A recent novel by French author Etienne Barilier entitled Piano chinois features two French music critics debating the performance of a Chinese pianist (clearly, the avatar of Yuja Wang). While one of them declares her the “greatest pianist of all days,” the other denounces her play as “lacking in spirit,” calling it “artificial and imitative.” Their “blog exchange” offers important reflections on the question of universality in art and culture more generally and—more specifically—the meaning of “Western Classical Music” in a transcultural context: why does this music, the emblematic product “of the West” play such an important role “in the East”? In this discussion, we will consider debates over “authenticity” and “creativity” in Chinese music which champion essentialisms about China’s loss of her “own” musical traditions and “Chineseness” as well as China’s inability to fully grasp those musical traditions “originating” with “others.” The paper will question why, in this rhetoric, even the best Chinese musicians “must still depend on Western mentors,” and why, in spite of the enormous success of China’s music students, people should continue to have doubts that “the spirit of ‘Western Classical Music’ has sunk deep roots into China’s society.”

Faculty Host: Shih-Hui Chen

Monday, October 2, 2017 @ 4:00 PM - 5:30 PM
Mechanical Laboratory 209
Free and open to the public.

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