Looking Beyond the “Fusion”

The relationship between Chinese music and the Western art tradition has only recently become a two-way street. Throughout much of history and in almost every art form, the portrayal of “Chinese” themes has relied on exoticism and heavy stereotyping. This ingrained image of Chinese art has left little space for validation by western cultures. On the other hand, Chinese artists and musicians have been studying western art since the Tang dynasty, over a thousand years ago.¹ Since then, western art has made its way into the popular culture in China, influencing the music and almost every other artistic medium. The New Culture Movement in the early 1900s marked the beginning of a study abroad movement.² Chinese intellectuals would bring western ideals from their time overseas and integrate them into their own work. Eventually, universities in the country’s larger metropolitan cities instigated their own western music programs. “Western” became synonymous with “modern,” and “modern” meant “progress.”³

The movement toward modernism initiated a new wave of Chinese

² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 3.
compositions. During the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao and his wife brought together a group of highly educated and well-versed musicians, composers, singers, and dancers to create a new form of Chinese opera, nicknamed “Model Opera,” that would bring China together.\(^4\) Because the government had access to everyone, including those trained in Western theory and others who were experts in traditional folk tunes, the new style of opera appealed to the masses- it did not serve as a representation of personal expression.\(^5\) In contrast, the post-Cultural Revolution composers of China sought to repurpose their music as an outlet.

Many of these composers had studied in the West or ended up moving overseas, bringing their culture and musical language with them. Chinese-American Composers, such as Chen Yi, Chen Qigang, Zhou Long, and Bright Sheng already had substantial Western music theory studies before even coming to the States.\(^6\) However, their music was still subject to the lens of exoticism. In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, reviewer Joshua Kosman described Chen Yi’s *Duo Ye* as if “Stravinsky of the early ballets had looked far to the East and plundered what he found there, sprinkling it with pugnacious orchestration and a dash of Knowing wit.”\(^7\) Kosman seems to be measuring Chen Yi’s work against western composers, as if they were the standard. For Ms. Chen, however, this piece meant so more much. *Duo Ye*

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\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid., 163.

stemmed from a meaningful trip that she took, where she learned about a traditional dance and song of the Dong minority (located in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China).\textsuperscript{8} She writes about her experience in her essay, *Tradition & Creation*:

“I traveled to the district of the Dong and Yao ethnic groups in Guangxi province with a group of composers from the Central Conservatory of Music in 1980. The warm scene left such a deep impression on me that I wrote the piano solo piece *Duo Ye* as a result of this field trip.”\textsuperscript{9}

Chen Yi writes each piece of music as an expression of an experience- a moment that can best be communicated through her unique palette. Her experiences as a young girl, learning the standard Western violin repertoire; her experiences as a teenager during the Cultural Revolution, learning folk tunes during her “reeducation;” her experiences as an adult, leaving China and living in America, under the scrutiny of the Western eye. In describing the challenge of merging together her Chinese and Western musical styles, she says, “If you just put them together as Eastern and Western, then it sounds artificial—they don’t sound together. But if you can merge them in your blood, then they sound natural together.”\textsuperscript{10} Each of these moments in her life have contributed to her distinctive voice- one that continues to evolve with each new composition.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{10} Galu Ioana, ”The Solo Violin Works of Samuel Adler, Chen Yi, and Shulamit Ran: A Performer’s Perspective,” Order No. 3528887, Bowling Green State University, 2012, 26-27.
According to Edward Cone, a performance for a piece of music encapsulates three voices: the composer’s voice, the vocal persona, and the performer’s voice.\textsuperscript{11} His writing implies an understanding of western music - including only Schubert, Mozart, Wagner, and Verdi in his musical examples.\textsuperscript{12} However, this concept of interacting with the music through three dimensions of voice can still apply to Chen Yi’s music. Cone describes the job of the composer as providing a medium “in which the poet speaks through the composer.”\textsuperscript{13} In Chen Yi’s \textit{Fisherman’s Song for Violin and Piano}, the violin acts as the singing voice, so the song has no words and does not stem from any written text. However, her song comes from the older fisherman song style, which originated from the southern coastal areas of China, around Guangdong province.\textsuperscript{14} Fisherman would sing as they worked and the voice usually stayed in a higher register in order to cut through the sound of the clashing waves.\textsuperscript{15} This song style had many of the characteristics typical of Chinese folk tunes - lyrical introduction, fast dance section in the middle of the song, and a return to the slower theme from the beginning.\textsuperscript{16} Chen Yi stayed true to many of these traditional features in her version of the fisherman’s song. The opening lyrical melody in the violin starts on a high E and does not stray far from that sphere until the middle dance section. Most of the piece is written in Chinese modes, primarily the

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\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{14} He Xiang, ”Selected works for violin and piano by Chen Yi: Western influences on the development of her compositional style,” \textit{RILM Abstracts of Music Literature with Full Text}, 2010, 26.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
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pentatonic mode. In addition, many of the slurs and gestures, such as the dotted rhythms (m. 17, m. 27, m. 119, m. 123), are common to Chinese folk tunes.

