When it opened in 1869, the Transcontinental Railroad linked the United States as never before. To mark the 150th anniversary of the massive infrastructure project, thirteen orchestras along the route have joined forces to commission Zhou Tian’s *Transcend*, which evokes the railroad’s construction, the natural landscape, the plight of migrant railroad builders, and the opening of the West. Orchestras are not only performing the score, they are examining their own communities’ histories and connections.

*by Jeff Lunden*
The Reno Philharmonic was looking for a way to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2019 with a commission, when the orchestra realized it coincided with another major anniversary: the sesquicentennial of the completion of the nation’s first transcontinental railroad. “We just got more and more excited when we realized how seminal the Transcontinental Railroad was to our community,” recalls Tim Young, president and CEO of the Reno Philharmonic. “I think many people here don’t realize that Reno only exists because of the Transcontinental Railroad. Charles Crocker [one of the four founders of the Central Pacific Railroad] stood outside what became the city and pulled the name out of a hat. The name was Jesse Lee Reno. And Crocker said, ‘Okay, this town is going to be named Reno.’ The next day the lots went on sale, and that’s how the town began in 1868.”

Laura Jackson, the Reno Philharmonic’s music director since 2009, knew who she wanted to commission: Chinese-born composer Zhou Tian. Early in her tenure, Jackson programmed Zhou’s *The Palace of Nine Perfections*, an impressionistic tone poem inspired by a seventeenth-century Chinese painting. “I saw how much people delighted in his presence when he would stand onstage and explain his music,” she remembers. “I thought, he is the perfect person for me to pick for this composition. He’s somebody that my audience really embraces and my orchestra loves.”

The commission was an idea that Zhou Tian embraced as well. “I was very excited—it’s such a big honor,” he says. “At the time, I didn’t know that much about the first Transcontinental Railroad. I said yes, but at the back of mind I was like, ‘Okay. Time to research what to do with this topic.’ ”

The Transcontinental Railroad was the nineteenth-century equivalent of the Moon shot in 1969. It was a massive engineering feat, begun in the middle of the Civil War. “The 1862 legislation signed by Abraham Lincoln was really aspirational in tone,” explains Patricia LaBounty, curator of the Union Pacific Railroad Museum in Council Bluffs, Iowa. “This was a creation of a railroad longer than any other. This, in many respects, was a new frontier for engineering, for industry, for exploration.”

The Union Pacific was formed to begin construction out of Omaha, Nebraska, while the Central Pacific, which was already in existence, started construction out of Sacramento, California. In many respects, it was very much an American story; both railroads relied extensively on immigrant labor, both railroads engaged in financial chicanery, and Native American populations were negatively impacted by the incursion into their territory. But, for better or for worse, the railroad changed the country: for passengers and freight, a six- to eight-month journey from coast to coast was reduced to a week. “That line still is in use,” says LaBounty. “It still is relevant to people today.”

Very quickly, the Reno Philharmonic realized that an instrumental piece about the Transcontinental Railroad might appeal to other orchestras. “It also had the same impact across the country,” says Young, “particularly in Utah, at Promontory Summit, where the lines were connected. But, basically every community along the line had had that same experience in their history.” So, with the help of Scott Faulkner, the orchestra’s principal bass, they contacted orchestras along the railroad’s

**Transcendent Transcontinental**

Zhou Tian’s *Transcend* was commissioned by the Reno Philharmonic in partnership with the Utah Symphony, Omaha Symphony, Sacramento Philharmonic and Opera, Boise Philharmonic, Arapahoe Philharmonic, Central Wisconsin Symphony, Cheyenne Symphony, Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras, Evanston Symphony, Idaho State-Civic Symphony, Michigan State University, and Stanford University. The Reno Philharmonic gave *Transcend*’s world premiere in April 2019, with performances by the partner orchestras continuing into 2020.
original route—and beyond—and found twelve additional willing ensembles: the Utah Symphony, Omaha Symphony, Sacramento Philharmonic and Opera, Boise Philharmonic, Arapahoe Philharmonic, Central Wisconsin Symphony, Cheyenne Symphony, Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras, Evanston Symphony, Idaho State-Civic Symphony, Michigan State University, and Stanford University. “Each of the orchestras bought in to the project, using a sliding scale based on budget size, to help defray the costs of the commission,” explains Young. “So that’s been very useful, obviously, in putting it together. And they’ve also invited Zhou to their communities.”

**Railroad Ties**

In 2017, Zhou Tian embarked on both a listening tour—hearing the various orchestras in the consortium, meeting conductors and players—and a research tour. “I must say, as a composer, I have never done so much research and had so much fun just to prepare a single piece,” he says. “Along the way there were many, many inspirations and I tried to put them into this piece,” which he named *Transcend*.

