

Red music receives a modern twist

By CHEN NAN

Instrumentalist Wang Xiaowei and singer Wang Xiaohai say miracles have happened since they met and became the band Miracle September. They rose from nothing, they say, to stardom after winning the top prize on *Star Boulevard*, a popular competition in China Central Television in September 2008. Then they found themselves in the spotlight of the 2011 CCTV Spring Festival Gala show.

Now, they are preparing to perform at the opening gala of Beijing Culture Week, from July 24 to 31, during the London Olympics. They will present two of their most popular hits, *Red Memory* and *Beautiful China*.

The band has also recorded *Best Wishes From Beijing*, a song celebrating the London Olympics, written by renowned musician Wang Pingjiu and young composer Chang Shilei.

"We didn't expect this opportunity to perform during the London Olympics. We've chosen the two songs because they represent our style and let us sing about our country," said Wang Xiaowei, 29, who has wowed audiences with her playing of a double-keyboard electronic organ.

Red Memory, their remix of classic red songs, combines the music of the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* and *Wanquan River*, a popular song from the classic movie *Red Detachment of Women* in 1961. They performed their medley at the Vienna Golden Hall in 2009, which led them to other touring opportunities in Europe and the United States.

Beautiful China, an original song mixing Chinese folk music and strong beats, was part of the 2012 CCTV Spring Festival Gala program. The duo's passionate singing and playing was a good match with the festival atmosphere.

"One of our biggest advantages is our performing style, which not only has music but also offers visual enjoyment," said Wang Xiaohai, 32, whose modern rendition of the revolutionary classics is a breath of fresh air. "Chinese tradition runs in our blood: Our music is fated to reflect the tradition. We hope that the audiences in London can learn how young Chinese musicians interpret traditional Chinese culture."

The two Wangs often think their meeting and the musical path they followed together is something of a miracle.

"For me, the best music she played is still the *Yellow River Piano Concerto*," said Wang Xiaowei, an accountant and graduate of Dongbei University. When he heard Wang Xiaohai play the organ for her graduation solo at Shenyang Conservatory of Music in 2004, he was enthralled.

Although the 9-to-5 office worker and karaoke fan had never received any musical training, a bold idea began to take shape in his mind.

"I'd never seen this instrument," Wang Xiaohai said. "But after hearing it being played, I just couldn't get its sound out of my head."

He contacted the performer, who was equally impressed by Wang Xiaohai's singing. They also found other common interests, such as their love of revolution-themed songs of the 1950s and 1960s, often called the "red classics".

Wang Xiaohai had little trouble convincing the 25-year-old performer from Dalian to team up as a band in 2008. Wang Xiaowei started learning the piano at 7 and she took second place at the 2006 UK Electronic Organ Competition.

Thus the organ, a Western instrument was paired with the classics of an important era of Chinese history.

Derived from the pipe organ, the double-keyboard electronic organ requires skillful maneuvering of its two keyboards and a foot pedal. Both hands and feet need to work together.

Another big challenge: There was no music available for the modern instrument to accompany Chinese red classics. The two had to first compose the music and then add red classics lyrics.

Besides pop music, Wang Xiaohai also injects operatic singing and rap to add color to their performances. To complement her partner, Wang Xiaowei also makes some visual improvisations.

"The performance is constantly evolving and is full of surprises," she said.

She adds that her association with the singer has reshaped her future. "He changed my original plans to be a teacher," she said. "The usual path taken by a music graduate in China."

Since music by the band has garnered attention, the number of students learning the instrument has doubled or even tripled, Wang Xiaowei believes.

They recognize the challenge of making original music rather than remixing old red songs all the time. Their upcoming debut album will feature original songwriting — slow and smoothing rhythms, which contrast with their previous fast and dramatic song style.

"What we've achieved so far is way beyond our expectations. We've realized our dreams one by one," Wang Xiaohai said.



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Kunqu Opera *A New Legend of Pipa* centers on Cai Wenji (middle, played by Tu Linghui), a poet and composer who was taken prisoner by Xiongnu nomads and became a chieftain's wife some 2,200 years ago. She eventually gained her freedom after a ransom was paid.

The world's a stage

Kunqu Opera will make its debut in London for the 2012 Olympics, **Mu Qian** reports.

Two rare performances of Kunqu Opera in London will transport audiences to ancient China. As part of the Beijing Culture Week organized by the government of Beijing, the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater will give two performances at the Shaw Theatre of London — *A Dream of Red Mansions* on July 24 and *A New Legend of Pipa* on the following day.

"Kunqu is regarded as the 'origin of a hundred operas' in China," said Cao Ying, Northern Kunqu Opera Theater's vice-president.

"It has a history of 600 years and has influenced not only many styles of Chinese opera but also Chinese literature, music and art."

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, one of China's "Four Great Classical Novels", there are 26 depictions of Kunqu, the best-known of which is the part about the heroine Lin Daiyu being enchanted by 12 girls' singing Kunqu in the 23rd chapter.

However, there was never a Kunqu adaptation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, except for some excerpts, until the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater premiered their version last year.

