

15 | Transcultural Composing

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Being creative is about making the right choices to make something original. Time and time again when composers find the systems from which they draw inspirations are no longer fertile grounds for ideas, they begin to look elsewhere for new concepts, new stimuli, and new ways of thinking. The sources of these ideas might originate in a society or community other than the one to which the composer belongs; in other words, traditions of a different culture. The impact and quality of each of these transcultural compositional exercises varies depending on the composer's motivation and understanding of the principles involved. Equally, their strategy, choice of materials, craftsmanship and sense of invention are crucial. This chapter provides an overview of transcultural composing – with a particular focus on motivation behind this practice – and offers a detailed investigation of a work of mine as an example to illustrate the process.

The Embodiment of Culture Through Music

Culture is 'a historically created system of meaning and significance ... a system of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of human beings understand, regulate and structure their individual and collective lives'.¹ It is articulated at different levels. At the most basic of these levels, it is reflected in language – the way its syntax, grammar, and vocabulary are used to describe the world. Societies with similar languages share at least some cultural features. Likewise, cultures with similar frameworks of musical conception share a higher degree of mutual understanding and appreciation. Fundamentally, a piece of music is a sequence of sonic events taking place within a pre-determined timeframe. Sounds are abstract and do not carry meaning intrinsically – they are mere vibrations in the air received by our ears, interpreted by our brains and then given meanings. Sounds are moulded by composers and musicians into repeatable, recognisable patterns. The sequences of pitches with their defined durational proportion (i.e. motifs, themes, melodies) and collections of simultaneous pitches (i.e. harmonies, timbres) are mingled with

a network of opinions, attitudes, and thoughts. These have geographical, social, political or even racial associations as we receive them. Over time, these meanings, or interpretations, are shared, collected, developed, categorised, and canonised into 'traditions' which are 'transmitted across generations to form a context that then becomes a framework for subsequent cultural activity and interpretation'.²

The perception of traditions are as 'dialectical and ambivalent as any concept that demands, and allows for, interpretation; for such interpretation may start at different and possibly opposite points of departure'. Ernst Krenek continues, 'these in turn depend on the system of values chosen by the respective observers so that the term "tradition" will take on positive or negative shadings'.³ Therefore a single sonic element can be perceived to have different meanings by people upholding different 'systems of values'. Understanding the constitution of cultures and the implication of different perceptions of a tradition enables composers to weave a 'web of allusion to certain non-musical sources which enhances the essentially abstract nature of the musical material itself'.⁴ As music's association with a culture depends on the interpretation of the sounds received by the listener, the success of a 'cultural allusion' relies on the receiver's pre-conception and familiarity with the tradition or traditions referred to, as well as when and how the allusion is presented in context of the totality of a piece of work. The impression of the intended allusion varies greatly among those who hear it. That can also depend on if it is parody, tribute, commentary or conceptual reference. Therefore, to engineer better resultant reception, composers are required to have a good understanding of the elements and cultural associations that come with the materials they employ, and how they can be manipulated.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the definition of musical tradition has become increasingly complex. With advances in communications accelerating the flow of knowledge around the world, cultural exchange and amalgamation has become a common occurrence. To what degree is a composer influenced by each of the different 'systems of values' that they encountered? Especially in such an increasingly complex matrix of cultural cross-current where boundaries of these 'systems of values' are constantly shifting. This is a question worth asking. At one end of the spectrum, some composers feel they are strongly associated with a specific culture. At the other, some composers do not find themselves belonging to any particular well-defined musical culture. They carry a sense of rootlessness. Consciously or not, the intention, degree, strategy and usage of materials in transcultural composing differs from case to case. It depends on an awareness of heritage, artistic inclination and imagination.

Identity and Belonging: A Matter of Fitting In

Many musicians start learning music the Western way. They contextualise music based on the well-tempered tuning system which allows music to be played in all major or minor heptatonic keys without sounding perceptibly 'out of tune'. This system provides the foundation for many concepts in Western music, and it has been used across Europe as the musical lingua franca since the seventeenth century. With the 'Age of Exploration' and subsequent colonisation, Western music was introduced to colonies through the work of missionaries and an educational system modelled on Western society. Western music was systematically prioritised in the 'new world'. Indigenous music was often branded primitive and deemed unworthy of study.

These examples of 'psychological structures of self-hatred',⁵ combined with the inherited hierarchical structures of domination in some post-colonial or post-assimilated countries, catalysed the indigenisation of Western culture in Asian countries. 'Western art music has been legitimized through governmental and/or institutional practice, radically redefining the social function of art music and concept of musical authorship in the process'.⁶ Over time, these structured inequalities in cultures became implicit and embedded in the social thinking. This power structure creates a dilemma for composers who readily identify with a tradition outside the dominant, but whose acquired compositional vocabulary is heavily derived from the 'mainstream'. Their ties with the dominant culture systemically lead them to contextualise other cultures using attributes developed for the dominant one. More problematically, these hegemonic points of view often lead to devaluation of other cultures because of different perceptions of priorities.

