Making Musical Modernity: The Shanghai Municipal Orchestra in a Colonial City

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Abstract

By examining the development of Western classical music in modern Shanghai, this paper argues that a shared era of musical modernity was created amid segregation within the colonial municipal government, with the interactions and exchanges between diasporic European musicians and Chinese performers. Rather than following the traditional narrative in treating Western music as a simple instrument of colonial power, this paper examines the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra within the racially divided municipal structure of the International Settlement, where orchestral performance functioned as a symbol of colonial authority but at the same time was constantly redefined by the active participation of native Chinese musician intellectuals and urban residents. The study, through analyzing the careers of Mario Paci and Arrigo Foa, will show how diasporic European musicians were able to recalibrate inherited European traditions under war, exile, and political upheaval. At the same time, Chinese performers transformed Western repertoire, using it as a means for social mobility and recognising their own modern cultural identity. Ultimately, through a historical analysis grounded in class and postcolonialism, this paper demonstrates that the encounters, where local intervention and crisis occurred, allowed the reorientation of musical authority in the city of Shanghai.

Keywords: Western classical music, Colonial modernity, Cultural exchange, Diasporic musicians

European music was first introduced into China between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by Christian missionaries, most notably by the Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci. In 1601, Ricci used his knowledge of Western mathematics, science, and music to gain access to the imperial court of the Ming Empire of China, where he established cultural relationships with Chinese rulers, officials, and the Confucian literati. In order to gain the favour of the emperor, he brought a clavichord as a diplomatic gift (Melvin and Cai, 2004). These exchanges led to the publication of a music theory text that blended Chinese and Western perspectives. These early encounters laid the foundation for the hybridization of Chinese and Western music, which, however, would emerge more fully in the nineteenth century (Olson and Peng, 2025).

The consolidation of Western music in China, however, was institutionalized and popularized only in the modern era following the Opium War of 1840. In his famous book China: Tradition and Transformation, historian John King Fairbank elaborated his idea that the Opium War should be regarded as the start of the so-called “modern era” of Chinese history and classifies this event as a clash of different world orders. The Opium War, Fairbank argues, is not about only opium itself, but the inevitable conflict between the traditional tributary system of China and the new political, economic, and social order established by the Western states (Fairbank, 1989). He argues that the tributary system of China will eventually

be changed by the West not only due to its “relative military weakness,” but also due to “the currents of ideas—concept of science learning, individual freedom, and economic growth, for example—which were beginning to sweep over the modern world” (Fairbank, 1989). After the Opium War of 1840 and the Treaty of Nanjing of 1842, ports were opened to foreign powers. They granted various privileges, including extraterritoriality, in Chinese cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou. Fairbank claims that Western music arrived with the “current of ideas” flowing into China during the colonial occupation, as part of the missionary curriculum. Chinese students were introduced to Western instruments such as the piano and violin, as well as Western staff notation and harmonic systems. As part of missionary education, music also came to be associated with modernity and sophistication. In the Chinese context, the widespread adoption of Western music occurred alongside the founding of modern institutions where the state expanded systematic religious networks, improved education systems, and commercialized music performances. (Olson and Peng, 2025).

Traditional Orientalist scholars, such as Fairbank, as previously mentioned, often promote the narrative that Western ideas in China function more as a structural power than as a carrier for cultural significance. These scholars often see China, and other ‘Oriental’ civilizations such as the Ottoman and Mughal Empires, as passively accepting the ‘more advanced’ and ‘modern’ Western ideas. However, historical analysis demands a more nuanced

understanding. This traditional narrative portraying China as passively accepting Western ideas is a problematic argument, as it dramatically oversimplifies history–unlike the situation in India and much of the Middle East, where Britain and France were able to rule over large territories, China was never fully controlled by colonisers. (Clifford, 1991). The city of Shanghai was a much more contested space between the Chinese and foreign residents. As Clifford describes in his 1927 account of the Shanghai Uprising:

