Cultural Boundary and National Border: Recent Works of Tan Dun, Chen Yi, and Bright Sheng

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Contemporary Music in East Asia

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Writing about the opening ceremony shortly before the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, Justin Davidson, a Pulitzer Prize winner and critic of *New York Magazine*, reflected that while it promised to be a spectacular Chinese event — all eyes on the Chinese production team, the buzz about the Chinese extravaganza that would mesmerize the world with its grandeur — the spectacle was also to be at least partly an American showcase as well.¹

This observation might appear a rehashing of familiar tunes about the globalized world we now live in, the so-called globalization in music. Yet to dismiss it with the banality of globalism would be to ignore the increasing prominence of locality in globility and to miss the significance of this moment — a culmination of intercultural process in the history of contemporary classical music. Davidson’s reflection on the momentous event, together with the return of Tan Dun’s opera *The First Emperor* to the

Metropolitan Opera House and Lang Lang's premiere of Tan Dun's piano concerto with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at Avery Fisher Hall of the same year, pinpointed an important trajectory within this recent history. Accompanying his text was a picture of lower Manhattan, a narrow street crowded with cars, tall buildings, commercial placards, and signage with Chinese characters. The Beijing Olympics' American connection reminded Davidson of the lower Manhattan of nearly twenty years ago, when many of the creative ideas we see today were incubated — that is, the downtown scene of New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many key figures in the production team of the 2008 Olympic ceremony were long-time residents of lower Manhattan, and most were active in the downtown scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s — a group of Chinese student artists that Tan Dun once referred to as "new Bohemians." Tan Dun noted, "At that time there were so many aspiring artists who came to New York to realize their crazily ambitious dreams. Quite a number of us were from Taiwan and China; for example, the artist Ai Weiwei and the film director Kaige Chen from Beijing, the movie director Ang Lee from Taipei, painters Chen Dangqin and Chen Yifei from Shanghai ... we were all very young, and very poor. But we were all gifted and very committed, working exceedingly hard to carve out our own path and fulfill our dreams."² It was an important historical juncture of the 1980s — particularly the arrival in Manhattan of the 1978-class, the first post-Cultural Revolution college graduates.³

An experimental music scene that developed on and around Manhattan's Lower East Side in the 1980s and 1990s, the downtown scene could be traced back to as early as the 1960s. Its diverse characteristics defy easy definition. According to composer and music critic Kyle Gann, it includes the following categories: conceptualism, minimalism, performance art, experimental rock, free improvisation, postminimalism, and totalism, as well as various electronic music experiments. The creative diversity of the scene resulted from the collaborative network of composer-improvisers, artists, and ensembles that lived and worked in the area. In the 1980s downtown music was supported by many venues and groups: the Blue Note, the Village Gate, the La MaMa Experimental Theater, Pace Downtown Theater, Knitting Factory, Bang on a Can, etc. In addition, composers such as John Cage, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, John Zorn, Morton Feldman and Meredith Monk had been prominent figures, just as the enduring influence of La Monte Young, Laurie Anderson, and Charlemagne Palestine, or other composers such as Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon. The artists and composer-improvisers downtown shared such myriad creative and professional connections that, as musicologist Tamar Barzel points out, "it is often impossible to abstract one part from the whole."⁴ These artists and musicians were skeptical of historical master narrative and shared an interest of the breach of convention, including what Barzel calls, "outré musical language amounted to a kind of defamiliarizing syntactical noise."⁵

Tan Dun

As a cradle for American experimental music, from Cage-inspired creative works of the 1950s and 1960s (including the Fluxus group) to the subsequent


3 This point has been discussed in different degrees of detail by several authors. Christian Utz, Neue Musik und Interkulturalität: Von John Cage bis Tan Dun (Beihetle zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft 51), Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002; Sheila Melvin and Jindong Cai. Rhapsody in Red: How Western Classical Music Became Chinese, New York: Algora Publishing 2004; and Su Zheng, Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America, Oxford; Oxford University Press 2010.


5 Ibid.
influx of minimalist composers, and to later composer-improvisers of the 1980s and 1990s, the downtown music scene was a uniquely significant phenomenon of American music culture. When Tan Dun and other Chinese composers arrived in the United States in the mid-1980s, they almost immediately became involved with the downtown aesthetics. Before long, they began to play a role in shaping that scene as well. Through the introduction of composer Chen Yi, the Kronos Quartet began its regular collaboration with pipa virtuoso Wu Man. Tan Dun intermingled with Glass, Cage and Monk, and worked together with a variety of conceptual artists and improvisors. In the late 1980s he collaborated with dance groups, exploring various experimental music concepts. One of his trademarks — using organic materials such as water, paper and stone — began to take shape during this period. His 1993 work *Paper Music—The Pink* was subtitled “Acoustic music for paper (an erotic ritual in sound and movement)” and his 1994 work *Ghost Opera* was written for string quartet and pipa with stone, water, paper and metal.

