

On the verge of extinction?: A group of two-humped camels search for food on the Alxa Desert in Inner Mongolia.



Photos by LU TONGJING



Musical talent flows into Forbidden City

By CHEN JIE
China Daily staff

If you are fed up of watching the World Cup football games, the Royal Garden Concert Series on Sunday evening could come as a nice little break when a solo concert by the gold medal winner of Van Cliburn Piano Competition is to be staged.

Another option is to relax at the Forbidden City Concert Hall where a performance by Stanislav Ioudenitch, a musician of elegance and imagination will be displayed. His well-honed technique is matched by his spellbinding performance.

Born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Ioudenitch studied at the Escuela Superior de Musica Reina Sofia in Madrid, Spain, and also attended the prestigious International Piano Foundation in Cadenabbia, Italy, for two years.

His solo recitals have taken him to venues throughout the former Soviet Union, as well as to Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain and the United States.

He has won top prizes in several international piano competitions, including the 1991 Busoni and the 1994 Kapell competitions. He also took first prize at both the 1998 Palm Beach invitational and the 2000 New Orleans international piano competitions.

However, to Ioudenitch, the most important prize was being one of two pianists who won gold medals at the 2001 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in Fort Worth, Texas.

It was the first time in the 40-year history of the prestigious contest that two top prizes were awarded.

Ioudenitch also won a second honour at the event, the Steven De Groote Memorial Award for the Best Performance of Chamber Music.

More amazingly, though, Ioudenitch won the Cliburn gold prize on his second attempt, something few pianists ever did because the famous week-long contest is as physically and emotionally gruelling as a marathon.

Certainly, nobody would have blamed Ioudenitch if he had opted out of last year's contest, especially since his experience at the 1997 Cliburn competition was nothing short of a disaster. Indeed, the story has already become a part of pianist folklore.

Ioudenitch, who was considered a real contender that year, withdrew from the competition, as he was suffering from second-degree burns on his right hand. It was more than a hiccup and a real career setback. Ioudenitch was forced to enter a doctorate programme at the University of Missouri in Kansas City.

But like a climber who fails in a first attempt at Mount Qomolangma, Ioudenitch could not resist the allure of the Cliburn competition. It is one of the most lucrative events in classical music, and winning is a real achievement. Finally he succeeded.

Now he has grown into one of the world's most promising young artists, exhibiting a probing attention to musical ideas that sets him apart from other artists of his generation.

"He possesses much of the disciplined extravagance and genuine artistic maturity that traditionally set great artists apart from simply brilliant ones," said Zhao Lin, presenter of the concert with the Forbidden City Concert Hall.

At the concert, Ioudenitch will play Mozart's piano sonata in A minor, Schubert's "Moments Musicaux" and some works of Prokofiev.

Mozart is his specialty. He has searched deeply into Mozart's sonata, shaping every phrase fluidly and poetically with a light, crisp yet never brittle touch. Nothing is blurred. His playing, even at its gentlest, has an understated rhythmic spine. There is also a lyrical expressiveness and spontaneity that's reminiscent of the old Russian style.

"Whenever I play music, my goal is to make the piano sing," he says.



File photo

The key to relaxation: Uzbekistan-born pianist Stanislav Ioudenitch will give a solo concert at the Forbidden City Concert Hall.

Volunteer treks across desert

Photographer catches dying environment on film

By YU NAN
China Daily staff

Camels are dying; children are drinking water filled with sand; deserts are encroaching on villages...

Scenes that most people in cities have never seen or imagined before are now on display in a photo exhibition at the Beijing Nature History Museum.

The startling pictures will shock visitors and touch their hearts.

The pictures were all taken by Lu Tongjing, 60, who has trekked in the deserts of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in North China and observed the lives of the local people there over the past seven years.

The exhibition is called "Camel Crying, Desert Encroachment SOS!" Lu hopes that his pictures will catch people's attention to the problems of ecological deterioration and maybe prompt action for ecological protection.

"I want to tell people the truth: Deserts are rapidly taking over the land we are living on," he said.

The exhibition, which started on Monday, is also being held to commemorate the 8th World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, according to Zhao Yemu, vice-curator of the museum that sponsors the exhibition.

Environmental calamity

Most of the pictures on show were taken in the Alxa Desert in the western areas of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region — the Badain Jaran Desert, Tengger Desert and Ulan Buh Desert.

People call the three the Alxa Desert because they are located in the Alxa Plateau and also because the grasslands which once joined them together have gradually disappeared.

Throughout history Alxa League, where the Alxa desert is located, has been known as the "hometown of camels." The number of two-humped camels numbered 250,000 in this area in the 1960s.