> "At noon, the factory whistles sound, their voices echoed by the sirens of the rusting Chinese ships lying in the Huangpu River, under the solid gray buildings of the banks and trading houses that line the Bund. From the cotton mills and silk filatures of Xiaoshadu and Zhabei, from the docks and godowns of Pudong and Yangtszepoo, from stores and offices, from hundreds and hundreds of little workshops crowded into the mean streets that cut the slums, the workers spill out into the roads where trams and buses now stand still, abandoned by their crews. Suddenly Shanghai is on strike, and within an hour will come the rattle of gunfire as the insurrection begins...Almost ten thousand British soldiers already patrol the streets of the International Settlement, and before night falls on an embattled city, American marines will join them and the other foreign troops that have come to protect the city's forty thousand

foreigners from the real and imagined dangers of China's first revolutionary war." (Clifford, 1991)

This passage demonstrates the tension between the colonisers and Chinese agency, and the limited control foreigners had. Therefore, in this contested environment, Western classical music developed through cultural negotiation, in which Chinese thinkers engaged with Western ideology and strove to integrate China's cultural identity within it—something that would have been impossible through colonial imposition alone. The city's orchestras, conservatories, and performance venues were sites where colonial governance and Chinese agency intersected.

Through tracing the historical intellectual exchanges between European diaspora musicians and their Chinese counterparts in Shanghai in the modern era, this paper argues that Western classical music in China emerged through these interactions rather than as a straightforward instrument of colonial or imperial power. By examining the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, diasporic musicians, and Chinese performers' negotiation of cultural authority, it demonstrates how music became a site of cosmopolitan exchange. In this space, local performers were able to dismantle the colonial origins of these traditions to create a new Chinese identity.

The analysis will begin by establishing the significance of Western music in

Shanghai's governmental structures, underscoring how inequalities within manifested in concert programming and the composition of audiences; only through this hierarchical society did cultural negotiation happen. Then, it will trace the roles of key figures such as Mario Paci and Arrigo Foa, who exemplify how diasporic musicians navigated institutional authority and professionalization to allow Chinese musicians and audience to dismantle the racial barriers that they themselves were hired to maintain. Following this, the paper examines the paths of Chinese musicians, especially those younger and those in conservatories, and how they appropriated and transformed European repertoire to claim their own cultural identity. Finally, it will situate these changes and developments into the broader transnational networks and show that the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra was a site where colonial prestige and Chinese claims to assertion merged. Through this multi-layered approach, the paper suggests that the modern Chinese musical life emerged from the entanglement of the prestige from the European diaspora and the generation of Chinese musicians determined to reclaim their cultural agency.

The colonial administration utilized the institutionalization of Western Classical music in Shanghai to reinforce racial stratification. At that time, the Shanghai Municipal Council was aligning the administration of the International Settlement with the broader goals of the British Empire (Yang, 2017). The existence of the orchestra was important because it made

the hierarchy in the society visible. The Shanghai Municipal Orchestra functioned not only as entertainment but as an instrument that would aestheticize the authority of the government. By playing European symphonic repertoire, the orchestra materialized the claim that colonial rule was sophisticated and modern, and the orchestra hall served as a space in which racial hierarchy could be described as an exquisite taste.

Despite the colonial administration's economic exploitation of the indigenous population and the Shanghai locals' different forms of resistance to colonial rule, cultural exchange remained close: "contact between Chinese and foreign musicians in China was generally not antagonistic. Foreign musicians did not behave in a condescending manner…Chinese musicians hardly ever perceived them to do so" (Mittler, 2005). To understand the basis of Shanghai's cultural diversity, it is necessary to understand the relationships between the different classes in settler society. The social composition of the foreign population made it impossible to view it as a single front (Cohen, 2000). The expatriate world of Shanghai contained officials, missionaries, commercial employees, property holders, and settlers of modest means, whose interests did not always coincide (Wilkinson, 1992). Even across these differences, however, groups had a collective desire for separation from the Chinese. Cultural institutions provided a means of consolidating that separation without resorting to overt coercion by authorities; meanwhile, concert

programming, centered on European music, reinforced the idea that high culture flowed only from Western centers. Because the orchestra performed prestigious European music, it made the colonial government's authority more legitimate. Musical performance was thus used as a subtle extension of status and power, aligning cultural sophistication with political control.