The feeling of not belonging has been articulated, often with a feeling of uneasiness, by many twentieth- and twenty-first-century composers. Particularly so for those who are not of Western European origin. For example, Béla Bartók felt anxiety that was deepened by the double bind of being Hungarian and aspiring to success abroad. While for Arnold Schoenberg 'identifying his German precursors as models supposedly guaranteed that the path he had taken was justified by music history itself, for Bartók invoking his Hungarian musical heritage would only have served to provincialize him as an exotic "other"'. For Schoenberg choosing his models from German music history was an act of pride. For Bartók, who had to position himself not only as an innovator but also as an artist securely

rooted both in national and Western European traditions, it was an agonizing, difficult process'.⁷

In creating music that was Hungarian in character and yet new in tone, Bartók could only make use of the musical heritage which was available to him. However, his Hungarian heritage consisted of 'nineteenth-century romantic music, the pseudo-folksongs and *verbunkos* music', while the modern means of expression consisted of 'the music of [Richard] Strauss and the development of nineteenth-century German music'. Therefore, he could not avoid the crisis resulting from the 'contradictory and incongruous nature of two elements'.⁸ Bartók's integration of folk music into art music was essential in his composing career as it 'could be considered both modernist innovation and national loyalty'.⁹ This was a creative decision which can be viewed as an act of patriotic duty as much as a necessary step in his career as a composer. With such clean-cut division between vernacular folk music and sophisticated art music, do we run the risk of simplifying the issue? Do we simply identify the degree of influence of different cultures on an individual, or even simplify the notion of the composer's own perception of belonging? By classifying the music of Hungary as nationalist, as 'an alternative to "universality", the prerogative of the "central" musical nations [Germany, France, and Italy]',¹⁰ we automatically relegate Hungary to 'peripheral' status.

Igor Stravinsky is another composer whose works are strongly coloured by his attitude towards tradition and belonging. 'Russianness' is core to the success of his early works. By the end of the 1910s, Stravinsky felt the need to move away from the influence of his home country. He started drawing inspiration from the more mainstream Western European music. While he saw music from the Baroque and Classical periods as a way of progressing creatively, his view of his Russian roots was becoming detached. In his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (1939–40), he gave a unique view on 'Russianness':

Soviet Russian music . . . I must confess that I know it only from a distance. But did not Gogol say that from a distant land (in this case, Italy, his adopted country) 'it was easier for him to embrace Russia in all its vastness'? I too believe I have some right to judge it from a west European or American vantage point. All the more so because Russia, at the present moment, is wrestling with processes so contradictory that it is admittedly almost impossible to see clearly from a vantage point, and consequently all the more impossible from the interior of the country itself.¹¹

But as Stephen Walsh suggests, Stravinsky's comment has to be read in the context of his contemporaneous works, and in the context of what was still

vulgarly understood as 'Russian'.¹² Such a repositioning of cultural belonging was a crucial element to Stravinsky's unlocking of creative resources, which could otherwise be unavailable, or considered 'illegitimate' for him. Echoing the title of one of his most stylistically eclectic works, *Agon* ('Game' or 'Contest') (1957), Stravinsky has described his approach to musical composition as a 'game'.¹³ This analogy provides a useful insight into the way Stravinsky perceived his cultural belonging. Both game and tradition are fundamentally the products of execution of a pre-determined set of rules. By considering composition as a game, Stravinsky implied the possibilities of altering his own tradition as well as constructing new ones in order to stay fashionable and creditable. He demonstrated a similar creative manoeuvre in his shift from neo-classicism to serialism later on in life. It seems then, that Stravinsky considered these various traditions as 'games' to be adopted and discarded, each with its own set of rules open to constant re-interpretations.

Both Bartók and Stravinsky came from the 'provincialised Europe'.¹⁴ The anxiety of not fitting into the mainstream must have been felt by them – at least at the beginning of their careers. In order to transcend the periphery to fit into the dominant culture, it would have been necessary for them to navigate between their own 'natural' national musical heritages and the Western European musical framework. They both created works which combined Western European music with the more orally transmitted 'natural' musical heritages of their home countries. This gives their works an air of the exotic, a kind of 'nationalized exoticism'.¹⁵

Exoticism and Orientalism

Globalisation has had a major impact on music and its dissemination. In the early twentieth century when atonality was becoming a new wave in composition, jazz and non-Western musics were also being introduced to Western European and American societies. These fresh sounds were extremely attractive to composers, some of whom had indirect contact with agents of these 'other' musics, such as Puccini researching the music of Japan for *Madam Butterfly* (1904) via publications containing transcriptions of Japanese songs. On the other hand, there were composers who had more direct contact with 'exotic' cultures. Examples such as Louis Moreau Gottschalk in Central and South America, Albert Roussel in Southeast Asia and India and Debussy's encounter with Balinese gamelan at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. From these experiences they drew elements of

these cultures into their own works. Even though each of these experiences resulted in some fine early examples of transcultural composition, the transactions were uni-directional in the absorption of influence. They embedded materials from the 'other' cultures in a canvas belonging primarily to the dominant culture. However, as the cultural climate has changed over the years, these composers' intentions are now often interpreted as cultural appreciation at best, and in some cases, cultural appropriation.

