



## CHINA

# LET'S NOT FORGET FUNCTION

by Rose Mary Su

**China is developing** at a dizzying speed, but in its haste to showcase its progress to the world, some design vision is lost. One place where this is particularly obvious is the country's program for new performing arts centers.

In preparation for the 2008 Olympics, the government poured generous funding into the construction of the National Grand Theater in Beijing. This venue consisted of three spaces: a large opera house, a major concert hall, and a smaller theater. The theater was designed by Paul Andreu, a French architect known more for his airports than performing arts centers, but he achieved what most Chinese view as progress: a Western-style monumental architecture that is a standout building in modern Beijing.

With more government funding, the rush to build performing arts venues continued to other cities, including smaller ones. Many of these cities do not have an existing facility nor resident artists who would use such a space. The government's strategy seems to be "build it and they will come."

Such a rush for progress comes at a price. Unlike first-tier cities where there are three performance halls within each Grand Theater, many of the smaller cities have one multipurpose hall that must accommodate all types of uses. The programming of these spaces can be an afterthought because the primary goal is to provide showstopping exterior architecture to attract tourists (inviting comparisons to Sydney). This makes it extremely challenging to satisfy the acoustical and operational needs of a wide range of performances, in particular those that rely heavily on visiting performers. Maintaining and operating these monumental halls can also be

a challenge, as the funding is left up to the local authorities rather than to Beijing.

What types of performances occur in these venues? Since the Cultural Revolution, traditional Peking opera, with its more intimate courtyard-style setting, has been replaced by propagandistic operas more akin to a heavily amplified Broadway show, with casts of hundreds, including dancers, acrobats, choruses, and sometimes even soldiers. Such extravaganzas require a huge stage. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a traditional Chinese instrumental ensemble playing in the pentatonic scale ideally would perform in a more intimate setting more comparable to a Western recital space. I once heard a *guzheng* ensemble (*guzheng* is a type of Chinese zither) in a multipurpose hall; the musicians were heavily amplified, and the performance was not memorable. On another visit to Beijing, I went to a *guzheng* maker's studio. With a more intimate setting, I was able to appreciate the timbre of this string instrument.

As the composer Tan Dun has said, "China is learning fast, but it has missed the point by building concert halls that are houses for rent instead of institutions with resident companies, production budgets, and a management team." The funding granted to these cities focused mainly on designing and building the venues, not on the continuing production of the events. As architects and acousticians, it is our responsibility to guide our clients and not simply use the opportunity to design a facility that is flashy but not functional. One hopes that as China races to build these once-in-a-lifetime performing arts facilities, it will make time to pause and plan out programs for the next generation. ■

**ROSE MARY SU** is an acoustical consultant for Acentech, specializing in performance space design and noise control. A native of Taiwan, she has a lifelong love of music.

**ABOVE**  
National Grand Theater, Beijing.  
Photo: Paul Maurer.