With the fluidity of cultural and intellectual exchange in Shanghai, Western music could be spread beyond official venues. It entered Chinese households through labor networks and private instruction, cutting across racial and class boundaries (Yang, 2017). The narrative of colonial imposition is challenged by the fact that Western music was able to be adapted by Chinese spaces even before formal desegregation. Even when access to concerts was restricted to only the foreign elite, musical knowledge had already leaked out across the boundaries that the authorities tried to enforce.

During moments of political crisis, the illusion of political control proved untenable. The protests of 1919 and the violence of 1925, where clashes between Chinese workers and settlement police triggered nationwide boycotts, exposed the fragility of the colonial authority. It was through these boycotts that the British Empire realised the exclusiveness of the settlers could not be sustained. (Cohen, 2000). Locals demanded increasing access to public amenities, and the British policy was forced to respond (Yang, 2017). During this time, the orchestra was unable to maintain its exclusivity. As the institution depended on a large

audience and funding, the orchestra needed to desegregate and produce incremental change. By rebranding the orchestra from a racialized group to a cosmopolitan body, the government could use Chinese inclusion for public stability. This process had already been structured by the segregated geography of the International Settlement. The International Settlement divided many spaces with racial hierarchy, with concert halls being included. However, because these places were open to the foreign public, they were also places of ideological divide. The foreign community had opposing interests within—some supporting the view of rigid separation, others encouraging Shanghai to become a global metropolis (Wilkinson, 1992). Even with the advancing integration, the British did not fully satisfy Chinese demands. The outcome was not pure equality but a "hybridity" (McCleod, 2010). The British tried to maintain power by shifting from total exclusion to the inclusion of only certain people. By opening concert halls at a high price while still requiring strict European etiquette, they hoped to satisfy Chinese demands while keeping authority. Nonetheless, with the inclusion of Chinese elites, the orchestra hall became a breeding ground for musical osmosis, the exchange of musical ideas (Yang, 2017).

The transformation was documented in the concert programs during the interwar period, as there was a gradual incorporation of Chinese compositions and Chinese musicians within conservatory and orchestral structures. Admittedly, European music remained central;

it was no longer performed exclusively for only the expatriate public. Instead, it was interpreted by Chinese audiences with their own unique frameworks of national renewal and identity. The very institution designed to symbolize European superiority thus became a site where Chinese cultural agency could be exercised (Yang, 2017).

The Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, therefore, illustrates how colonial cultural spaces could perform contradictory functions. On one level, the orchestral hierarchy was legitimized by aligning European art music with municipal authority. On another, it created conditions for cross-racial exchange that colonial administrators had not originally intended. Segregation within spaces concentrated cultures into certain venues, but also allowed contact points for the transformation of identities. Chinese musicians who entered the orchestral space not only absorbed foreign traditions but also adapted them and repurposed them for their own aspirations. This evolution of classical music in Shanghai was driven by a complex intersection of settler politics, migrant labor, and Chinese participation. Ultimately, the colonial city was a space where institutional hierarchy and urban crisis forced various actors to collide, collaborate, and ultimately rewrite the musical landscape.

This structural collision between colonial rulers and Chinese locals was personified in 1918 by the arrival of the Italian virtuoso Mario Paci. Originally a touring virtuoso, a serious case of pneumonia left Paci bedridden in Shanghai General Hospital for two months. During

this recovery, Paci's postponed recitals and damaged Steinway piano led him to spend his time reacquainting himself with the city's social and musical life. While reveling in the "hedonistic delights" of the French Concession, Paci spent his evenings in cafes and restaurants listening to the live dance and jazz music of the Shanghai nightlife (Melvin and Cai, 2004). It was during these nights that he determined to realize his "life-long dual dreams" of being both a conductor and a pianist by organizing a grand orchestral concert. To build this ensemble, Paci looked beyond the formal municipal structures and recruited a full group of forty musicians from the city's cafes and clubs—a metropolitan space already vibrating with the rise of ''Yellow Music''. By integrating these diverse professional musicians into a singular symphonic body, Paci transformed a colonial band full of amateur musicians into the ''Best Orchestra in the Far East'' (Melvin and Cai, 2004).