Since the 1950s, billions of people have become exposed to cultures previously unfamiliar to them. Music of the industrialised West has exerted a vast impact on most of the world's music. As Bruno Nettl summarises:

In the course of the twentieth century, it is reasonable to argue that cultural mix has been a major prevailing force in musical innovation. Most of the forms of popular music that became prevalent first in the Americas and Europe, and then in the rest of the world, each represent elements from two or more of the world's culture areas. In most if not all cases, we are faced with the confluence of Western elements and those of a non-Western society, and one could make a case for the suggestion that the most significant event in world music of the 20th century is the coming of Western musical culture to all other cultures. . . . The twentieth century has been different in several ways: one music was brought to all others, and thus the world becomes a laboratory in which we can see how different cultures and musical systems respond to what is essentially the same stimulus.¹⁶

Although Nettl sympathetically emphasises the bi-directional nature of transcultural influence or confluence between Western and non-Western societies, he does not deny the centrality of Western music in the global musical landscape. This echoes an observation Canadian composer Claude Vivier made in 1977 that:

A process is in motion which slowly but surely is bringing together the different cultures of the world to find one terrestrial culture. It seems that this movement is headed more towards an impoverishment than an enrichment. More and more the non-western cultures are literally drowned by western culture without any exchange of culture which would have been desirable for human thought.¹⁷

The Chinese composer Chou Wen-chung highlights this issue from the point of view of a 'minority':

It is often observed that Chinese music, in particular, does not have a solid theoretical base; a view that has also caused modern Chinese composers and educators to ignore Chinese theoretical writings. In reality, though such an

observation only illustrates a universal attitude of judging other cultures exclusively according to the conventions of one's own.¹⁸

Of course, no assumption can be made of the background of Chinese composers as it 'much depends on when they were born, where they spent their childhood or formative years, where they were educated and where they now live'.¹⁹ One of the more general issues highlighted by Chou was the ignorance of Chinese theory by the Chinese themselves. This problem is echoed by Tōru Takemitsu:

I am Japanese, but when I decided to be a composer, I did not know anything about my own musical tradition. I hated everything about Japan at that time because of my experience during the war. I really wanted to be a composer who was writing Western music, but after I had studied Western music for ten years I discovered by chance my own Japanese traditions. At that time I was crazy about the 'Viennese School' composers, and by chance I heard the music of the Bunraku Puppet Theater . . . I suddenly recognized that I was Japanese and I should study my own tradition. So I started learning to play the Biwa. I studied it with a great master for two years and became very serious about our tradition. But I still try to combine it with Western music in my compositions.²⁰

During his study at New England Conservatory between 1946 and 1950, Chou Wen-chung absorbed a huge amount in terms of compositional techniques. He acquired familiarity with major contemporary works. However, the incompatibility of his choice of thematic materials with the technique he employed, his 'blending of Chinese melody and Western harmony' was finally put into question by his teacher Bohuslav Martinů. This problem was further highlighted when Nicolas Slonimsky challenged Chou's knowledge about traditional Chinese music, which made 'Chou [feel] embarrassed because actually he knew very little'.²¹ Motivated by a keen sense of embarrassment, Chou devoted himself between 1955 and 1957 to the study of the literature, notation, historical background, and playing technique of the traditional Chinese qin (seven-string zither). At the same time, he began to formulate how he was going to develop his own style. He combined his study of Chinese painting, calligraphy, poetry, and philosophy with his study of Western music history, and developed a comparative perspective in his conceptualisation of the 'difference between some of the general aesthetic values of Western and Chinese arts and music'²² (Table 15.1).

What he started off as a comparative approach to conceptualise the differences between Western and Chinese aesthetics led him to develop the conviction of a 're-merger' of Eastern and Western musical concepts and practices. He believes 'the traditions of Eastern and Western music

Table 15.1 Chou Wen-chung's concept of differences between Western and Chinese music and arts

Western	Chinese
<i>Straight tones preferred</i>	<i>Bent or embellished tones preferred</i>
<i>Aural impressions emphasised</i>	<i>Process of creation, not end result</i>
<i>Clarity of meaning</i>	<i>Suggestive, unexplained is desirable</i>
<i>Man controls nature</i>	<i>Nature dictates</i>

once shared the same sources and that, after a thousand years of divergence, they are now merging to form the mainstream of a new musical tradition'.²³ This newly established concept, combined with 'a desire to succeed as a composer in the West',²⁴ provided a foundation for Chou to filter through the classical Chinese materials. He fused them with Western techniques to develop new compositional concepts such as cultural confluence and the development of his *I-Ching*-inspired 'variable modes'.

A similar journey was experienced by Filipino composer and ethnomusicologist José Maceda. Starting his musical career as a concert pianist, Maceda later turned to historical musicology and eventually composition. In 1947, during the preparation for a series of recitals featuring Beethoven's *Appassionata* sonata in Manila, he was 'repeatedly provoked by an interior voice posing what was for him an epiphany and a previously unasked question, "What has all of this got to do with coconuts and rice?"'²⁵ As Maceda later recalled, there was a notable absence of pre-colonial music, implicitly symbolised by 'coconuts and rice', in the culture with which he grew up. This was particularly so under American occupation and in a middle-class community. The European tonality, as Michael Tenzer pointed out, was rooted deeply in Manila's artistic circles, which 'inculcated inspiring musicians with a sense of the inexorable authority of European tonality, and fed the tenacious illusion that there was nothing else musically Philippine [sic] to discover'.²⁶

Maceda's awakening came with two very different musical encounters. First, in the late 1940s, he was introduced to the music of Edgard Varèse, who pioneered the concept of 'sound-masses' and their interactions, and later, Iannis Xenakis. Maceda saw the works of Varèse and Xenakis as efforts in attaining 'a higher form of universality than Western music had achieved through tonality and its putative heir, serialism'.²⁷ Maceda's second revelation

Example 15.1 José Maceda, *Ugnayan* (1974), ending. Reproduced by permission of University of the Philippines Center for Ethnomusicology.

