



Can the Miracle of Music Transform Africa's Poverty? China's Great Pianist Yuan Sheng Performs in Kenyan Slum

Text and Photos: Andre Vltchek

Introduction: In recent years controversy has centered on China's advance, both geopolitically and economically, in the South China Sea, East China sea, and in Africa. Here Andre Vltchek provides a look at another Chinese "export" as virtuoso pianist Yuan Sheng brings his music to the slums of Kenya and poses this question: can Africa follow in the footsteps of Venezuela and Brazil in using music as a way out of poverty for some of its youth? APJ.



The date is 15th of August 2012, the time - 11 o'clock in the morning. The place – a primary school in one of the toughest slums on African continent – Mukuru kwa Njenga in Nairobi, Kenya.

Although officially it is still a school holiday, the courtyard is overflowing with uniformed children from 7th and 8th grades: both boys and girls, Christian and Muslim. Kids are talking and giggling; they appear to be a little bit nervous in anticipation of the event that until recently would have been beyond their wildest imagination.

On the patio stands an upright Yamaha piano borrowed from The Kenya Conservatory of Music. It is not like those grand Steinways used in the music schools of rich countries, but it is well tuned and it looks imposing and slightly out of place in this humble school with broken glass panels, protected by barbed wire. And next to the piano suddenly appears one of Asia's most celebrated contemporary concert pianists, Yuan Sheng.

Maestro Sheng or Professor Sheng (he is a professor of piano at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing) has been my good friend for many years. We met in New York City where he graduated from the Manhattan School of Music and since then we have often traveled together by car all over China, discussing politics and arts.

Yuan has performed in over twenty countries throughout the world, recently in UK, Italy and the United States. He was awarded the Gold Medal in the First Ignacio Cervantes International Piano Competition held in Havana, Cuba in 2000.

And then, one day in January 2012 in Beijing, we began discussing the possibility of bringing him to Nairobi, to see if what music has done for years in Brazilian and Venezuelan slums could be implemented in Kenya. Or at least dreamed of.

The music is one of the great universal languages. Outstanding performances can inspire, even change the lives of children in deprived communities. And Kenya, for decades a shop window of African capitalism and staunch Western ally, has been hosting some of the most horrendous slums on the continent.



The idea impressed Yayo Segi, East African Head of Education for UNESCO. After having worked for years in Latin America, Ms. Segi has been a determined advocate of non-formal education. She believes that "education is a fundamental human right through which all other rights could be realized and education is all about equality of opportunities for all, regardless of who and where they are. Just because children are born and grow up in poor countries, it does not mean that they should be deprived of opportunities of learning through arts. In fact, we should never underestimate the power of arts to cultivate and fulfill potentials of

children." One of the initiatives that had inspired her was the world-famous concept of Venezuelan Youth Orchestras and their empowering effect on people from poor communities.

But Mozart and Cervantes in Mukuru kwa Njenga?

"Why not?" we said. Yuan recently collaborated in my feature documentary film "One Flew Over Dadaab", depicting life in the biggest refugee camp in the world, housing mainly poor Somali refugees. Yuan recorded Bach's Goldberg Variations and my brilliant film editor in Tokyo, Hata Takeshi, managed to link Bach's music with the tragedy in the middle of the Northern Kenyan desert. It worked, it was powerful, and we felt we should continue along the same lines, building bridges between the continents and cultures.

First the children sang. A few hundred of them arrived, many smiling, some confused about what was awaiting them. The songs they performed were mainly local Kenyan compositions.

Then Yuan spoke to them, explaining the essence of classical music, talking about Mozart, Liszt, Chopin and Beethoven as if those giants were his old friends: people suffering from pain, longing for love, forced to leave their beloved countries.

I had heard him speak once in Manila, Philippines and I knew that he would 'connect' even with the dwellers of the toughest slum in Nairobi. He had that gift, the ability to approach, touch and convince an audience.

His love for the music has had deep roots – even in the past that preceded his birth. After the revolution, his parents, both famous musicians, were known to load their grand piano and violin on the back of a truck and travel all over China to play for people in rural communities.



The children were listening as if he were reading to them from some thrilling fairytale. Still, many had no inkling of what was to come.