The rise of yellow music in interwar Shanghai provides a crucial backdrop to understanding Paci's introduction. Yellow music, the derogatory term for Jazz-influenced Chinese popular music, was attacked from multiple directions: May Fourth reformers condemned it as degenerate and insufficiently national, while European elites dismissed it as vulgar and overly sinicized (Harris, 2003). Occupying this unstable cultural position, the city's musicians lived between being "too Western" for nationalists and "too Chinese" for colonial conservatives. Yet it was precisely within this contested environment that Paci was

able to conceive his musical project. While listening to the live jazz and dance bands that filled the cafés and nightclubs of the city, he began to imagine a disciplined, high-level symphonic institution that could anchor European art music in the city (Melvin and Cai, 2004).

This origin story complicates any easy opposition between jazz modernity and symphonic classicism. Paci, not withdrawing from Shanghai's cosmopolitan nightlife, frequented cafes, listened closely, and then actively recruited musicians from the same entertainment circuits (Melvin and Cai, 2004). He assembled a forty-member ensemble drawn from the Philippines, Russia, and various European countries and subjected them to rigorous rehearsal discipline (Melvin and Cai, 2004). Cabaret musicians were thus reorganized into a professional symphonic body. Shanghai's foreign residents, deprived of European musical life during the Great War, responded with immense enthusiasm to the restoration of large-scale symphonic performance.

Paci quickly promoted the orchestra into a central component of Shanghai's musical life (Stafutti, 2005). A description from Composer Alexander Tcherepnin's 1935 review of Paci and the orchestra highlights both his ambition and his authority:

"The municipality of the International concessions pays a subvention to a symphony orchestra consisting of artists of all nations, well trained under the direction of an

> enlightened musician and conductor, Mario Paci. He came to China eighteen years ago, and it is through his efforts that the Municipal Orchestra has become an important factor in the musical life of Shanghai. Paci looked upon his job as missionary work. In his independent mind he conceived a plan to educate his public by introducing it not only to the usual symphonic repertory, but also to the latest compositions of the moderns. He played, sometimes in advance of his Western colleagues, works of Respighi, Rieti, Malipiero, de Falla, Ravel, Kodaly, Bartok, Graener, Hindemith. Although his choice did not always meet with the approval of the Municipal Council, the high standard of his performances, together with his great authority, left no valid ground for an effective attack on his venturesome programs."

This passage suggests several musicologically significant features. Firstly, Paci viewed his work as educational. The rhetoric of "missionary work" implies a view of elitism, as if he were 'civilizing' the city. However, it can also be viewed as a dedication to teaching. He did not only limit his programming to the standard great composers such as Beethoven and Wagner, but also incorporated contemporary European music. Through this process, he positioned Shanghai as a city of modern and world-class new music rather than another colonial outpost. What initially looked like condescension turned into an impulse to reshape Shanghai into a modern player in the cosmopolitan stage.

Secondly, Paci's authority rested not merely on ideology but on performance standards. Paci's initial breakthrough came not as an educator, but instead as a performer, even being recognized by the famed opera composer Giacomo Puccini despite having an unpolished formal education (Stafutti, 2005). Under his direction, the orchestra moved from a loosely organized municipal ensemble toward a professional orchestra capable of performing complex symphonic repertoire. By creating professional rehearsal cycles and a coherent playing style, he was able to bring respect to the western canon imported into Shanghai from both expatriate and Chinese audiences. This was his real contribution to Chinese society — being a teacher who could train musicians able to compete on a global stage.

Paci's pedagogical work transcended even the concert hall. He was a teacher in the cultural life of middle and upper-class Shanghai residents. While his educational passion, noted in biographical accounts (Stafutti, 2005), shaped generations of musicians, the historical record remains contested. The accounts of Tan Shuzhen, his student and first violinist of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, revealed evidence of unpaid or uncompensated labour (he later gained paid positions under Paci's successor), which complicates the celebratory narrative (Melvin, 1999). By framing the work as 'missionary', Paci's mentorship was linked to the power imbalances in that era. While Tan indeed gained artistic benefit from this elite training, the orchestra used his student status to extract work without pay. Thus, this

gap exposed the system where the ‘gift’ of Western education was able to justify withholding fair wages.

