

Some Vital Experiences and Musical Ideas*

Lei Liang

(1993) While in college, I became very close to the Peking Opera master, Ni Qiu-ping (1905-1995) who accompanied the King of Peking Opera Mei Lan-fang from the 1930s until 1961. Master Ni taught me a phrase that summarized the aesthetic ideal of the Chinese opera: “No sound is not sung, no movement is not danced.” All sound has the potential to be musically expressive. There are more than 100 varieties of coughing alone. Each sound is stylized, crafted and contextualized in a meaningful way. This way of thinking has had a fundamental impact on my own conception of musical sound.

~

(1996) The renowned Mongolian scholar Mr. Wulalji took me to Nei Mongol. A throat singer visited us and we sat around a table. Without any preparation, they started singing two long chants – two different melodies along with a drone that together intertwined beautifully. It was a rare experiment in Mongolian music, and I happened to witness this magical moment. It has made me wonder, up to the present day, is it possible to create a polyphony that evolves organically from the materials and principles of this music?

~

(1997) I studied the *guqin* (an ancient seven-stringed zither) with ethnomusicologist Rulan Chao Pian. When practicing a passage, Prof. Pian interrupted me, “The color is inaccurate.” My pitches were right, but I used incorrect fingering, therefore inverting the timbre of the passage. This seemingly minute detail touches upon a principal aspect of traditional Chinese *guqin* music: the melodies are composed of not only pitches but also colors. Later on, I developed a technique called “one-note polyphony” that systematically explores this subtle idea.

~

(1999) Having been interested in Mahayana Buddhism for a number of years, I went to a Buddhist monastery in upstate New York to study meditation. One evening, while walking alone by the side of the lake, I caught the sight of a “V” shape floating and extending on the surface of the water. It was a beaver taking a swim under the moon. This image gave me insight into my relationship with silence: underneath the music I write is a profoundly deep silence upon which I seek to inscribe my signature through sound.

~

(2001) When I first encountered the music of the Mongolian fiddle player Serashi (1887-1968), it was a deeply moving experience. He plays well-known melodies, yet without sweetening the tunes; instead, he finds the “truth” of each note and brings out the vitality, the vastness of space and the profound loneliness it contains. As he said, “You must put the entire weight of your whole life into every single note you play.” I regard him as my

ideal teacher and audience. I devoted four years re-discovering and producing a recording of his performances, and I have dedicated pieces to him.



I discovered my own compositional voice in a work for any solo instrument (*Garden Eight*, 1996). Since then, my thoughts have followed a single trajectory in parallel ways. It can be summarized in my belief that composing is a way to free oneself from the artificial confines of cultural identity, a means to challenge the perceived borders and convenient labels. To this end, I developed a few core concepts, each building on the richness of resources that crosses historical, cultural, technological and disciplinary boundaries. Some examples:

ONE-NOTE POLYPHONY: Inspired by my sonogram analysis of the music of the *guqin*, my initial fascination in sound has found its expression in an idea that I call “one-note polyphony.” Each note is conceived as a kernel, or a container: a single note functions as the “intersection” where various musical dimensions can be accessed. My interest lies in the potential for perceptible timbral transformation through the varying possibilities for instrumental re-synthesis on these single notes. (e.g. *Brush-Stroke* for chamber orchestra, 2004; *Five Seasons* for pipa and string quartet, 2010)

SHADOWS: I am fascinated by the dialectical relationship between the convergence and divergence of musical voices found in the traditional heterophonic music of Mongolia and Japan. There, the functionality of a principal line and its accompaniment can interchange, and often not synchronously. They can move not only in unison, but also individually like rivers with diverting currents in an ocean. I call the secondary line with ever-changing functions the “shadow,” and I apply the idea of the shadow to other parameters in music, thereby creating “melodic shadows,” “harmonic shadows,” “timbral shadows” and “rhythmic shadows.” (e.g. *Gobi Gloria* for string quartet, 2006; *Verge* for string orchestra, 2009)

BREATHING: Melodic flows might seem free and unpredictable, yet they must also appear urgent and inevitable. In this respect, they closely resemble the subtle processes of breathing. Breathing, as a psychophysical experience, may be described as the constant expansion and contraction of time. It is an experience we rarely pay attention to, yet a short moment without it can easily put us at the verge of death. One can think of it as a pre-industrial sense of time, or even a “timeless time.” Can a piece breathe slowly and deeply, like an old tree in the winter? Can music capture this urgency in time? Can such subtle processes be quantified in the finest detail? (e.g. *Milou* for mixed ensemble, 1999; *Harp Concerto*, 2008)

TRANSFORMATION: A sound is a living entity, its latent dynamism and hidden forces mirror an individual’s adaptation in a complex and ever-changing world. How can music expose and explore the phenomena of gradual and radical transformation? How can it celebrate the essence of existence – the driving energies and the vitality of change? How can it reflect the diversity and depth of human experience? (e.g. *Yuan* for saxophone)

quartet, 2008; *Tremors of a Memory Chord* for piano and grand Chinese orchestra, 2011)

Born in China during the last years of Cultural Revolution, I grew up as a Chinese citizen, but I was homeless spiritually and culturally. I had a strong urge to question everything I was taught, and to discover or create my own spiritual and cultural homeland. After I left Beijing and came to America in 1990 at age 17, my search broadened and intensified.

It is not a cultural entity with a convenient border marked “China,” nor a sense of nostalgia that I am seeking. That would be too easy. While cultural and historical borders are often sharply delineated, simplified and celebrated, they tend to be, more often than not, characterized by fluidity, uncertainty and subjects of deep ambivalence. For example, the majority of court orchestras in Tang Dynasty China (618-907CE) were foreign orchestras; many instruments that are labeled as quintessentially Chinese, such as the *pipa* (lute), were imported from Asia Minor and other foreign lands; court ensembles were often spatialized and performed with dance.

Histories, traditions and my own identities are merely cultural constructs. Any totalized or essentialized “Asian” tradition can only be mystifying and meaningless on a personal level. I consider cultural labels, clichéd quotations or exotic instrumental treatments as badges of intellectual laziness and lack of originality.

I wish to further reduce my musical materials to reveal their bare essence, while enriching their surfaces and complicating their transformative processes; and to test them in every medium I encounter. Each sound I create should bear the imprint of a handmade craft, and I aspire for it to radiate the warmth of human touch and to enfold a thickening of time.

This is a lifetime pursuit that can only be realized through persistent practice. It is what I do on a daily basis: engage in an intense dialogue with history; argue with inherited and new dogmas; take matters of materials, methods and details seriously; resist authorities, gimmicks and fashionable trends to keep my music vital, relevant and personal.

I search for the life force contained in a sonic material, its energy and potential for subtle and radical transformation in the ever-changing environments and contexts that we are in. These living sounds are constantly altering their own boundaries, be it in the frequency, amplitude and spectral domain. Isn't it only natural for us to do the same with this art form we call “music?”

---*This paper is based on lectures given by Lei Liang at Harvard University (Cambridge, 2010), Toho Gakuen (Tokyo, 2010) and Taiwan National University (Taipei, 2011).*

*This article was published as “Duiwo shenyou yingxiang de jige tian he yixie chuanguo xiangfa” [Some vital experiences and musical ideas]. Beijing: Renmin Yinyue [People's Music], vol.585 (2012 no.1): 10-11. Translation by Lei Liang.