muscular movements totally in sync with the music performed.

The next piece, *Zhan* or *Waging War* by Estene Cheong, was not just about the heat of battle.

While the inherent stress, tension and violence of the music were self-explanatory, it was the calm before the storm which brought out the most ominous overtones. Liaw gave more credence to the whys, whos and whats of conflicts, and the better strategies by picking one's battles wisely.

That tied in perfectly with *Sheng* or *Introspection* by Lin Ssu Ting, which was quiet and slow, thus evoking the most mystery among the movements.

Here, the two bowed instru-

ments – Liaw's erhu and Liu's cello – came to the fore. Finding oneself, knowing one's abilities and limitations, and those of one's adversaries – vital decisions would hinge on these.

By now, one would have surmised Liaw's thoughts on her own personal demons, about her choice of becoming a professional musician and the further obstacles she faces.

This would come to fruition in the fourth and final movement, *March On* by Toh Yan Ee, which returned to earlier martial manoeuvres. The artist is now exhorted to resist and persist until the final goal is reached, and then soldier on some more.

Liaw is a thoughtful yet passionate artist, and her conception of this idea-provoking production bringing together friends and fellow collaborators heralds further promising artistic endeavours to come.