Today, organic music has become one of Tan Dun’s major pursuits. In 2009 he premiered *Earth Concerto for Ceramic Percussion and Orchestra*, which concluded his *Organic Music Series* that also includes a paper concerto and a water concerto. In 2010 Tan Dun initiated a project to fashion musical instruments from clay that he collected from Xi’an, Hong Kong, and Yingko in Taiwan. With the help of ceramic artists, he crafted the clay into ceramic musical instruments — drums, trumpets and xun (the traditional Chinese wind instrument) — for his compositions. (See Fig. 9.1) He explained in a 2010 interview prior to the concerto’s premiere in China, “Their sounds symbolize Heaven and Earth, and the symphony symbolizes humans. This interaction between sounds of Heaven and Earth and the songs of humans is what I understand as *The Song of the Earth*.” Many new millennium initiatives such as this were anticipated by his work of the 1980s and 1990s, albeit in a different tenor.

In 1991 the chief critic of *New York Times* Edward Rothstein reviewed a concert featuring Tan Dun’s *Soundshape*, a work using original ceramic instruments developed by Tan Dun and New York-based potter Ragnar Naess but no longer in his catalogue. The review, entitled “*A Shaman Without Religion,*” is a fascinating piece to read, and not just because so much of it still could have been written today:

Sitting in the dark recently at La Mama’s Annex Theater in downtown Manhattan, listening to wordless bass chants imitating the vocal style of Tibetan monks, I felt as if I had wandered into a temple of an unknown religion. Overtones swirled high above the fundamental pitches, produced by ancient techniques once passed along in monastic training.

The aura of ritual was not dispelled when seven instrumentalists slowly took positions behind altars containing an array of handmade ceramic instruments. Some ceramics took the shape of crescent moons. Others

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were jars, cast on a potter’s wheel not unlike those used millenniums ago. Still others had silken strings stretched across resonant hollows.

The high priest was the Chinese composer Tan Dun, who, shamanlike, led the shimmering earthen sounds with almost ceremonial gestures, crying out in Chinese or murmuring phrases in English, moving from player to player, signaling transformations of sound. The work, Soundshape (1989), risked preciousness and pretension, but Mr. Tan is an acute musician, who was trained both in China and at Columbia University. The result defied skepticism, inspiring an almost devotional response from the audience. The event seemed to have the character of a ritual.

Many of its musical elements resemble those I heard in La Mama’s performance: exotic sonorities of stoneware and flutes, almost Minimalist repetitions and slow transformations of motifs, solemn intonations and harsh strident cries... In this, he is really in the mainstream of a particular strand of the avant-garde since the 1960’s.

Students of Tan Dun’s music would recognize that characteristics identified in this 1991 article are now the signature elements of his work. Yet there is also a significant difference. Whereas the 1991 review connected Tan Dun’s work to the kindred spirit of the experimentalist tradition of downtown music, today such lineage is hardly mentioned. The change is in many ways indicative of the extent to which Tan Dun has “claimed” and “recreated” these characteristics. In the general perception and the public discourse about him, these compositional traits are authentically his. At the institutional level, the venue for Tan Dun’s work today is also more likely to be Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall, rather than in the east village. He has established a loyal fan base in large concert halls and record sales, a base that extends beyond the supporters of experimental theaters. His popular appeal might be spurred by his success in elevating his sonic imagery to spiritual and abstract levels, open to multiple interpretations. For example, speaking of paper as an organic material that could be broken down to create anew, he suggested an analogy: “Musically, it’s the same process ... First, find a field of your memories and try to collect the most beautiful memories. Then, soak them, smash them, and press them, dry them, fire them, and allow these memories to become a beautiful work of art.” To audiences at large, the unpredictable openness of Tan Dun’s sonic world seems alluring rather than intimidating.

Although its significance is seldom considered closely, the historical confluence of the late 1980s is unique. I would argue that their (this group of Chinese composers) position within this particular historical context raises many interesting questions. In another review of the same month Rothstein

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summed up this position succinctly in one sentence.

