He Luting: Musical defiance in Maoist China

Composer and educator He Luting (1903-1999) became one of the most influential musical figures in China's history. Trained in the Western classical tradition, He Luting promulgated the musical techniques of the West while dedicating himself to raising the standards of music in modern China. His outspoken advocacy of Western classical music rendered him a target during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), causing him to become a victim of one of the earliest and most vicious attacks of that campaign. His bravery and defiance garnered him national attention, and he achieved legendary status for thousands of Chinese intellectuals terrorized by that regime. This document will show the effects of the ever-changing political climate of Maoist China on Chinese musicians, as reflected in the life and career of He Luting. A thorough examination of the humble beginnings and life experiences of He Luting will clearly portray the ways in which the changing polemics of the Communist Party influenced the musical education and compositional style of prominent Chinese musicians. This document also depicts how the writings of Claude Debussy attracted the notice of those in the highest levels of government, and how He Luting's subsequent defense of Debussy's writings resulted in what they deemed "the most serious counterrevolutionary incident prior to the Cultural Revolution." He Luting's subsequent interrogation and violent abuse (which had the distinction of being the only live, televised struggle session during this regime) is portrayed, as well as its effects on intellectuals throughout China. A detailed account of the sufferings of prominent musicians in Shanghai and their persecution by the government is also given in comparison with the case of He Luting. Other issues explored will include the importance of music in Maoist China, and why many musicians were persecuted for defending a musical culture that was not their own.

Keyword
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