

And ^{the} bands played on

The name of Arrigo Foa, the Italian who devoted his life to orchestras in Shanghai and Hong Kong, is no longer a familiar one. Thirty years after his death, **Oliver Chou** looks at the maestro's legacy.

Dr Lin Junqing's caricature of Arrigo Foa, pianist Esther Lerman-Vitenson and cellist Walter Joachim, from the 1920s.
Above right: Foa conducts a 1959 concert with the then amateur Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra.



Marco Polo was born in the Republic of Venice and Matteo Ricci in the Papal States. Had they entered the world at any time since the late 19th century, they would have been called Italians and been compatriots of another man who bridged the East-West cultural divide by living and working in China.

Unlike the explorer and the Jesuit priest, however, Arrigo Foa, a musician, conductor and teacher, who spent 60 years in Shanghai and Hong Kong, and is buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Happy Valley, has been largely forgotten. Thirty years after his death, at his MacDonnell Road home on May 23, 1981, aged 81, only a handful of Hongkongers remember his musical contribution, much less the man himself.

"He is better remembered in Shanghai than in Hong Kong," says Liu Yuen-sung, chairman of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, who was a protégé of Foa in the last 20 years of his life and a violinist with the orchestra in the 1960s, when the Italian was its conductor.

Li Keqiang – one of Foa's many violin students at the Shanghai Conservatory between the late 1920s and the early 50s – passed on what he learned from the Italian to his own sons, Li Honggang and Li Weigang, who are now members of the internationally renowned Shanghai Quartet. Huang Xiaotong, mentor to most of China's leading conductors today, was among Foa's last students before the Italian was forced to leave the city. Because of these men, Foa's name and legacy have not faded in Shanghai in quite the same way as they have in Hong Kong.

Born in 1900, in the town of Vercelli, near Milan, Foa was a violin prodigy of Jewish descent who entered the Milan Conservatory at the age of 12. In 1918, he won the school's top prize upon graduation and embarked on a professional career with his own piano trio, touring post-war Europe.

In 1921, he met Florence native Mario Paci, conductor-designate of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra (SMO). Paci invited Foa and other musicians to join China's first professional orchestra (the SMO was founded in 1879). It did not take long for the 21-year-old to decide to try his luck in Shanghai, which had a reputation as an adventurer's paradise.

Foa left his home country and arrived in Shanghai in August 1921, with Paci and three other Italian musicians. For the next 21 years, he >>