51 FLUTES, 4 LAHA 51

The image shows a handwritten musical score on a grid of 20 numbered staves. The title at the top left is "51 FLUTES, 4 LAHA" and the number "51" is written in the top right corner. The staves are numbered 1 through 20. The notation is dense and includes various rhythmic markings, such as vertical lines and dots, and some text annotations in a non-Latin script. The score appears to be a complex, multi-layered piece, likely a traditional Filipino ensemble piece as indicated by the title.

came on his return to the Philippines in 1952, when he encountered the sound of the kinaban, the Hanunoo jaw's harp of Mindoro island. This led him to study ethnomusicology at UCLA, followed by ethnomusicological research in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. It was through this work that he discovered:

a hitherto unknown musical world may have been of equal magnitude to that experienced in the early decades of the twentieth century by European social scientists and music scholars However, while the seeds of ethnomusicology as sown by these individuals still contained the toxic elements of colonial thought and the superior Western science looking into specimens of less developed humanity, José Maceda saw through his discoveries a gaping void not only in his entire musical understanding but also his own musical life as a non-westerner, and Asian and Filipino The search took on several aspects of shifts and upheavals in consciousness and action – from a rejection of musical heresies such as the superior Western music and the primitivism of others, and abandoning a blossoming piano career in favor of the ascetic but rugged life of the classic ethnomusicologist . . . as well as the creation of non-conformist 'avant-garde' compositions.²⁸

From his research, Maceda came to appreciate certain features in Asian native cultural concepts such as drones, infinity ('repeated sounds, with no stressed, showing a concept of time without marking time, like a straight line with no end'²⁹), balance with nature and emphasis on timbre rather than melody – all of which he came to explore in his compositions. Works such as *Ugma-ugma* (1963), *Pagsamba* (1968), *Ugnayan* (1974), and *Udlot-udlot* (1975) are ritualistic and scored for a large number of performers. For example, a performance of *Ugnayan* would involve twenty pre-recorded tracks being broadcast on twenty (or its multiple) radio stations (Example 15.1). Thousands of people are encouraged to move freely in open spaces, each carrying a radio receiver randomly tuned to one of the radio stations, creating an organic sound-mass which engulfs the listeners. Maceda interrogated musical structures and their distinct relationship to Asian cultural and social thoughts. He explored the connection between 'a past doctrine of civilization and a contemporary mode of behaviour and creative imagination that have been moulded by centuries of change that now intervene between the ancient "past" and a dynamic "present"'.³⁰ In doing so, Maceda defined his identity as a non-Westerner, as an Asian and as a Filipino. Through a thorough examination of his various traditions, he found 'alternatives to the imposed values of imperialist and dominant cultures, offering paradigms in the exercise of freedom, imagination, and humanism'.³¹

Constructing an Imaginary Culture

The result of any amalgamation is the formation of something new. When combining elements from two or more cultures in a composition, the result, strictly speaking, is only related to the original cultures. It belongs to a synthetic culture, a culture dreamt up by its creator. As Hungarians, for example, Bartók and György Ligeti share much of the same cultural heritage. Yet living through the Second World War and the Cold War, the creative decisions faced by Ligeti were more complex. By 1971, he already felt a looming creative crisis, both for him and other post-war composers. As he reminisced in 1981:

I find myself, so to speak, in a kind of compositional crisis, which, gradually and to some extent furtively, was already opening up during the seventies. And this isn't just a personal crisis but much more, I believe, a crisis of the whole generation to which I belong . . . not to go on composing in an old avant-garde manner that had become a cliché, but also not to decline into a return to earlier styles. I've been trying deliberately in these last years to find an answer for myself – a music that doesn't mean regurgitating the past, including the avant-garde past.³²

Ligeti did not find his way out of this stylistic crisis until he came to write his *Horn Trio* of 1982. Nonetheless, in his magnum opus *Le Grand Macabre* (1974–7, rev. 1996), he had already started a lengthy investigation and self-examination. It is a work full of sonic inventions as well as pseudo-pastiches and allusions to older musics, most famously so in its final passacaglia, parodying Beethoven's passacaglia theme in the finale of the *Eroica* symphony. Although the main purpose of *Le Grand Macabre* is its response to the operatic genre, its quality of 'examining the past' – specifically Ligeti's peripherally European past – places it as 'the most apt musical symbol for the new space that Hungary came to take in Ligeti's work'.³³ Referring to an article titled *Musical Memories of My Childhood* written by Ligeti, Rachel Beckles Willson argued that one crucial factor of Ligeti's success in creating a strange and intriguing past was the inaccessibility of his origins. Without the constraint of facts, due to a lack of surviving documentation, Ligeti had the freedom to inject elements of fantasy into the construction of his past and the 'musical history' of an 'imagined' Hungary according to his 'memories'. Ligeti's Hungary 'was essentially something that he elaborated for the purposes of his career in the West, a considerable part of it was tinged with fantasy'.³⁴ In constructing an imaginary country with 'imagined traditions', Ligeti

realised the importance of artificial semiotics based on 'reality' to increase the credibility of such a make-believe location.