But then he began playing. First it was a Mozart Sonata, followed by Liebestraum by Liszt, then Chopin's Polonaise.

And it was stunning. It was easy to forget that the upright piano stood in a dusty courtyard. The performance was as brilliant as if it were in the top concert hall somewhere in Beijing or New York. Yuan Sheng did not cheat and that was obvious from the beginning. In the show of internationalism and solidarity, he was giving these children from seemingly hopeless slums what he would give to some over-cultured audience in a big city, maybe more, probably much more.

He spoke to them before each piece, as if sharing his innermost thoughts. He spoke about the pain Cervantes, a Cuban child prodigy who studied at the Paris Conservatory in the 1860s, had felt before leaving Cuba, and about the Afro-Cuban rhythms in the dances by Lecuona. He introduced them to the magical universe of Chinese composer

Peixun Chen and his "Autumn Moon". And then, at the end, came Beethoven's monumental Pathétique Sonata in its entirety and in all its splendor.



I observed and filmed initial bewilderment on the faces of local children. All doubts were gone and it was clear that many of them understood clearly what was happening before their eyes.

"Because I had never seen or listened to the piano in a live performance before, I did not know what to expect! It sounds very beautiful. I would like to try to learn," said 7th grader Anna Kamau right after the concert.

Peter Mwanzi, an 8th Grade student was visibly moved: "I really enjoyed Mr. Sheng's performance. We were told that he is a world famous concert pianist and professor of music. I am sure he is! I am happy that he has come to our school, instead of going to so many others in Nairobi. It makes me feel special!"

Ms. Segi spoke to the students and teachers after the performance and was told how successful the event was, how much more such initiatives are needed.

Mrs. Ciprien Wanjohi, Principal of Mukuru kwa Njenga Primary School was impressed

and appreciative:

"We are really grateful to have had the opportunity of interacting with Mr. Sheng today at this primary school. As you know, this school is located right in the heart of a tough urban slum. Students are born, grow up, live and die in this place; they don't know anything about what is going on outside the parameters of this poor slum. So having someone as great as Mr. Sheng is an incredible exposure to the students here. Also I want to tell you that we have a lot of talented students. There is one student who is a gifted runner and has recently represented Nairobi Province in an athletic event. I am sure there are many more whom we do not know who have great talent such as in the field of music. Although means are always limited, I do hope that this performance today has encouraged students to pursue music."

At one point we left the school. One of the teachers became our guide. We walked for almost an hour, surrounded by misery, hopelessness, open sewage, toxic spills, desperate eyes of women and children.

Yuan was shocked. He had never seen such open and screaming misery, not even in South Africa, Egypt, or the Philippines where he had been performing. But after a few minutes he began interacting with the people around him. Later he said:

"Coming to Kenya, I further realized that there is so much social injustice in the world. The story goes often untold, the suffering unrealized or unrecognized... It is unfortunate but it is a fact that people at the bottom of the social ladder are deprived of education. To equip them with the ultimate weapon for the improvement of their lives, one has to guide them toward the ability to study and to think. Therefore to me, education is the number one issue that has to be addressed here."

We were walking through a slum that could easily swallow even a group of people with armed security guards. We were walking unprotected, just with a teacher from the local school. But soon we realized how revered the teacher was, how revered were educators in general. We were safe with him. And when the people learned that Yuan came to perform for their children and that he came from far away China – that he came without any demand of financial compensation – they became warm and welcoming.

I was convinced that sharing and introducing great art and great artists and thinkers to the poorest of the poor would work not only in Venezuela and Brazil – it could easily work here and everywhere else!

[ANDRE VITCHEK](#) is a novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. His book on Western imperialism in the South Pacific, *Oceania*, is available [here](#). His provocative book about post-Suharto Indonesia and market-fundamentalism is *Indonesia – The Archipelago of Fear*. Vitchek presently resides and works in East Asia and Africa.

Recommended Citation: Andre Vitchek, "Can the Miracle of Music Transform Africa's Poverty? China's Great Pianist Yuan Sheng Performs in Kenyan Slum," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 10, Issue 35, No. 4, August 27, 2012.