[Tan Dun] now seems suspended somewhere between the traditional avant-garde, the ancient Asian traditions of sound’s connection to soul and universe, and contemporary Western notions of esthetic structure dramatically presented. 9

The image of “suspending” evoke here sounds surprisingly refreshing today, given the tired clichés of “East meets West” or “staging Chineseness” that all too often simplified the multi-directional pulls that constitute the reality for these composers. Tan Dun himself used “cultural jetlag” to describe this state of being suspended between competing traditions, trends, aesthetics and universes. 10 By jetlag he meant the jarring distance between uptown (Columbia University, where he was getting a doctoral degree) and the downtown music; between atonal music and Chinese folk tradition; between the music he played before he went to Beijing and after he began his studies in the conservatory there. Suspended in the network of sonorities, aesthetics, traditions, etc., works by Tan Dun’s generation necessarily grow out of an expansive and often intensive dialogue among various trainings, cultural forces, aesthetics, inspirations, traditions, experiments and compositional doctrines. Their talents were expressed therefore through mediation of the intersections, overlaps and conflicts among different realms of cultural experiences, self-expression and everyday practices. It is also a negotiation of the spatial relations peculiar to the end of the 20th century, as the political and financial world map has shifted significantly.

For Tan Dun, the conflicts that arose from crossing different cultural realms precipitated a move from the peripheral to the center. In 2008 he noted, “[The music I played before going to Beijing] all came back to me through

my fascination with experimental music in downtown New York.” 11 This was definitely reciprocal as well. Tan Dun was not merely at the receiving end of influence. Rather, his work notably “mainstreamed” downtown music, especially the experimental theaters. His 1995 opera Marco Polo, first performed in Europe, was produced by New York City Opera in 1997. His grand opera The First Emperor was commissioned by The Metropolitan Opera House in 1998 and premiered in 2006. In some parts of the opera one can observe how Tan Dun had remarkably transformed the iconic classical institution of The Metropolitan Opera House to an experimental theater — one brimming with wild possibilities. The opening scene was particularly successful in this respect. Its vocalizing and drumming create “unsated yearning,” akin to what Rothstein identified more than a decade earlier. This time the “unsated yearning” for ritualistic order was created, with the help of MET orchestra and chorus, through a precisely orchestrated sequence of vocalization, deliberately audible breathing, slapping sounds, temporal punctuations, inspired percussion writing, and the masterful monologue of a Beijing opera singer in Chinese tongue. As a ritual and ceremony, this opening of The First Emperor forcefully claimed its audience as its community, as did the impressive drumming at the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony. 12 The latter, however, was not created by Tan Dun, but rather by the director of The First Emperor, Zhang Yimou, who was the chief producer of the grand spectacular of the 2008 Olympics. 13 Not surprisingly, Zhang’s key role in both required him to jet between New York City and Beijing to work on these two projects simultaneously in 2006.

Tan Dun is indeed a child of American experimental music, a scene filled with multi-ethnic influences and where Asian introjection made indelible marks. Tan Dun expressed the sentiment in a 1995 documentary, “New York

11 Ibid.
12 Having been present at the premiere of The First Emperor at The Metropolitan Opera House, I was particularly struck by the use of similar gestures and sonority of drumming in Beijing Olympic opening ceremony.
is the home of my music. It's not just China, it's not just Europe or the West. I find more and more New York is the place I should stick with to create more of my music." 14 No doubt, the fundamental challenge to tradition and the establishment, and the reconsideration of what can be regarded as music continues to characterize Tan Dun’s work. The striking inclusion, if not the sonic effect, of brake drums in his 2008 Youtube Symphony is another such provocative gesture, familiar to lower Manhattan. That the kind of “defamiliarizing syntactical noise” was juxtaposed with other musical idioms clearly challenged the hierarchy of tastes, an important means for the downtown artists to forge their original creativity in the absence of epistemological constraints. However, as a brainchild of Tan Dun in 2008, gestures such as the brake drum no longer belong exclusively to experimental theater, but rather to the London Symphony Orchestra as well, under Tan Dun’s baton.

For people who might be tempted to ask whether it was downtown music that made Tan Dun or whether it was Tan Dun, by taking downtown music out of lower Manhattan, who remade experimentalist music, it is useful to reflect on another émigré composer who became synonymous with Hollywood music in the United States: the film composer Erich Korngold. Reflecting on this émigré composer, violinist Philippe Quint noted, “What is interesting is that it’s really not Hollywood that made Korngold, it’s Korngold that made Hollywood.” 15 Without Korngold’s richly melodic, harmonic and contrapuntal writing, the tradition of Hollywood’s film music might indeed have been quite different. His influence can be heard in the work of later film composers such as John Williams and Alexander Courage.