Arrigo Foa’s leadership in China represents the transition of European classical music within the complicated socioeconomic circumstances. Following the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, in May of 1942, Foa replaced Mario Paci in a central role in maintaining Western symphonic music in the region. The orchestra survived the Second World War largely intact, aided in part by Foa’s strategic programming choices, such as sharing the conductor’s platform with Japanese guests, incorporating Japanese repertoire, and expanding the ensemble to include more non-European musicians (The Hong Kong Jockey Club University of Chicago Heritage Courtyard and Interpretation Centre, 2014). Foa’s decisions prioritized the survival of the ensemble, effectively allowing the orchestra to outlive the British Empire in China.

During the political upheavals of the late 1940s and early 1950s, many musicians departed, but Foa remained, cooperating with the new cultural authorities. He produced concerts for impoverished communities, programmed works by Chinese composers, and recruited more Chinese musicians, repurposing the orchestra for the public rather than for the colonial enclave (Melvin and Cai, 2004). These efforts positioned him as a mediator between the European musical tradition and emergent Chinese musical agency, even when the

orchestra's function as a place for social mobility diminished as war and its economic effects arrived.

Arrigo Foa's personal approach to music combined technical mastery with unconventional habits. Despite being described as able to perform high-level solo performances without extensive practice, his conducting style was sometimes criticized as lax (Melvin and Cai, 2004). He prioritized musical intuition over rigid rehearsals, which also allowed him to adapt European repertoire to new social contexts. This flexibility was arguably what allowed him to pivot the orchestra from a stable colonial project to the struggling wartime ensemble.

In the late 1930s, the orchestra began paying Chinese musicians more regularly, yet the financial conditions remained precarious. Due to inflation and the wartime economy, payment was limited, forcing many musicians to supplement their income through church performances or cinema orchestration. Despite these challenges, Foa's insistence on including local talents and maintaining professional standards reinforced both technical excellence and cultural integration. Thus, under Foa, the orchestra functioned as a site where musicians had to adapt to the changing national circumstances, proving the ensemble could survive under the collapse of colonial rule. (The Hong Kong Jockey Club University of Chicago Heritage Courtyard and Interpretation Centre, 2014).

Beyond his administrative role, Foa's significance was tied to the specific weight of his own diasporic history. To understand this, we must look beyond local administration toward the global "diaspora" —a term that once referred specifically to the Jewish experience but now describes a broader reality of displacement (McLeod, 2010). This expansion of definition is analytically significant because Arrigo Foa can now be situated as a mirror to Chinese individuals, who were persecuted through colonial infrastructures. In Shanghai, Western art music institutions were described by later commentators as places of opportunity for musicians fleeing European antisemitism and Fascism (Melvin and Cai, 2004). In this sense, the flourish of Western music in Shanghai can also be viewed as a shared sanctuary, in the contextualization of how Europeans and Chinese both sought refuge and humanity during a period where Fascism was at its peak. Pelcovits (1946) describes the return of internally displaced Chinese residents fleeing the Japanese invasion to their Shanghai neighborhoods, only to discover that they had become Jewish refugee enclaves. Upon return, many Chinese homeowners found that stateless Europeans who occupied their homes had already been relocated there by the Japanese authorities. This example complicates the view of Europeans being uniformly dominant. These refugees inhabited a colonial city with hierarchies that protected but also constrained them, as they were still regarded as 'higher' in the racial hierarchy, protecting them from the worst treatments from the Japanese. Still, they were

stateless due to the war in Europe and could not leave their ghettos easily. This created a unique situation in which privilege and instability coexisted in Shanghai.

The culture of shared displacement was also anticipated through Mario Paci's concert programming. Although often viewed as merely a representation of European classical high culture, Paci insisted on performing contemporary works by composers such as Ottorino Respighi, Maurice Ravel, Béla Bartók, and Paul Hindemith, even when these works were met with reluctance from the Shanghai Municipal Council (Melvin and Cai, 2004). His mission to educate a wide range of audiences eventually enabled him to extend beyond European classics towards increasing engagement with Chinese listeners through various forms, such as radio broadcasts, Chinese language publicity, youth concerts, and collaborations with Chinese performers.

