In his dressing room at the Academy of Music, Conductor Eugene Ormandy began to unwind. It had been a long night—a two-and-a-half-hour marathon of Bach’s monumental *Saint Matthew Passion* with a choir of two hundred before a full house in the ornate concert hall. Next week, it would be more of the same when Maestro Ormandy performed the concert as the finale for the Philadelphia Orchestra’s annual New York season.

But on this night, Ormandy had something else on his mind—geopolitics. All week long, he had read and heard about an improbable turn of events in relations between the United States and China. A U.S. table tennis team, which had been competing at the world championship in Japan, received an unexpected, last-minute invitation to visit Beijing. The fifteen athletes accepted and, just like that, became the first American group of any kind invited to mainland China since 1949.

Just days earlier, a headline on the front page of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* declared, “After 22 Years, Americans Are Welcome in China.” A correspondent for the Associated Press swooned, “The spring-like warmth in U.S.-China contacts at the human level cannot fail to melt some of the ice that has congealed in the long winter of hostility.”

Over the course of the visit, the reporter detailed where the athletes went (the Great Wall), whom they met (Premier Zhou Enlai), what they ate (an eight-course banquet, including shrimp with pigeon eggs), and, yes, how they played before a Beijing crowd of eighteen thousand (losses for both the American men and women).

Taking it all in, Ormandy mulled with more than a little envy all the fuss. “If a ping-pong team can go, why can’t we?” he wondered aloud to the orchestra manager, Boris Sokoloff. “How would you get an invitation to China, Boris?”
“Let’s write the White House,” the manager offered. “Nixon’s always liked the orchestra.” Indeed, in 1970, Richard Nixon and his wife, Pat, had traveled by Metroliner train to Philadelphia to award Ormandy the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the country. Welcomed with “Hail to the Chief” as he entered the Prince of Wales box at the Academy of Music with the First Lady, Nixon was treated to his favorite, Tchaikovsky’s “1812 Overture.” For extra fanfare, the Valley Forge Military Academy Band joined the orchestra on stage.

Ormandy wasted no time in writing to the White House about China, but the reply was not the one that he wanted. Despite all the goodwill coming from “ping-pong diplomacy,”
the United States did not have official diplomatic relations with China, which meant there was no American embassy in Beijing and no Chinese embassy in Washington, DC. A White House aide suggested that Ormandy try reaching out to the nearest Chinese ambassador—in Ottawa, Canada. Ormandy did write, but the request went nowhere. Undeterred, he kept nudging his friends in high places to press his case.

The “winter of hostility” between China and the United States was in its third decade. The two countries had barely spoken to each other since the creation of the Communist People’s Republic of China in 1949. The superpowers had been on opposite sides of wars in Korea and Vietnam and had severed full diplomatic relations. Any contact on such issues as prisoners of war had to be conducted through diplomats in a third-party country, Poland. And then there was the divisive matter of Taiwan. During China’s civil war, the United States had sided with the Nationalist government, which retreated to the island of Taiwan after being defeated by the People’s Liberation Army. As long as the United States stayed loyal to the Nationalists, relations with the mainland remained severed.

But in the spring of 1971, with table tennis in the news, a new reality was taking hold in both Washington and Beijing. Even before he became president, Nixon acknowledged that a foreign policy that excluded a fifth of all humans—in other words, China—did not make any sense at all. He wanted to normalize the diplomatic relationship and end decades of isolation.

China’s leaders, meanwhile, were deeply suspicious of the Soviet Union. Contrary to popular perception, the Communist world was not a unified front, with the Chinese and the Soviets linked as comrades in arms. In fact, China was becoming increasingly worried about the possibility of a Soviet invasion. In the late 1960s, the Soviets had built up forces along the Chinese border. China viewed the United States as a potential foil to Soviet aggression. Nixon, meanwhile, realized that reaching out to Chairman Mao Zedong could put the head of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, off balance.

The invitation to the ping-pong players was a tentative first step. Nicholas Platt, a China expert at the State Department at the time, framed the visit this way: “The Chinese wanted to send a message to the United States that they were willing to talk. The Chinese started to wink at the United States—and the United States winked back.”

In less than a year’s time, the winking led to a historic meeting in February 1972, when Nixon traveled to snowy Beijing to meet Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou. China’s
state-controlled media declared that this visit was a good thing. For the first time in years, Chinese people could openly express curiosity about Americans—interest that previously would have been grounds for punishment or retribution.