Yet a transnational process that fostered a quintessentially American trend is certainly not unique to Tan Dun or Korngold. The American years of Schoenberg, a master of the second Viennese school, have made indelible impression on American modernists such as Milton Babbitt and Elliott Carter. Many of Tan Dun’s Chinese cohorts developed their musical language in similarly complex, yet distinctively American ways, a topic to which we will return later.

Chen Yi

Also pursuing doctoral degrees at Columbia University at the same time as Tan Dun were Chen Yi, Zhou Long, and Bright Sheng. When asked how living in the United States for more than two decades has had an impact on her, Chen Yi noted, “Everything is developing but also inter-reacting. It’s a great network, and it’s ongoing.” 16 Her work displays an acute sensitivity to the cultural context in which she composes. The Third Symphony, composed in 2009, celebrates the multicultural nature of American society. It features three movements: “From the Dragon Culture,” “The Melting Pot,” and “Global Village.” She explained, “I don’t limit myself to the past, the future is wider.” When asked whether she felt alliance with China or the United States, she replied, “I am in America. I write music inspired by the culture around me. My cultural root is Chinese, and now my inspiration is a combination. This is what makes me have my own voice. I do honor both cultures and even more cultures because America is a multicultural society; you have influence from many different resources.” 17

Indeed, the American cultural and social context surrounding the success of Chen Yi and others established them as eminent composers in the new mold of the 21st century. While their sound world and sonority palette were

14 Eric Hung, “Tan Dun Through the Lens of Western Media (Part 1),” Notes 67/3 2011, p. 608.
17 Ibid.
fostered in a unique period of Chinese contemporary history (most notably
the Cultural Revolution, which I discuss elsewhere), their works were
incubated in New York during the 1980s and 1990s and went through periods
of enormous ferment in the tumultuous, varied music world they found there.
Certain trends emerged as their work became deeply imbued with the multi-
faceted sonic environment and aesthetics of the United States. Not all of
them ended up joining the lineage of downtown composers. Indeed there are
many layers of complexity in this cultural “suspension,” in which various
cultural memories and music heritages were combined. The West where
these contemporary Chinese composers reside becomes a space that is defined
both by its “locality” where cultural interaction emerged from daily practices
and the rich soundscape, and that also transcends such a locality. It offers a
screen upon which (inter)cultural memories, imagination and fantasies may be
projected.

Unlike Tan Dun, whose doctoral study at Columbia was eclipsed by
his active engagement with downtown music, Chen Yi benefited from her
study at Columbia. A pupil of Mario Davidovsky and Chou Wen-Chung, she
assumed a rigorous, disciplined approach to composition. Davidovsky was
a former director of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, and
has distinguished himself as one of the most respected composition faculty
in academe. He is known for the use of new sounds with musical integrity
and with attention to critical parameters such as time, space, structure, and
direction. Immersed in her study with such esteemed mentors at Columbia
University, structural integrity comes to play an important role in Chen’s
work. At the same time, residing in New York allowed her to continue to
be engaged with traditional Chinese performers, resulting in the founding
of the ensemble Music From China. Her unique blend of highly developed
compositional craft, structural rigor, and rich musical imagination has
been recognized by numerous high-brow composition awards, including a
Guggenheim Fellowship, the Rome Prize, the Charles Ives Living Award,
and others. It is not surprising that Chen Yi was the first of the group of the
1978-class to be inducted into the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

(2005), and the first to hold a distinguished professorship in the US academe.
As an academic composer since the mid-1990s who quickly adapted to the
needs of American music education, Chen Yi’s work was widely circulated
in concerts by different levels of performing groups and with a variety of
audiences, no longer limited to the professional music establishment. No
doubt Chen Yi also experienced the kind of “cultural jetlag” described by Tan
Dun, yet her response to it was a different one.

Chen Yi’s works often adhere to classical structures. A marimba solo
Jing Marimba (2009) has a formal design based strictly on the golden-mean
division applied at five hierarchical levels. It builds on characteristic melodic
phrases from traditional Beijing opera, yet follow a carefully designed formal
structure. (See Fig. 9.3)

A large work, Prelude and Fugue (2009), commissioned by the Saint
Paul Chamber Orchestra, incorporates three traditional Cantonese instru-

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\begin{array}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\text{Formal Structure} & 108+72=180 \\
\hline
\text{Golden-mean Division} & Part I(65+43–108) & mm.1-108 & mm.109-180 \\
\hline
\text{Parts} & Sec A(39+26–65) & Sec B(25+18–43) & Sec A & Sec B \\
\hline
\text{Golden-mean Division} & mm.1-65 & mm.66-108 & mm.109-151 & mm.152-180 \\
\hline
\text{Sections} & mm.1-39 & mm.40-65 & mm.66-90 & mm.91-108 \\
\hline
\text{Unit (Golden-mean Division)} & mm.1-23 & mm.24-39 & & \\
\hline
\text{Golden-mean Division} & *m.24 & *m.49 & *m.66 & *m.109 & *m.152 \\
\hline
\text{Point} & & & & & \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