"*A Dream of Red Mansions* is a great work that covers various aspects of feudal China, including political, social and cultural aspects, and even medicine and food," said Cao Qijing, the work's general director.

"It's a great challenge for us to bring it to the stage."

Written by Cao Xueqin in the middle of the 18th century, *A Dream of Red Mansions* tells about the rise and decay of a noble family and, by extension, of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The best-known plotline of the work is the tragic love story between Jia Baoyu and his cousin, Lin, who are forced to part by Jia's family.

"The love story is only a part of the work," Cao Qijing said.

"In this performance, we try to portray the characters' destinies with that of their society."

The Kunqu Opera *A Dream of Red Mansions* lasted for six hours and was divided into two performances when it premiered. The London show will be a concise version, lasting about two hours.

The cast comprises not only award-winning performers from the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater like Wei Chunrong but also performers from Kunqu companies in Shanghai and Jiangsu province.

When adapted into other forms of Chinese operas, some parallel plots from the novel were given lineal narration. But the Kunqu version has some plots run simultaneously onstage — for example, that of Lin burning her scripts and Jia's wedding.

"The lyrics of Kunqu are much more elegant than those of today's dramas, and reading the lyrics alone is very enjoyable," Cao the director said.

Kunqu's music is also softer than many other traditional Chinese operas, such as Peking Opera, with *qudi* (a type of flute) as a main instrument.

Accompanying *A Dream of Red Mansions* is an orchestra of 40 musicians. Apart from Chinese instruments, there are also Western instruments like violins, violas and cellos.

"For this original work, we want to experiment with some new instruments, and they proved to be suitable to supplement the band," Cao Ying said.

"We don't know how Kunqu was performed 600 years ago. But it must have gone through many reforms and



A Dream of Red Mansions tells of the tragic love story between Lin Daiyu (right, played by Zhu Binzhen) and Jia Baoyu (Weng Jiahui).



Northern Kunqu Opera Theater will perform *A Dream of Red Mansions* at the Shaw Theatre in London on July 24.

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The other work to be presented in London, *A New Legend of Pipa*, is a traditional work and will be performed only with Chinese instruments.

Interestingly, the work's author Cao Yin (1658-1712) was the grandfather of Cao Xueqin, the author of *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

A New Legend of Pipa hasn't been performed for centuries and was only recently revived by the Northern Kunqu Opera Theater after a script was found in the National Library of China.

The work tells of Cai Wenji, a Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) poet and composer, who was taken prisoner by the Xiongnu nomads and became a chieftain's wife but was eventually ransomed back.

Founded in Beijing in 1957, the Northern Kunqu

SINGING AN ANCIENT OPERA'S PRAISES

Kunqu Opera is one of the oldest extant forms of Chinese opera.

It evolved from the Kunshan melody and developed during the late Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). A famous early pioneer was Gu Jian from Qiandeng town in Kunshan, Jiangsu province.

Kunqu Opera dominated Chinese theatre from the 16th to the 18th centuries, and has influenced many other Chinese performing arts, including Peking Opera. Its emergence ushered in the second golden era of Chinese drama. But it had nearly disappeared by the early 20th century.

In 1956, *Fifteen Strings of Cash* by the Zhejiang Kunqu Opera Troupe ran to 46 performances in Beijing and was attended by then leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. The work was said to have salvaged Kunqu Opera.

Kunqu Opera was suppressed during the "cultural revolution" (1966-76), when all operas, except "revolutionary operas", were banned.

There has been a revival of the art form since the 1980s.

Today, there are professional Kunqu Opera troupes in seven cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou and Nanjing in Jiangsu province, Chenzhou in Hunan province, and Yongjia and Hangzhou in Zhejiang province. Amateur opera societies are active in many other cities in China and overseas.

Some of the best-known Kunqu Opera works are *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Peach Blossom Fan*, *The Palace of Long Life*, *The White Snake*, *The Western Mansion*, and *The Kite*.

Kunqu Opera has been listed by UNESCO among the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity since 2001.

MU QIAN

Opera Theater is one of China's seven professional Kunqu troupes and the only one in North China. The troupe has revived and created many Kunqu Opera works and trained a number of renowned performers.

There has been increasing interest in Kunqu Opera in recent years. Apart from the seven official Kunqu Opera troupes in China, there are many smaller commercial groups. In Beijing, there are several Kunqu Opera-themed restaurants.

The Northern Kunqu Opera Theater had 360 performances in 2010, including some in universities.

"People are ever-busier," Cao Ying said. "Watching Kunqu Opera enables one to slow down and be spiritually purified. I think that's why Kunqu Opera is becoming more popular."

Northern Kunqu Opera Theater has toured more than 30 countries and regions.

"We assumed that the traditional art of Kunqu Opera is difficult for foreigners to appreciate," Cao Ying said. "But foreign audiences usually enjoy our performances very much."

English subtitles will be provided for both shows in London.



The band Miracle September, formed by double keyboard player Wang Xiaowei (right) and singer/songwriter Wang Xiaohai, rose to overnight fame after winning a television talent show in September 2008.