However, continuous drought has ravaged the area for decades. The local people as well as their camels are suffering from water shortages and soil erosion.

Less than 40,000 camels now exist in this area and the number keeps decreasing by around a thousand every year, according to local statistics.

"Even camels, regarded as the kings of the desert with the strongest endurance, now cannot survive in the desert, so how can people survive?" Lu said.

But the natural calamity is not the main killer of the camels. The profits made from cashmere has driven local people to increase the number of goats on the grassland. But goats, which eat grass leaves and grass roots, have aggravated the environmental and have helped speed the desertification process.

"Without enough grass to eat, goats begin to eat the pashm on each other's bodies, so goat herders dress them in colourful clothes to protect their only treasure," Lu said.

Besides over-grass, random logging, over-exploitation and the northwestern part of China, the deterioration of the ecosystems and increasing desertification have created hotbeds for sandstorms, Chinese experts have concluded.

"The Alxa Desert is one of the main sources of sandstorms that frequently sweeps across North and Northwest China in spring," Lu said.

"If the ecological condition in Alxa cannot be improved, Beijing will never escape from sandstorms, no matter how many trees are planted there."

Destroyer and volunteer

Lu himself is one of the witnesses to the exacerbation of the ecosystem.

Born in Weihai East China's Shandong Province, Lu has hosen to support the country's northwestern border areas and settled down in the suburbs of Baotou in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 1966. He was 24 then.

Lu still remembers the beautiful images of the mine area where he worked in the early years. "The grass was high to my waist, the rivers and brooks were full of fish and shrimp. The whole area was heaven."

"But in just 20 years, the river dried up, the grass withered away, and the deserts are close."

"Only recently the people begun to reconsider the way they've which has placed a heavy burden on the ecosystem."

Lu said "sorry" his speech to students in Beijing Forestry University last year. He admitted that he was one of the destroyers of the ecosystem.

The man who fell into the group for eco-protection is Sei Toyama, a world-known Japanese expert sand-control, who has helped China turn Gobi of Hobq Desert into an oasis of forests within 10 years.

He sold part of property in Japan and built a base in Encei in 1990 and called on Japanese people to join his activity in slowing down desertification in China.



Desert watcher: Lu Tongjing has taken over 10,000 pictures of deserts in North and Northwest China.

Under Toyama's calling, thousands of volunteers from both Japan and China travelled to Engebei to plant trees, making the vegetation rate rise from 15 per cent to 90 per cent within five years.

Curious about Toyama's actions, Lu took pictures of the 89-year-old Japanese in 1995.

"Toyama refused to let me take pictures of him at first," Lu recalled. "But I didn't leave the base and stayed to help the volunteers plant trees."

"For the first time in my life, I realized the importance of the ecosystem and eco-protection," Lu said.

Moved by Toyama's activities, Lu began his plan to observe the eco-conditions on his own. With his camera and his deep feelings for the grassland, he trekked into the desert.

Lu has visited all of the deserts in Inner Mongolia as well as some deserts in Gansu, Qinghai, Shaanxi provinces and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

Having taken nearly 10,000 pictures, Lu began to hold exhibitions in big cities across China to inform people about the seriousness of the eco-condition and the huge problem of desertification in northern and northwestern China.

"We cannot just sit and wait to be swallowed up by deserts and drought," Wang said emotionally.

What next?

People are not just waiting. Now six national programmes have been launched by the government to halt the spread of deserts, rehabilitate ecosystems in semi-arid areas and prevent more dry land from turning into sandy soil or desert-like areas, according to a recent conference sponsored by the State Forestry Administration.

These projects are designed to cover more than 85 per cent of China's sandy land to form a framework for the country's long-term strategy of controlling desertification.

Lu said an individual could also contribute to the eco-protection by either joining the volunteers or preventing the activities which exacerbate the environment — such as wasting water and illegally felling wood.

Lu said he would co-operate with some green non-governmental organizations in Beijing to organize volunteers in big cities across China to plant trees in the deserts.

Some visitors to his photography exhibitions immediately said they would join the group when it is established.

Lu also hopes to bring his photo exhibitions to colleges in Beijing. The new educated generation should be the main force to continue the eco-protection of China, he said.



Dying trees: Populus euphratica, a tree growing in dry areas, is withering in the Alxa Desert due to the continuous drought.



Goat in dress: Local residents dress their goats to prevent them from eating each other's pashm in times of famine.



Above: Local residents dig for saline cistanche, a lucrative medical herb. This has worsened the desertification process in the Alxa region. Right: A family living in the Alxa Desert have to walk miles in order to get water.