Figure 9.3 Chen Yi: Jing Marimba (2009) formal design based on the golden-mean division
mental music pieces ingeniously into the quintessential baroque form. These traditional instrumental works all have programmatic titles. Each of the three instrumental pieces chosen for this composition has a distinctive characteristic: “Thunder in a Drought,” expressing people’s exuberance upon the good news of rain, is full of large leaps, fast rhythm; “Jiggling Bell on a Hungry Horse,” depicting the quivering motion of the starved animal, is characterized by tremolos, dissonances and jagged rhythms; “Getting Medals in a Dragon Race” uses a buoyant gesture to reflect the summoning at the beginning of the race, followed by an active and lively passage depicting the speed and action. In contrapuntal texture, Chen Yi uses these three sets of music elements and gestures as contrapuntal subjects, creating a theatrically intense piece. The vivid imagery of the three subjects is rendered magnificently in texture, timbre, rhythm, scoring and musical gesture.

As an example, Figure 9.4 reproduces Chen Yi’s use of the melody of “Jiggling Bell on a Hungry Horse” at the first section of the work. Notice the tritone between D and G# in m. 25, characteristic of the tune, which is repeated in mm. 25, 27, and 33-34. The repeated 16th-note rhythmic figure, the descending F#-E-D, and the abrupt stops, as well as their relentless repetition, mimic the shaking legs of the poor skinny hungry horse having difficulty sustaining itself, walking precariously and close to collapsing with each step.

A remarkable feature in Chen Yi’s work is her vivid use of melodies from Chinese folk traditions and opera. As in Prelude and Fugue, these existing tunes in Chen Yi’s work serve a variety of functions. Some are programmatic, the three tunes and their recurrences recalled the associated images, spirit, sentiment, and even energy. At the same time they also play an important role in the rhetorical process of the work, providing appropriate opening gestures, making dramatic declamations, and building rhythmic momentum. Other times, the tunes appear in fragmented forms to add to the layers of orchestral texture, demarcate structural divisions, or create larger gestures. Their composite creates good contrapuntal fit for the fugue structure. These three otherwise unrelated folk tunes collectively create a world of musical fantasy, and through the imageries of dragon race, thunder after drought, and hungry
horses, bring forth the sense of energy, celebratory mood, and rhythmic forces.

Chen Yi’s knowledge of the vernacular musical practices is evident: in her work these Chinese melodies cross cultural boundaries with energy and vigor, boundaries that would halt many others. Melody, therefore, is essential to the intercultural process with which her work often is actively engaged. Having always held an intense interest in the vernacular, Chen’s work heightens the relationship between ethnomusicological initiative and music composition. The interest undoubtedly stemmed from her student days at the Central Conservatory of Beijing, which included fieldwork collecting folksongs and a curriculum requiring memorization of a large variety of them. It could also be traced back further to the time of the Cultural Revolution, when she was sent to rural areas to work in the countryside and learn from the peasantry like millions of others. In the United States, Chen Yi extended this interest in the oral tradition of the subaltern to the vernacular in the daily life of the United States. The distinctive vernacular aspect in Chen Yi’s work recalls Charles Ives’s re-inventing of the European forms of symphony and sonata with vernacular tunes and topics. Students of Chen Yi’s music may indeed do well to take a lesson from Peter Burkholder’s study of fourteen specific procedures of melodic appropriation in All Made of Tunes: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowing.18 Bending vernacular materials to fit European classical structure — or vice versa — constitutes an important compositional approach for Chen Yi, as it did Ives all through his oeuvre. The omnipresent folk tunes in Chen Yi’s work are reflected in a wide variety of musical situations and cultural work, from compositions written for Chanticleer (a cappella group), the Women’s Philharmonics in San Francisco (as the resident composer), and symphony bands (co-commissioned by the National Wind Ensemble Consortium Group), to her grand symphonic statement for the inaugural concert at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, a spectacular and new icon of Kansas City, home to its symphony orchestra, ballet and opera company. Within the modern compositional framework Chen Yi distilled the essence of folk traditions.