This strategy of drawing imagined traditions from a make-believe place based on familiar attributes, where the 'real' melts into the 'imaginary' (and vice versa) resonates with the literary movement known as magical realism. This genre is associated with a select group of Latin-American writers including Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges. They experienced themselves as lacking (in their case as a result of poverty and economic exile) a cultural tradition in which to ground their creativity. It is with the term 'magical realism' (or 'réalisme magique') that the Canadian composer Denys Bouliane, a student of Ligeti, identified himself earlier on in his career. For his cycle of works under the collective title *Gamache – Rythmes et échos des rivages anticostiens* (2009), *Vols et vertiges du Gamache* (2008–10), *Tekeni-Ahsen* (2010–11) and *Kahseta's tekeni-ahsen* (2010–11) – Bouliane draws inspiration from an invented community living on the Anticosti Island in Quebec. It has its own history, culture, language, custom and music. This technique was one of the many solutions Bouliane came up with as 'a need to situate oneself, to forcefully or clumsily verify the state of the presence of one's roots'.³⁵

Bouliane later recalled that, as a student in the 1970s, the Montréal music scene was saturated with the music of post-serialism, represented by composers such as Serge Garant and the post-Messaien school with Gilles Tremblay as a leading figure. Bouliane did not feel he belonged to either school, and had been looking elsewhere for role models. When he first heard *Le Grand Macabre*, he was completely transfixed. It is not hard to imagine the attraction *Le Grand Macabre* had for a young composer like Bouliane, who did not feel a sense of belonging to any school. The idea of 'imagined tradition' that Ligeti explored in his 'anti-anti-opera' struck a chord in Bouliane, who had already concerned himself with the issue of tradition. For the young Canadian composer:

it is first and foremost a matter of lacking a tradition of concert or 'creative' art music that is collectively recognized, appreciated and encouraged as one's own and through which one can visualize oneself and one's history ... contemporary Canadian and Québécois composers have no body of works, musical models, or collectively celebrated musical figures through which to explore their own artistic individuality or from which to draw inspiration.³⁶

Bouliane came to the conclusion that 'all that I can do is to play with tradition, to become an illusionist, to make believe I do have a culture, to invent a pseudo-tradition, in sum to play the part of the chameleon'.³⁷ For the

purpose of inventing a 'reality' by playing with traditions, Bouliane developed a system of 'extended modes' based on diatonic modes, which are colourfully explored in works such as *Jeux de société* (1979–80, revised 1981), *A Certain Chinese Cyclopaedia* (1986), *Douze Tiroirs de demi-vérités pour alléger votre descente* (1981–2) and *Le Cactus rieur et la demoiselle qui souffrait d'une soif insatiable* (1986). This invented system of organising musical attributes enabled him to build harmonies with various degrees of diatonic implications. He often alluded to existing musical syntaxes – such as diatonic chords – with unexpected resolutions, or what he called 'pseudo-functional tonality'.³⁸ More importantly, all these harmonic materials have traceable links to a pre-defined, artificial modal-framework (echoing Chou Wen-chung's variable modes). In doing so, the 'notion of a tradition' is embedded in a system with a logical paradigm that governs the basic palette of the music, just as major and minor scales have functioned in Western music.

The Giant Web Metaphor of Culture

One idea Ligeti suggested during his Hamburg composition classes left a lasting impact on Bouliane. The 'oscillatory theory of culture':

Imagine for a moment the following representation of the history of living beings: an infinite multi-dimensional spider web woven across space and time. All living creatures have a place in it and each one 'is shaken, shakes, and will shake' in its own way. Some are very active; they create waves, 'ripples' in the web. These ripples carry in all directions in space and time and on occasion pass through relays (in the electrical sense), multipliers that vibrate at the same frequency and that amplify, modulate, or simply react to the signal, themselves creating new waves.³⁹

Compared to Krenek's concept of tradition as a 'system of value', Ligeti's metaphor is more useful for visualising the complex nature of multiple influences. The default position of a composer in the 'giant web' is determined by their experiences. Every source of influence is placed in a 'relative position' according to chronological, geographical, social, and other factors. Each source has its own magnitude of oscillation. The bigger the influence, the larger the wave it creates. The person will pick up each of these influences according to their relative distance from these sources as well as the power of the wave. However, they are free to choose their position with respect to all sources of influence according to individual artistic conviction. This adjustment of position in the web, in order to engineer the overall magnitude of combined influences, is the exact metaphor for transcultural composing.

With this concept, composers can put themselves into a more comprehensive, multi-dimensional perspective. Hence they can create a more realistic mental model for the purpose of filtering and amalgamating elements from different cultures. Each composer also has the potential to invent a tradition if their creation has the gravitas to influence others. One thing is certain: no one exists in a cultural vacuum.