Significantly, in the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra's ambitious 1937 tour to Nanjing, Paci programmed Avshalomov's The Hutongs of Peking. The choice was critical because it was written by a composer who had himself had a diasporic Jewish history that intersected with Chinese culture (Melvin and Cai, 2004). This detail complicates any interpretation of such repertoire as only oriental sounds. Rather, it situates the work as a reflection of the parallels of the two groups, who both faced repression and used their own agency. Foa's later performances for impoverished communities and fundraising efforts for Chinese resistance

during the war further reflect how diasporic musicians could reposition themselves to take a moral stand against the colonial system (The Hong Kong Jockey Club University of Chicago Heritage Courtyard and Interpretation Centre, 2014). In this sense, Paci and the orchestra did not simply reproduce European prestige. Instead, it created a shared platform where displaced Jewish musicians and Chinese performers could work together to claim a sense of belonging and promote musical modernity under war and an empire (Yang, 2017).

Philip Bohlman's ethnomusical analysis in Music, Nationalism and the Making of the New Europe explores how music creates social cohesion in various diasporic communities of 1989 Europe, arguing that "all forms of music making articulate values and attitudes of social groups, large or small, powerful or powerless" (Sorce Keller, 2011). This raises a question: how was it possible, amid such social upheaval, that several pianists, such as Mary Shen (Yang, 2017), found avenues for social mobility within the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra? A combination of Bohlman and Homi Bhabha's work allows an explanation. Bohlman argued that when displaced Europeans settled in new lands, they attempted to project their nationalist identity into their surroundings; however, this 'new Europeanness' would also reveal the violent and turbulent history they had fled (Thompson, 2012). Bhabha argued that displaced people had the ability to actively intervene in inherited cultural forms to create new, hybrid meanings rather than simply inherit old traditions (McLeod, 2010).

Under Paci's guidance, the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra became precisely such a site of hybridity. The European repertoire, originally seen as tradition, was reframed: it contained the violent experiences of diasporic communities (Tang, 2014). The White Russian caricaturist Sapajou repeatedly drew Paci dodging "torpedoes" at ratepayer meetings, or escaping the flames of an "orchestra abolition campaign." These images register the orchestra's structural fragility and reveal where its support lay. Paci defended funding before a skeptical Western public (Melvin and Cai, 2004). When refugee members of the orchestra defended it against budget cuts from the municipal council, they changed what the music stood for. Instead of displaying colonial prestige, they filled the performances with their stories of survival and the struggle to rebuild a new home in Shanghai.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that Western classical music in Shanghai developed through complex interactions rather than simple imposition. By combining history, sociology, and diaspora studies, this paper has shown how the pressures of war and displacement gave local musicians the power to reshape musical tradition. Further, it concludes that the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra and related musical institutions functioned as spaces in which European traditions were actively negotiated and transformed by Chinese musicians, diasporic performers, and municipal authorities. This analysis moves beyond a simple history of an orchestra or its music, and demonstrates that music is both a product of

social forces and a powerful medium that individuals can use to exercise creativity and gain social influence.

Archival records, concert programs, and contemporary accounts reveal how colonial authorities structured every performance to uphold the city's rigid social hierarchies. At the same time, social disturbances such as the riots show the limits of foreign control and the opportunities for negotiation. The careers of Mario Paci and Arrigo Foa provide concrete examples of how European conductors balanced between European tradition and local conditions. Paci's programming of contemporary European works alongside Chinese-themed compositions and his dedication to public education demonstrate that musical authority was inseparable from social engagement. Foa's efforts to include local performers and serve broader social needs during wartime further show that diasporic musicians could adapt their traditions to survive the pressures of war and political upheaval.

Chinese performers also played an equally essential role in changing how European music was heard and used. Musicians such as Mary Shen illustrate that mastery of Western music could become a vehicle for social mobility, cultural recognition, and the articulation of modern Chinese identity. Their engagements in orchestras and conservatories reveal they were active participants who reshaped inherited traditions to match the modernity in Shanghai.

The evidence demonstrates that music circulated among multiple channels, including formal institutions, domestic networks, and popular entertainment spaces, creating contact zones in which social and cultural boundaries could be contested and reshaped.

By tracing these processes, this paper demonstrates that modern Chinese musical identity emerged through the active engagement with inherited European forms, shaped by the conditions of displacement, urban transformation, and cultural negotiation, and demonstrates how colonial and cosmopolitan structures interacted to produce a distinctive musical landscape.

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