That the category of émigré composers may seem ill-suited to composers such as Tan Dun may have to do with the denoted historical context. But that only partially explains the situation. A more fundamental reason would be that the term “émigré composer” has been associated with composers of European, in particular Austro-German, origins, the tradition with which American music has been most closely identified since the 18th century. Implicitly associated with the European exodus, “émigré composer” therefore has a certain connotation of prestige as well. It is hardly surprising that Ernst Krenek proclaimed “in America … the extraordinary meets with uncomprehending indifference” on the pages of the journal Perspectives of New Music in 1970, where he also ruminated on the artistic compromises his fellow émigré composers had made.19 However, recently American musicologists have become increasingly aware of how Austro-German tradition had thoroughly dominated the value system of American music. In his pointed critique of this phenomenon, musicologist Arved Ashby opines, “American musical culture is innately tangential and hybrid. The hybridity largely stems from the fact that this country of immigrants espouses no single American ‘ethnicity.’”20 Indeed this historical process is now complicated by the arrival of composers of Chinese origin, whose entry onto the concert stages and quick rise in the music scene have been highly visible and celebrated. As Ashby notes, “The increasingly multicultural nature of American society makes musical discussion precarious.” Composers such as Chen Yi are, in many ways, émigré composers of a newer mold. Indeed, Justin Davidson had expressed a similar view in a


Chen Yi belongs less to the exotic camp than to the great tradition of émigré composers. Just as Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s swooning symphonic style was transplanted from Vienna to the soundtracks of Hollywood swashbucklers; just as Arnold Schoenberg’s California sojourn begat generations of U.S. modernists; so the fusion of Chinese and Western music has become a distinctively American phenomenon.21

It may be too soon to tell whether or not such a fusion is a distinctively American phenomenon. Yet, Chen Yi and her cohort should certainly be written into the lineage of émigré composers with like transnational experiences and impact on American music scene. It would put into sharp relief the need for new framework to address the developing discourse of such compositions of cultural fusion, a discourse that both encompasses and is encompassed by American music and yet is not fully coterminous with it.22

Bright Sheng

While the pairings of Tan Dun/Cage and Chen Yi/Davidovsky reflect a similarity in the general aesthetics and compositional approaches that fostered their music characteristics, a music genealogy, the pairing for Bright Sheng would no doubt be Leonard Bernstein. Arriving in the United States in 1982, Bright Sheng found a mentor in Bernstein just three years later, and remained very close to him until the maestro’s death in 1990. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Aspen and Tanglewood were the training ground where Bright Sheng sharpened his skills in composition, as well as his craft in conducting everything from standard symphonic repertoire to contemporary music. He became remarkably well-steeped in the orchestral music scene of the United States. His own epic-scale orchestral works (on topics relating to the Nanking Massacre or the Cultural Revolution) and three operas have been composed in collaboration with such prominent American institutions as Seattle Symphony, Santa Fe Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and New York City Ballet. For example, a 1998 orchestral work, The Full Moon, shows lyrical and limpid melodies, and a lush texture and timbre, conjuring up the nuanced orchestral timbre of a Mahler score. A recent work, The Black Swan, composed in 2009, is a luxurious arrangement of Brahms’s Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 2 for orchestra.

Having worked for the music and dance troupe of Qinghai Province on the Tibetan border during the Cultural Revolution, Bright Sheng was steeped in both Chinese and Tibetan influences before he came to the USA. The Tibetan experience has become increasingly prominent in recent years, as his recent work, stemming from the symphonic tradition, shows a broadening of an already rich orchestral palette. Appointed the first resident composer of New York City Ballet, he composed a non-narrative ballet score for orchestra, Just Dance in 2009. The percussion section includes two bongos, two congas, as well as small Peking Opera gongs and temple blocks. The work is divided into three movements. “Jubilant” was taken from classical Chinese instrumental music, while “Reminiscent” has a tinge of central Asian influence. “All Out” is an amalgamation of what the composer called “everything.” In the dynamic first movement, Chinese traditional melodies are set against the multiple strands of rhythmic grooves, with the sound of bongos and congas clearly in dominance. A Shostakovich sense of breath in music phrases and a Bartokian sense of rhythmic propulsion create dramatic and theatrical gestures. Figure 9.5

reproduces the opening of the first movement "Jubilant," where the prominent rhythmic motive first appears in the percussion section — a composite of vibraphone, 2 bongos and 2 congas.

A contrasting middle movement employs no percussion. Then the third movement picks up again the distinctive rhythmic motive of bongos and congas, but now playing against the penetrating sound of Peking opera gongs. The percussion accompaniment of Peking opera is rich in meaning and highly versatile. Its music is comprised of a set of idiomatic rhythmic patterns, regularly used to emulate emotive responses, reflect inner state of characters, support dramatic movements, distinguish character types, and so on. It thus has tremendous narrating power. The juxtaposition of the propulsive rhythmic "feel" of African/Cuban percussion with the rhythmic narrating of Peking gongs sets off a lively contrast against the symphonic texture. The work highlights a 21st-century dialogue between the multi-ethnic American popular culture, grand symphonic gestures and Chinese utterance.