A Personal Example: Composing *Jieshi*

In 2011, I had an opportunity to explore an Asian tradition which I have not experienced growing up in British Colonial Hong Kong. *Jieshi* was written for qin, the Chinese seven-string zither, and a Western string quartet. It was based on the ancient qin melody *Youlan*. *Youlan*, or *Jieshi Diao Youlan* in full meaning ‘*Secluded Orchid in Stone Tablet Mode*’, is believed to be the oldest surviving notated music from the Far East, dating back to the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). Although I am ethnically Chinese, I had minimal exposure to qin music when I was growing up in Hong Kong. After discovering the story of Chou Wen-chung being challenged by Nicolas Slonimsky about his relationship with traditional Chinese music, I started thinking critically about my own relationship with it. Even though I share Chou’s sentiment, I did not have the time available to immerse myself into the study of qin playing. I used Stravinsky’s attitude towards Russian music as a point of departure, viewing Chinese music from ‘a vantage point’, with an observational, objective approach.

Youlan has been used in compositions by Chinese composers, most notably in Tan Dun’s first string quartet *Feng-Ya-Song* (1982) and the second movement titled *Secluded Orchid* of Zhou Long’s *Rites of Chimes* (2000). I was fully aware of my lack of in-depth knowledge of qin music and the philosophy behind its playing. Therefore I did not feel it appropriate to dismantle a cultural artefact such as *Youlan* and reconstitute it into a fantasy or theme-and-variations type composition. In my mind, the historical and cultural background of the raw material demanded to be treated with respect. Since I knew qin music only from a distance, I decided my compositional approach was to be as objective as possible. I wanted to write a work that could highlight the unique history of *Youlan*, the performance philosophy of qin music, and most of all, the expertise of the player.

My solution was conceptually simple. With Li Xiangting, a professor at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, who is also one of the



Figure 15.1 Excerpt of *Youlan* transcription by Master Li Xiangting. Reproduced with permission.

finest qin players in the world, as a consultant and the soloist in the first performance, I set out to make *Jieshi* a showcase of the quality of authentic qin playing. I requested him to interpret *Youlan* as naturally as possible. Meanwhile, for the string quartet parts, I wanted the materials to be derived entirely from the original qin melody, non-intrusively. I drew this idea from the art of framing paintings, where the colour, dimension and decorations are carefully considered in order to strike a balance between contrast and harmony. *Jieshi* was to be a composition-as-observation. Once this idea was formed, I started to think about generating material for the string quartet. Qin, originally a ‘ritual instrument’, later became a ‘personal, intimate instrument because of its limited volume and intricate sound quality’.⁴⁰ With that in mind, the choice of deploying a heavily muted Western string quartet throughout to complement the timbre of the qin seemed a natural option. I had been given a transcription – in Western notations – of *Youlan* by Master Li (Figure 15.1). I also had a commercial recording, played by him⁴¹.

In Master Li’s transcription, the melody is notated in Western music fashion. However, invented symbols made up of re-combined fragmented Chinese characters used by qin players to codify fingering techniques are placed below individual notes. All authentic qin music is largely improvisatory in nature. *Youlan* is no exception. A quick glance of Master Li’s transcription would present a false impression as the appearance of Western notion implies a degree of accuracy in duration proportion, for example, a crotchet is equal to two quavers, and so on. It was therefore essential for me to remind myself that the original ‘manuscript’ was written in Chinese characters, or ideograms (Figure 15.2). These ideograms describe the finger positions, fingering technique, character of the sound and duration in often poetic and mystic terms. ‘Great emphasis [is] placed on the production and control of tone, which often involves an elaborated vocabulary of articulations, modification in timbre, inflections in pitch, fluctuation in intensity, vibratos and tremolos.’⁴² Nothing was absolute, and yet everything is carefully detailed.

碣石蘭序一名荷蘭
 丘學明會稽人也舉未隱於九疑山妙絕楚詞於
 蘭一五石精絕以其聲微而志遠而不堪授人以陳
 蘭明三變及丘學明隨關皇十年於丹陽縣年
 三十九七歲子侍之其聲遂隨耳
 幽蘭第五
 那卧中拍，正半寸許兼高食指中指雙掌宮高中
 指應下与物候下十二下一寸許住末面起食指散緩
 扶宮高，拍挑面又半扶宮高縱容下無名於十三外一
 寸許兼，角於面偏即花兩半扶扶挑聲，緩，起
 大指當十，兼面緩，散歷四微無名打面食指挑微
 大指當八，兼面無名打面食指散挑羽無名當十一
 兼宮無名打宮微冷，大指當九兼宮面兼金兼宮
 高移大指當八，兼面無名打面大指徐，仰上八上一寸
 許急乘解扶打宮無名當十兼微食指挑微應，
 無名不動下大指當九兼微羽却轉微羽食指節過
 微大指急鬆微上至八拍微起無名不動無名散打宮
 食指挑微應，無名不動又下大指當九兼微無名散
 打宮挑微大指拍微起大指還當九兼微羽急全扶微
 羽舉大指屈無名當九十開兼文武食指打文下大
 指當九兼文挑文大指不動又即歷文武冷無名散打
 宮微大指不動食指挑文中指無名開拍微挑文差
 名散拍微食指應文武微散大指不動急全扶文武大
 指當八兼武食指挑武大指緩仰上半寸許，大指當
 八上一寸許兼羽食指打迴大指却退至八還上鬆舉岸
 大指附緩下當九兼羽文於羽文花兩半扶挑聲大指而
 節仰文上至八至七感取餘聲，無名當九兼羽大指
 當八上兼羽無名打羽大指拍羽起無名當十兼微大
 指當九兼微羽即於微羽花緩全扶無名打微大指急
 感至九指微起無名乘退下十一還上至十位散挑文

Figure 15.2 Manuscript of *Youlan* from the early Tang Dynasty (c. seventh century). Reproduced by permission of the Digital Research Archives, Tokyo National Museum.

