



Andrew J. Russell

The Golden Spike: Celebrating the meeting of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific rail lines on the newly completed Transcontinental Railroad at Promontory Summit, Utah, May 10, 1869.

SOUND TRACKS

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



National Park Service

To mark the sesquicentennial of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, on May 10, 2019, two vintage Union Pacific steam locomotives met at Promontory Summit, Utah, this time with officials, descendants of workers who helped build the railroad, community members, and railroad and history enthusiasts.

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



Jen Sammet Photography

Composer Zhou Tian explores an abandoned train tunnel at Donner Pass Summit built for the Transcontinental Railroad.

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.



Immigrants from China were among the workforce that constructed the Transcontinental Railroad.

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



On October 2, 2017, while preparing for composer Zhou Tian's *Transcend*, Reno Philharmonic President and CEO Tim Young, Music Director Laura Jackson, Zhou Tian, and Principal Bass Scott Faulkner explored the abandoned Donner Pass Summit train tunnels at China Wall, built over 150 years ago for the Transcontinental Railroad in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains. The tunnels there were built in large part by Chinese laborers.

Much of the landscape the Transcontinental Railroad went through maintains its raw, unspoiled character. In photo: Reno Philharmonic Music Director Laura Jackson, composer Zhou Tian, and Principal Bass Scott Faulkner survey the region below China Wall in preparation for the world premiere of Zhou's *Transcend*.

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.

Composer Zhou Tian used sounds of the railroad and the landscape for musical inspiration, along with elements of Chinese and Irish music to reflect the immigrant laborers who worked on the railroad.

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 tun-

nel 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



While Zhou Tian was researching the Transcontinental Railroad in Omaha, Raleigh Sheffield (in photo), a docent at the Durham Western Heritage Museum, told him about the one-word telegraph message that announced the rail’s completion, which inspired the composer to write the “D-O-N-E” movement of *Transcend*.



Omaha Symphony President and CEO Jennifer Boomgaarden says, “It made complete sense for us to be to be part of this joint commission.” The Union Pacific has its headquarters in Omaha and the railroad runs through the city.

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

technology at the time—was built along the right-of-way. As the Golden Spike linking the two rail lines was driven in, a coast-to-coast telegram was transmitted. “And it was just one word,” explains Zhou Tian. “It’s done. D-O-N-E, exclamation point.” The composer found the sound of the Morse Code and used it as the rhythmic motif for his final movement. After a brass fanfare, the trumpets play the Morse Code rhythm, and are then joined by the xylophone and horns. While the motif doesn’t run throughout the movement, it recurs in different places—underneath melodic string lines and pushing the movement to its climactic finish.

Zhou was also careful to reference folk

meditative movement, Zhou Tian explains, is a “vocalise for those who sought a better future.” Over a bed of quiet, slow-moving strings, woodwind and harp solos suggest Chinese folk melodies and harmonies.

Transcend had its world premiere at the

The Reno Philharmonic realized that an instrumental piece about the Transcontinental Railroad might appeal to other orchestras that were directly affected by the massive engineering project. Twelve orchestras joined in as commissioning partners.

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, contracted with both railroads to provide LDS workers to finish the project, so the city has many descendants of those railroad builders. And the Union Pacific Railroad has a hub in Salt Lake City, where it hauls freight, from the West Coast to the Midwest.

Paul Meecham, president and CEO of the Utah Symphony, says the orchestra



Utah Opera

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.

Union Pacific has its headquarters, and visited the Union Pacific Railroad Museum and the Durham Western Heritage Museum, housed in Omaha’s old Union Station. It was there he learned that the joining of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific on May 10, 1869 at Promontory Summit, Utah, was the country’s first nationwide media event. The national telegraph line—cutting-edge communications

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

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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 Sympho-



The Utah Symphony was part of the commissioning *Transcend* consortium and performed the score in May 2019. Utah Symphony Music Director Thierry Fischer (at right in photo with President and CEO Paul Meecham) says that for residents of Salt Lake City, “This project is very symbolic and very strong. 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.”



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.

ny’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 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.” **S**

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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