Active as a pianist, conductor and composer within the past two decades in the United States, Bright Sheng maintains a rich and multi-faceted engagement with concert music. His merging of African-Cuban, Chinese and European music traditions in a composition for a classical institution such as New York City Ballet constitutes a solution to recurring questions faced by new concert music today. In 2004 a public discussion about the future of new music was held among a dozen or so prominent classical music critics at the Aspen Music Festival. Reporting the lively exchange, Anne Midgette, now the chief music critic for The Washington Post, wrote,

[A] plausible idea involved that loaded term multiculturalism: the idea that classical music in this country has been blown open, in the best sense, by musical influences from other cultures. Among the most-played contemporary composers are non-Europeans like Tan Dun, Chen Yi, Bright Sheng and Osvaldo Golijov. Then there was the idea about the influence of [American] pop music, which classical composers should (according to Alex Ross of The New Yorker) or do (according to Kyle Gann of The Village Voice) work with more.

Though articulated as two separate trends/ideas in the discussion, a merging of the two — multicultural and popular music influences — seems the aesthetic aim of Bright Sheng’s dance work. They constitute the spirit of the dance, the riff of rhythm and timbre rubbing shoulders with the tuneful melodies that were once distilled in the playing on traditional Chinese instruments. A similar approach is also being taken by Tan Dun. His 2009
work, Violin Concerto: The Love, begins with percussion riffs from an earlier violin concerto Out of Peking Opera (1987-1994), now recast in funkier rhythms. The term “Hip Hop” is literally marked in the score. This movement, depicting young love, continues on with a steady funk-rock drum beat and brash whoops from the brass section. “It made the music unusually playful and accessible,” observed Steve Smith of The New York Times.25

Global Space

Ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes once noted, “music plays an active role in creating and shaping global spaces that otherwise would not have happened.”26 The three composers discussed here negotiated with the fertile musical forces of American cosmopolitanism in unique ways, achieving fruitful results that could not have existed in anyone’s wildest imagination several decades ago. Their activities cross not only the Pacific Ocean to the United States, where they have resided for two decades and more, but have also extended to classical institutions in Europe. Their works are distributed by prestigious music publishers: Schirmer and Theodore Presser. Furthermore, in a very interesting move, within the last decade they have also greatly increased their activities and efforts in Asia, which, in addition to China, includes Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Australia, etc. Aside from regular performances, two initiatives are particularly notable. Chen Yi has led the annual “Beijing International Composition Workshop” at the Central Conservatory of Music, a ten-day workshop whose programs range from lessons, lectures, and conducting classes to concerts. The workshop is distinguished by its commitment to the future of Chinese contemporary music, through offerings such as lectures on traditional instruments or folk traditions and discussions and panels on Chinese cultural and musical heritage.

In busy metropolitan Hong Kong, Bright Sheng founded “The Intimacy of Creativity,” an annual two-week composition symposium that brings young composers together with world-famous performers and composers, in which they revise and refine compositions through rehearsal discussions and experiments to hammer out the work’s full potential. Supported by Hong Kong cultural institutions and prominent patrons, the symposium serves to carry out Bright Sheng’s visions as well. The 2012 symposium, for example, focused on merging pop music and classical music. It brought together a jazz musician, a Hong Kong pop singer, and Chinese orchestra members, as well as established composers and performers from North America. Through these long-term endeavors both Sheng and Chen exert their influence as leading figures in new music scene on both continents and work to have a lasting impact on contemporary music in the specific localities of their choices. Their music and endeavors such as the workshops epitomize globility; they consider the “world” a single field of opportunity, while embracing in very specific places and specific times the music of various localities. Therefore, the fluid global flow in which these composers’ works have had prominent and impressive presence was established by specific and localized creative endeavors, i.e., what Anna Tsing calls “located specificity of globalist dream.”27 The located specificity registers how the composers bring vigor and breathe life into the global music imagination. Within the larger “structure” of global space/structure, their musical lineage, personal experience, aesthetics, commitment to musical practices, and sensitivity to changing environment shape the ways that have come to distinguish themselves.