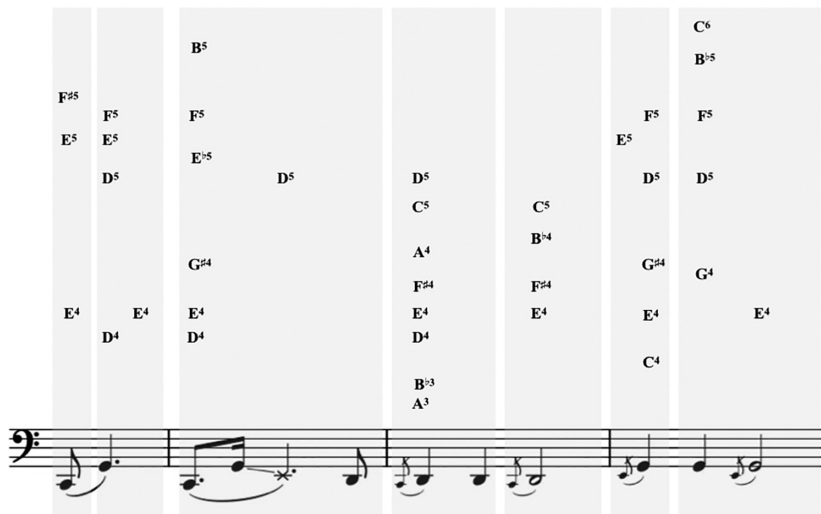


Figure 15.3 *Youlan*'s upper partials ('harmonic stacks') obtained from spectral analysis in relation to the original.⁷

Just as important as the tone of words is in a tonal language like Chinese, this focus on tonal colour in qin music⁴³ resonates with the thinking of composers from the Spectralism school. The timbre and decay of sounds form an integral part of their philosophy. In order to explore the potential of qin's timbre, I carried out a spectral analysis on Master Li's recording of *Youlan* to get a better picture of the harmonic composites of the sound made by this instrument. Through this exercise, I discovered that the sound of the qin is rich in upper harmonics:

This rich palette of upper harmonics, not particularly noticeable when heard, provided me with a repertoire of pitch materials, or 'harmonic stacks', for the string quartet (Figure 15.3). With the modal nature of *Youlan*, a limited set of notes is repeatedly played. Over time, a virtual sustained harmonic background – or drone as Maceda would have described it – is created with an emphasis on certain pitches. Using the string quartet to sustain these pitches as well as their associated upper harmonics is a way of metaphorically amplifying and delaying the decays of sounds of the qin.

The decision of retaining the improvisatory character of *Youlan* in *Jieshi* prompted a notational challenge. In the original of Master Li's transcription, the music is notated in Western notation. Although bar lines are used, Master Li explained that the music is not supposed to be played with any sense of strict meter. Therefore, this transcription is to be interpreted as a guideline for improvisation. At best, the qin player would

Example 15.2 Raymond Yiu, *Jieshi* (2011), fig. F, string players operating according to the qin part, independently from each other.

The musical score consists of five staves:

- O. (Oboe):** Marked *obss.* with a fermata.
- Vln. I (Violin I):** Includes a cue from Vln. II, *molto sul pont.*, *ord.*, *pp*, and *jeté*.
- Vln. II (Violin II):** Includes a cue to vln. I and vlc., *jeté*, and *sf ppp*.
- Vla. (Viola):** Includes *jeté*, *sf ppp*, *sal IV*, and *jeté*.
- Vc. (Violoncello):** Includes a cue from vln. II, synchronise with vln. I, *molto sul pont.*, *ord.*, *pp*, *sf ppp*, and *ppp*.

Example 15.3 *Jieshi*, before fig. N, string players operating in synchronisation.

The image displays a musical score for Example 15.3. At the top, a single staff shows a qin melody consisting of a sequence of eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. Below this, four staves represent the string quartet parts. Each string part begins with a dynamic marking of *sf pp* (sforzando piano-piano). The parts are synchronized with the qin melody, with vertical dashed lines indicating the alignment of notes. The first string part is marked 'synchronise (tutti)'. The second and third string parts are marked 'synchronise (tutti)' and '(led by vln. I)'. The fourth string part is also marked 'synchronise (tutti)' and '(led by vln. I)'. A horizontal line with arrows at both ends spans across the four string parts, labeled '(cue to others)', indicating that the players are to follow each other's cues for synchronization.

play all the notes written out, with a large degree of flexibility regarding the duration of the notes. This operation is in some ways not dissimilar to jazz music where players improvise around a melody. To facilitate this notion of elasticity of the music, an unorthodox system of notation was required to coordinate the solo qin with the four Western string players. It was based on the principle that the qin player is the leader, a conductor of sorts. The string quartet players follow, or more appropriately, 'comment' on the music played by the qin player. The four string parts are for most of the time tied in with the qin part and operate mostly independently from each other (Example 15.2). There are also moments when the string players synchronise with each other to create a more unified sonic texture (Example 15.3).

