

## Western Choral Music Sung by Farmers in Chinese Rural Fields

### *Chinese Yunnan Little Well Miao Farmers Choir*

By Li Xi

A farmer's choir from the small town of Little Well, in the Yunnan province of China, attracted everyone's attention in the China Central Television's Young Choirs Competition in 2008. The chorus is fully comprised of Miao farmers. They wear very traditional clothes that they made themselves. They look so relaxed and natural that you can almost smell the fragrance of the earth from their sun burnt faces. Surprisingly, the choir didn't sing local folk songs, but instead they sang "For Unto Us a Child is Born" from Handel's *Messiah*.



**Choral Conductor Li Xi**

Their voices were very harmonious, but it seemed a little strange that their sound was a mix of bel canto and a little Miao style as well. Their sopranos and altos were very bright but it didn't sound sharp at all. Their tenors and basses were deep and dignified. They combined the fresh Miao style and the sacred church music style perfectly, which generated a peculiar effect. They performed like musicians with full formal music training. In this particular competition, they needed to sing a choral song completely impromptu, and they did an excellent job.

During the Expo 2008 International Folk Music Week, the Yunnan Little Well Miao Farmers Choir came to the National Theatre again to perform. Their excellent performance was warmly received by the audience.



On October 8, 2008, a Solfeggio Teaching Forum was held at the Chinese Central Conservatory of Music, which is the highest music institution in China. The organizing committee invited the

Yunnan Little Well Miao Farmers Choir to perform a concert for the forum. In the concert, the audience listened to the choir sing many selections from *Messiah*, such as, “Worthy is the Lamb,” “And the Glory of the Lord,” “The Lord Gave the Word,” and “Hallelujah,” and a setting of the “Gloria” by Mozart. They also sang “Zigeunerliedchen” which is from *Liederalbum für die Jugend* Op.79, No. 7 (1849), composed by Robert Schumann (1810 - 1856) and the Scottish folk song “Auld Lang Syne.” They sang sixteen songs in this special chorus concert. The audience really admired how well the choir could sing the music from the Baroque and Romantic periods so perfectly.



People couldn't help wondering how choir members from such remote rural areas, who never received professional music training, nor were highly educated, could perform western choral music so professionally. How could they sing with such wonderful bel canto voices? Why was their Solfeggio level so high? Why did they not sing local folk songs instead of singing western choral music? Where did they learn the western music? Who taught them?



With wonder and doubt, we went to Small Well, the biggest Miao Village in Kunming, Yunnan. Small Well is located in Fumin County in the southeast section of Kunming City. It is in the mountains at an altitude of 2380 meters (7808 feet). A rugged mountain road is the village's only connection to the outside world. There are 475 villagers living there, 85% of whom are Christian.

Because they have over a century of history in Christian beliefs, the village is very harmonious and peaceful, and the villagers always try to maintain honesty, trust, and simple folk charity. In

this remote hill village which is far away from the prosperous world, the villagers are poor in wealth but rich in spirit. The heavy physical labor and poor village life don't make them unhappy, but instead encourage them to love singing and to love life. The members of the Yunnan Small Well Miao Farmers Choir are just ordinary villagers, but the villagers here differ from



other villages. Everyone in this village loves to sing. Although they have never studied it in school, their level of [solfeggio](#) and musical skill is as high as any professional musician. Singing western choral music is the custom of the villagers here.

How did this happen? Why did they form these customs? Who taught them? In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mr. Samuel Pollard (1864 - 1915), who was a British missionary, came to this area of China. He devoted twenty years to preaching and improving the cultural level of the local people. He made a lot of remarkable contributions, and eventually died in northwestern China in the city of Guizhou.

Meanwhile, Mr. Arthur G. Nicholls, who was an Australian missionary, also came to this area. He taught the local Miao villagers the bel canto style. They were taught to sing their appropriate voice part. From then on, the soprano, alto, tenor and bass parts were taught to their children and their children's children from generation to generation. They taught their children the scores and the lyrics and this custom never stopped.