With the team from the Reno Philharmonic, the composer walked through the Donner Summit Tunnel, high in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, where the Chinese workers for the Central Pacific risked life and limb to blast through the rock, and braved avalanches during the winter. Though there are no definitive counts, it’s estimated that as many as 1,000 workers died. Laura Jackson says she had an epiphany while walking through the tunnel with Zhou: “I’m thinking, what have I done? I’ve asked a Chinese-American composer to compose a piece commemorating this history that just annihilated so many people who share his heritage. And I just turned to him and I said ‘We are not just celebrating, we are commemorating. We’re commemorating a transformation of this nation.’”

Zhou Tian recalls: “Visiting the tunnel was a powerful experience. Reading about it is one thing, but when you actually see how long the tunnel is and how dark it is and how cold it is … to experience just the little bit of how difficult and how huge this whole project was, it was inspiring.” Zhou used some of the sounds he heard that day for musical inspiration. The echo of the pebbles under his feet became the foundation of “Pulse,” the first movement of his unabashedly tonal, colorful three-movement piece. After a quiet, elegiac opening with strings, which Zhou likens to the “expansive desert of Utah and Nevada,” the piece erupts into a propulsive 3/4 meter, with eighth-note triplets. It’s punctuated by brass and percussion inflections, representing the blasts of black powder used to carve out the tunnels and ledges for the railroad’s
roadbed in the Sierras. It also has melodic elements which suggest Irish folk music—Irish workers helped complete the Union Pacific portion of the railroad’s route through Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah.

Other trips Zhou took yielded other insights. He traveled to Omaha, where the Union Pacific has its headquarters and the railroad runs through the city. Zhou was also careful to reference folk music of the Chinese workers on the railroad, mainly in his second movement, “Promise.” “I imagined 100 percent of those Chinese workers who worked on the railroad were men, so they traveled a long, long way to America to work on this project,” the composer says. “They must have made promises to their families to reunite with them somehow in America or back in China. And many of them didn’t.” The meditative movement, Zhou Tian explains, is a “vocalise for those who sought a better future.”

Transcend had its world premiere at the Pioneer Center for the Performing Arts in Reno, Nevada on April 27, 2019. Reno Philharmonic Music Director Laura Jackson is unequivocal in her enthusiasm for the final results. She writes, in an email, “It is a GREAT piece and the audience went nuts over it.”

Interstate Transit

Thierry Fischer, music director of the Utah Symphony, is a fan of the piece as well. The Utah Symphony was part of the commissioning consortium and performed Transcend in May 2019. “It’s very approachable on an immediate basis,” he says. “It’s very clear and it’s colorful. It’s spacious, it’s deep.” He adds that being part of the commission is meaningful for residents of Salt Lake City: “We just thought this project is very symbolic and very strong. And it means a lot to the Chinese community in Salt Lake, and to the people who have families or people who worked on this massive achievement.” Indeed, once the railroad construction reached Utah, Brigham Young, leader of the Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and a founder of Salt Lake City: “We just thought this project is very symbolic and very strong. And it means a lot to the Chinese community in Salt Lake, and to the people who have families or people who worked on this massive achievement.”

Working with Utah Symphony | Utah Opera, composer Zhou Tian interacts with elementary school children who sent him creative ideas for his composition, Transcend, thanking them and identifying moments in the score that sprang from their suggestions a year prior.
wanted to enhance the audience experience during Transcend’s premiere in May 2019; there was a traditional Chinese music ensemble performing in the lobby of Abravanel Hall and “an extract from an exhibit from Stanford University all about the building of the Transcontinental Railroad. We’re trying to amplify the performances that we’re giving, trying to place those in some historical context.” In addition, the Utah Opera (partner organization with Utah Symphony) premiered Transcontinental Railroad-themed “ten-minute operas” by other composers in several cities this spring.

Transcend kicked off Omaha Symphony’s 2019-20 season in September. Omaha Symphony President and CEO Jennifer Boomgaarden says that with Union Pacific, a major donor, “having its headquarters here and, of course, the railroad running through the city, it made complete sense for us to be part of this joint commission. Things like this can help celebrate a momentous occasion.”

Writing a new piece of music to be performed by thirteen orchestras, many in communities that have been profoundly impacted by the Transcontinental Railroad, has been a significant experience for the 38-year-old composer. “I was very honored to be part of this project,” says Zhou Tian. “As a Chinese-born composer who immigrated to this country and was educated here at many of its music schools, I was very moved to create this new work—to tell a musical story, to convey a sense of spiritual bliss, and to pay tribute to my own cultural heritage.”

To place Zhou Tian’s score about the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad in context, the Reno Philharmonic and the other commissioning orchestras are presenting events, community discussions, and pre-concert talks with a focus on local history. In photo, the Reno Philharmonic partnered with Union Pacific to display information about the rail line’s history.

Jeff Lunden is a freelance arts reporter whose work is frequently heard on NPR and other public radio outlets. He’s also a musical theater composer who wrote a show about the Transcontinental Railroad that played in New York City and toured the country for Theatreworks/USA, a leading presenter of theater for young audiences.
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