The challenge of appeasing a global audience is obviously tricky for composers. Bright Sheng is rather pragmatic, noting,

I think less and less about whether some element I am using is Chinese or Western. I write whatever excites me while continuing to study both cultures. It is crucial that one knows both sides truly well and in depth, therefore Western audiences don’t feel they need to understand Chinese music in order to appreciate you, and Chinese audiences that they need to understand Western contemporary music. 28

His commitment to relieve listeners of any doubt about how the music belongs is evident. It is also reflected in his uncompromising approach and high expectation transcend linguistic difference, music or otherwise. For Tan Dun, on the other hand, the challenge leads in a very different direction. He has offered many different answers to such questions over the years, depending largely on the occasion. A recent answer seems strikingly succinct, representative of both his philosophy and pragmatic approach. Interviewed before the premiere of his Percussion Concerto (2012) in Germany he was asked “How important is the amount of original Chinese percussion instruments in the work?” He answered, “I have never felt there was a distinction between Chinese and Western percussion instruments. ... I have always used my own quiet and mystic methods in composing for or playing an instrument. It is not the instrument or the instrumentation that defines a piece, but the way that you play the instrument or use the instrumentation.” 29

Intentional or not, the national/cultural boundary is necessarily blurred in this music aesthetics. Certainly such a comment presents scholars with the challenge to develop new hermeneutic frame for music whose emblematic quality is deeply ingrained in blurring the boundary.

Identity and (Inter)cultural Memories

Despite these three composers’ continuous presence on the concert stages in the United States, their admission into various prestigious institutions or their receipt of the most prestigious contemporary music awards in the United States, they have continued to be labeled and listened to as first and foremost “Chinese.” The easy designation highlights one-dimensionally their foreignness, glossing over their far more complex constitution and evolution as composers and musicians of the late 20th century and early 21st century. In some cases their Chineseness was touted and celebrated at the expense of suppressing their other stylistic features. Tan Dun is a noted and particularly acute example. In other cases their Chineseness was criticized: its sameness — hinting at the narrowness of the composers’ aesthetic palette or musical imagination; its chinoiserie — suggesting self-exoticizing and selling out.

In his book *Culture and the Plural*, French philosopher Michel de Certeau wrote about the politics of knowledge that are inherent but seldom made explicit:

In a more general sense, every position of knowledge that establishes as an object a category of people implies, by definition, a relationship of force and domination. It assumes that at that very place these people are no longer subjects and citizens entirely of their own being. For example, among the blacks whom I saw in Los Angeles, Chicago, and elsewhere, a different gaze is directed toward black culture, a different analysis is made than that of the ethology or sociology of whites. Every historiographer or ethnologist always remains the symptom or the flag of the milieu that develops it. 30

Certainly a parallel can be drawn between the gaze directed toward black culture, and one toward other ethnic culture in America, such as Chinese. Yet events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics force us to reconsider the “category” Chinese or American and what it privileges, coaxes, and suppresses. As the American music critic Davidson looked east to Beijing on the global stage and the artistic marks of the 2008 Olympics opening ceremony, he couldn’t help but see “signs” of American music flow and disperse throughout the cultural event. Their “Americanness” distinguishes them. The cultural memories their work invoked for him, perhaps for others as well, are those within American borders. With the help of the global spotlight that sharpened the view, the American critic’s gaze at the Beijing display rendered a revelation about ethnic-national labels, in that the east-ward gaze complicates an easy understanding of ethnic formation, national characteristics, and cultural encounter in contemporary music. Suddenly they don’t seem all that distinctively Chinese anymore!

Indeed Davidson’s gaze is unusual because it differs from the more typical gaze that Chinese contemporary composers receive in the United States — one that confirms rather than crosses cultural boundaries, pursuing questions of “Chineseness” rather than “Americanness.” Yet his gaze also foregrounds another challenge. Allan Isaac, a scholar of American Studies, poignantly asks, “When colonized subjects entered the terrestrial space of the U.S. nation-state, how do the same tropes and fantasies inform their negotiation with Americanness? What happens when they come “home” to this fantasy?”

The “colonized subjects” were always the silent Other. Yet through their distinctive work, the composers in question are no longer the silent Other, but rather, interlocutor of American music. They developed in their own “American ways,” as reflected by their successful, but different, career paths and aesthetic ambitions, for which they have continued to be honored with highest recognitions by US governmental and cultural institutions and receive international acclaim. It is certainly impossible to generalize the nature of their music, or even this generation as a whole, without flattening the individual differences that have animated the contemporary music scene in fascinating ways. This group was made up of individuals who developed and carved out their creative paths. As world power shifts in the 21st century, with China in particular taking the spotlight, these composers continue to expand their global and domestic stages in complicated ways. Their works have come to reshape and redefine cultural institutions in the West, just as the latter have played a key role in shaping their works.

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References