The villagers often sing Christian hymns which were sung by their grandparents. They can also sing secular choral songs. After they finish their physical work for the day they often sing together at night. Singing Christian hymns is their main cultural activity. Everyone in the village can sing. There is no professional conductor and no professional vocal teacher in the village.

Most of the members of the village only have a primary school education. Singing is an integral part of life which accompanies them throughout their whole life.

Yunnan Little Well Miao Farmers Choir was founded in 1986. There are now sixty-three

members in the choir. All are young people from families in the village and they are all ordinary peasants. After their daily labor, they get together and sing just for fun. One villager said it in simple words, "We like to sing, and then sing."

In recent years, the choir often has had the opportunity to perform outside the village. But whenever they return home they are still ordinary peasants who still carry a hoe to work in the field.

Because the chorus doesn't understand the Arabic numerals on the sheet music, they use moveable do solfege, and they use the old Miao letters to name the notes. This makes the music easier to learn for the young villagers.

Now the choir can sing more than 400 songs, often in foreign languages. They are familiar with the music of Beethoven, Schumann, Bach, Wagner, Mozart, and other famous composers. They are also familiar with the works of the Baroque period, the Classical period and Romantic period. Considering their relative isolation from the western world, this is a truly amazing phenomenon.

This short of stature Miao man in the picture above, who was answering the host lady's questions, is the conductor of the choir. His name is Long Guang Yuan. He had just finished conducting the chorus at the National Grand Theatre and came back to the village. Now he is busy



with the corn harvest in the field which is the food for the coming year. They mustn't delay it. Mr. Long Guang Yuan first learned singing from the old men in the village when he was eighteen years old. He has been the conductor of the choir for ten years. He is an ordinary peasant and works in the field every day. He leads the chorus every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday evening after work.



This is the youngest member of the choir. Her hair is tied in a simple ponytail and she is wearing homespun clothes. She looks like an ordinary girl from an ordinary village, but she has bright and clear eyes. There are four cows at home that she and her younger sister need to care for. She studied at school for five years but then she had to quit school and stay home to support her family. She thinks that this is the fate of every villager.

“What do you usually do every day?”

“I do field's work for my family.”

“How many songs can you sing now?”

“I think I can sing more than one hundred songs.”

The villagers say that as Christians, children here participate in choir at a very young age, and all of them love to sing.

When she sang a song for us, this small unremarkable child suddenly changed into a beautiful girl. Her voice was so beautiful, it seemed like we were listening to a song sung in a music hall. It touched our hearts and warmed us with her passion for singing.



This is the Chinese Yunnan Little Well Miao Farmers Choir. It is a very special choir. Although they are very famous in China today, they retain their simple life, and this art form still exists in its original state. They pick up a hoe to work the fields, put down the hoe to sing. They are so plain but their songs are so harmonious.

With their dreams of life, with their gratitude to heaven and to the earth, their beautiful songs are from deep in their heart. They talk to God with their pure voices. They sing these amazing songs year after year, from generation to generation, and only get better over time...

You can listen to the songs sung by Chinese Yunnan Little Well Miao Farmers Choir at the following sites online:

<http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/tvNXgphA4Ow/>

<http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/hnhDulaRrag/>

<http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/9bB87T7ntcQ/>

<http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/Lo3-YZwwfz4/>

[http://v.ku6.com/show/\\_uCh14EHBGNakIE4.html](http://v.ku6.com/show/_uCh14EHBGNakIE4.html)

[http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMTYxMzA4NTY0.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTYxMzA4NTY0.html)

<http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/zugZBZDjBmc/>

**Li Xi** is the founding conductor of the Shenzhen Yantian Foreign Language Primary School Children's Choir in China which she began in 2001. In July 2010, the choir won the gold medal in the Champions Competition of the 6<sup>th</sup> World Choir Games, demonstrating its enormous development over the past decade. Xi enjoys collecting folk music and adapting the folk music into a *cappella* songs. She is a member of the International Federation for Choral Music (IFCM), the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), the China Choral Association, and the China Society of Music Education (CSME). **Email: Jack.zeyu@gmail.com**