Delegations of athletes, including American swimmers, divers, and college basketball players, were invited to China, as were groups of scientists, physicians, archaeologists, teachers, psychologists, and members of Congress. In Ormandy’s corner was the powerful Republican senator from Philadelphia, Minority Leader Hugh Scott, who brought up the Philadelphia Orchestra when he met the premier during a Senate trip to China in April 1972.

But Zhou was one step ahead of him. The premier had already begun using cultural exchanges, particularly with European classical musicians, to expose the Chinese public to Western culture and to soften negative perceptions that had hardened over the decades.
Under Mao, a generation of Chinese had been raised to think of America as public enemy number one. In 1972, as part of “music diplomacy,” Zhou invited the renowned London Philharmonic and Vienna Philharmonic to perform in China. But his real goal was diplomatic, and his priority was improving relations with the United States.

And for that, he wanted an American orchestra.

In February 1973, the premier met with National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, who was on a swing through Asia to advance peace talks to end the Vietnam War. The topic of more cultural exchanges came up. By now, Zhou had made up his mind. He would invite the Philadelphia Orchestra to be the first American orchestra to perform in mainland China.

From the perspective of nearly a half century later, what transpired next looms as a watershed event in the cultural histories of the two nations and in the personal lives of the people...
involved. Our present-day cynicism inclines us to reject the sentimental notion of music as a bridge between people, of art and culture as diplomacy. But at that time, the propaganda-fueled suspicion and wariness between the nations was undeniable—as was the mutual goodwill of those who performed and connected during the trip, however briefly.

The timing of the ten-day visit in September 1973 elevated its significance. From a foreign-policy standpoint, even after the Nixon meeting and the increasing willingness of China to invite delegations from the United States, no one could say with certainty where China was heading. In early 1973, diplomats in the newly opened United States Liaison Office in Beijing (then called Peking by Westerners) still had to rely on reading the tea
leaves to divine the palace intrigue among China’s leaders. The competing camps pitted Premier Zhou against Mao’s powerful fourth wife, Jiang Qing, the leader of what would later be disparaged as the notorious Gang of Four. In the days before, during, and after the Philadelphia Orchestra’s trip, U.S. foreign service officers shared classified cables deconstructing every gesture, every interaction, every utterance for meaning. Even Madame Mao’s fashion choice at a concert—a Western-style black dress accented with white pumps and a white handbag—warranted a mention in a diplomatic cable from Beijing to the U.S. State Department.

On a broader scale, the tour offered insight into where China was in terms of the Cultural Revolution, a chaotic, repressive period of political upheaval, launched by Mao in 1966 to stoke revolutionary embers. The slogan of the Cultural Revolution was “Destroy the old to build the new.” Western culture was reviled as bourgeois to the point that Chinese musicians were banned from performing the works of such classical composers as Beethoven and Mozart. The first few years, from 1966 to 1970, were the most violent. Many lives were destroyed, particularly those of artists, musicians, and intellectuals, whom young Red Guards viewed as emblematic of old ways. With Mao’s tacit approval, mobs attacked, publicly humiliated, and sometimes summarily executed their victims. No one knows the real number of fatalities during this period, but estimates range from hundreds of thousands to more than a million. The number of lives disrupted and careers ruined is incalculable.

Mao deemed that art served politics and that the only acceptable forms of entertainment—an area that fell under the control of his wife—were operas, ballets, and symphonies with revolutionary themes. Against this backdrop, the idea of China hosting some of the greatest orchestras in the world was a clear signal of a changing direction. But how far would Zhou’s music diplomacy go? Would the premier prevail? Or his nemesis, Madame Mao?

Ormandy would call the orchestra’s tour of China “bigger than music.” The American musicians, accustomed to international travel, had experienced nothing like it and sensed history in the making. Chinese musicians and audiences, who had longed to hear Western music again, would later describe the artistic and emotional impact of the concerts. After the orchestra departed China, however, the political winds suddenly shifted, dealing a setback to music diplomacy with a synchronized attack in state media against Beethoven. Not until Mao’s death in 1976, which marked the definitive end to the Cultural Revolution, were the
restrictions on classical music lifted, allowing Chinese musicians to freely pursue training and resume performing works by the great composers.

In looking back at the visit by the Philadelphia Orchestra, diplomats and historians can detect glimmers of a cultural reawakening that would reach full flower in succeeding generations. And the enduring legacy of this rebirth is seen now in the legions of music students in China and the number of new professional orchestras, conservatories, and first-class concert halls as well as Chinese musicians in orchestras around the world.

“It was ten of the most intense days of my life,” recalls Kati Marton, the lone television reporter to accompany the orchestra on tour.

To understand the prevailing mind-set at that moment in history—and the subsequent thaw and bloom—we need to listen to the voices of those who lived it.

Here is what they said.