Another aspect of the materials derived for the string quartet is the way the players mimic the musical gestures of the qin (Example 15.4). Besides the rich timbral variety, another distinctive feature of qin playing is the repertoire of fingering techniques – different in each hand. In qin manuals such as *Shen Ch'i Pi P'u* (1425, edited by Chu Ch'üan) and *San Ts'ai T'u Hui* (1607/09, edited by Wang Ch'i), there are numerous fingering techniques listed.

Example 15.4 *Jieshi*, before fig. C, string players mimicking solo qin gesture.

The image displays a musical score for Example 15.4, titled "Example 15.4 *Jieshi*, before fig. C, string players mimicking solo qin gesture." It consists of five staves of music. The top staff shows the original qin melody. The second staff begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic marking and includes the text "cue from qin, cue to vla." with a downward arrow pointing to the start of the string part. The third staff includes the text "cue from vln. II, cue to vlc." with a downward arrow. The fourth staff includes the text "cue from vla." with a downward arrow. Vertical dashed lines connect the notes of the original melody to the corresponding notes in the string parts across all staves, illustrating the imitation.

They include a wide range of techniques such as single or double notes, type of slide, pitch deviations, angle, and types of attack. To gain an in-depth understanding of these techniques takes years of study. The most sensible solution was to relate all the materials for the string quartet as closely to the original qin melody without any unjustifiable creative imposition.

In *Jieshi*, the use of Western string instruments is taken out of its normal cultural context. Here, the strings function purely as sound generators capable of producing quiet, sustained pitches. Their 'emotional quality', namely the use of vibrato, often associated with Western music, is suppressed. With the unusual notational concept, the performers are required to listen more intensely than they usually do in metered Western classical music.

The other issue I faced when working on *Jieshi* was the question of authorship. For a composer such as myself, who grew up in a Westernised Chinese society, the absence of 'a composer' for a musical work seemed unorthodox. With that in mind, approaching *Youlan* from a composer-as-observer angle was possibly the most appropriate strategy. It was essential for me to find a suitable point in the 'Giant Web' for this particular work so that all cultural influences involved are proportionally weighted. The choices of

materials and their treatments are informed by a combination of historical, cultural, dramatic, and aesthetic context. I saw *Youlan* as a cultural artefact, which demanded a non-destructive treatment from the start. It was a decision influenced by my respect for a field of knowledge which I was still to explore, and yet, felt comfortable enough to engage with in a non-deconstructive way.

Conclusion

Transcultural composing can range from mere quotation to an elaborate system of harmonic and/or rhythmic organisation inspired by a different culture. The possibilities and variations are numerous. To engage in transcultural composing is not necessarily something every composer consciously does: there are composers who happily compose music using ideas and techniques which they have acquired within the 'dominant' Western musical system. There are other composers who have discovered ideas from 'other' cultures which inspire them superficially. They may not appreciate the impact of the cultural hybridity they have produced beyond the sonic surface. Then, there are composers who are heritage conscious. They are more likely to pay attention to the histories of the multiple cultures from which they draw inspiration, the processes through which they manipulate materials and the cultural implications. I believe compositions from the last category are likely to be more thoughtful and persuasive.

Many of the composers engaged in meaningful transcultural composing went beyond decorative borrowing and embedding of non-Western musical materials into Western structural framework, or 'the practice of composing for Western contexts'.⁴⁴ They carried out thorough investigations of their heritages to understand the constitution and dynamics of their cultural belonging and creative identity. These cultural brokers – 'individuals who have acquired understanding of more than one set of cultural principles and who function as mediators between native and foreign cultural groups in initiating dialogues'⁴⁵ – make informed choices in the strategies and materials for their works. They usually have greater command and knowledge of specific musical practices other than the Western 'dominant' tradition. Refinement in their compositional procedures is also required for more successful integration of cultural resources.

Ideally, composers should adopt the ethnomusicological perspective, a set of shared attitudes on how one construes music-making in and out of culture. It consists of three components – to consider there is more than one kind of legitimate art music, to allow someone else's contrasting

musical practice to be considered as valid and worthwhile, and to view the various musics of the past that are not part of one's actual or adopted tradition so they can be respected and enjoyed. However, the most important factor shared by successful transcultural composers, through my research and my own compositional practice, is finding the right motivation for doing so. These motivations can range from positioning oneself culturally (using models such as Ligeti's 'Giant Web' metaphor, for example) to investigating the essence of a culture outside the 'dominant' Western one. It can be exploring the confluences between cultures, universality towards a kind of 'cultural transcendence',⁴⁶ or inventing an 'imaginary culture' by playing with traditions.

In an age when we are striving for more equality under the shadow of the 'colonially tainted', Western-centric musical history, it is important for all composers to examine their culture holistically. We need to understand our cultural make-up to find the most suitable ways to handle transcultural operation. To look at transcultural composing at a more analytical level helps composers from the 'dominant' culture to avoid unintentional cultural appropriation. Composers from 'other' cultures can find a better understanding of their own cultural identity, and hence locate their heritage more easily. This will help them to develop their works with an evolved sense of individuality that reflects their experiences in more truthful and unique ways.

Listening List

<https://shorturl.at/almFZ>

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