In relation to the vocal persona, Cone writes, “music should be considered as a mode of representation through which a character is realized...which controls our perception of the character...yet which is fundamentally external to the character.”

The character of Chen's Fisherman's Song is a fisherman, obviously, but because of the absence of words (and context), the violin as the “voice” can only go so far in acting out this persona. If this song were in the context of an opera, where the singers would be acting dramatically within a set, the audience would have a much quicker understanding of the piece and what it aims to portray. However, Ms. Chen has chosen a duet between violin and piano as her medium, and the character still comes through clearly.

The piece opens with trills in the piano, setting the scene with the ripples and shimmer of the water, and a short run in mm. 7-8 evokes the sound of a gentle swell. The piano then transitions in m. 9 to an offbeat pattern in the right hand triggered by an arpeggiated chord in the bass, suggesting the shape of the undulating waves. The lyrical melody comes in the violin in m. 10, staying in a register much higher than the piano. In m. 29, Chen writes in a “piu mosso” tempo marking, and the piano introduces triplets against the violin's duple eighth notes- a tension that builds until m. 43, when the opening theme comes back in a forte dynamic (instead of the mezzo forte where the theme started).

17 Cone, “Persona, Protagonist, and Characters,” 32.
The dance section beginning in m. 56 introduces a new side to the fisherman’s character. The dance starts in a piano dynamic and gradually builds as more double stops and sixteenth notes appear. As the violin and piano begin their ascent towards the climax, they trade off sixteenth notes, and the violin ends up taking over with a long sequence of sixteenth note double stops that eventually climbs to the fortissimo B in m. 100, the highest point of the song. The shimmer of the water returns here in the piano, except in forte dynamic this time, and violin sounds rhythmically free and improvisatory, especially compared to the highly rhythmic dance section just prior. The piano has the theme when it returns in m. 111 while the violin becomes the shape of the water using triplet figures that vaguely echo the melody, similar to the ripples that echo the impact of a stone dropped in water. The piece ends with pianissimo in both voices and harmonics in the violin, illustrating the transparency of the still water.

The relationship between the vocal persona and composer intersects at the performer. The performer, according to Cone, has a level of control that comes from “its articulation and intensification of these usually amorphous elements.” Cone argues that this idea lies in the subconscious of the singer or performer because of the innate shaping of the speech we use in communicating emotionally. He writes: “When we speak, we are normally completely conscious of the words we use, but much less so of our inflections of tone, pitch, loudness, rhythm, and speed.” In applying this concept to Chen’s work, a performer can relate to the music in a

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18 Ibid., 34.
19 Ibid., 33.
personal way, making the lens of exoticism and the perception of “foreign” obsolete.

In an essay from the book *China and the West*, Hon-Lun Yang briefly mentions the idea of western music as a “universal language,” in contrast to music in general. This issue ties in with Cone’s argument because in his article, he uses the western art tradition as the foundation and does not mention how his ideas might apply to music outside this genre. However, at the end of the chapter, as Cone speculates on Schubert’s intentions in his Heine songs, he concludes that no matter the composer’s intention with the characters and context, “they [the Heine songs] are the richer for being heard in this way.” That is the point. Although Chen Yi’s music is written in a western context, it still often gets misplaced or categorized, as exemplified in the quote from the *San Francisco Chronicle* stated earlier. Certain music cannot be devalued simply because of where composers choose to draw influence and inspiration. It still speaks in some way, we just have to take the initiative to dig deeper. Music is universal, but it may not be used in the same concrete way as a language.

Following her move to the United States in the mid-80s, Chen Yi studied with renowned composers Chou Wen-Chung and Mario Davidovsky at Columbia University. Chen and the other composers who came from China to America around the same time period saw a significant change in their musical styles due to reasons that no one can pinpoint. In a dissertation titled, “Immigrant Music and Transnational Discourse: Chinese American Music Culture in New York City,” Su de San Zheng

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21 Cone, “Persona, Protagonist, and Characters,” 40.
writes this:

“...composers have left behind them the ideological and social constraints imposed by the Chinese communist government and society in their motherland; at the same time, they have become highly conscious of their own cultural heritage and individual identities in America’s multi-ethnic society and strongly competitive new music circle. Chinese cultural tradition is therefore both part of their personal identity and a strategic capital for their professional advancement in America.”

The consciousness that she mentions forced these composers to adjust their musical voices in order to be heard in midst of the Western art tradition that dominated the music schools in America. Chen Yi has lived in the States for almost half of her life now, and her more recent works very obviously reflect a change in cultural influences, especially when compared to the pieces she composed while still living in China.

Ms. Chen wrote Memory for solo violin, premiered in 2010, in honor of her beloved violin teacher, Lin Yaoji. She wrote this about the piece:

“Dear Professor Lin: I wish you could hear the tune in my Memory, which sounds like my painful cry out of your name in our Cantonese dialect. I expressed my deep sorrow in the music, to remember your fatherly

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mentorship. Your meaningful smile will always be with us encouragingly.”

The melody of the piece itself is not based on any certain folk-tune, as in the
Fisherman’s Song. Instead, she derives the opening 4-note motive, which comes back
several times throughout the piece, from the tones used to pronounce 林老师,
which means Teacher Lin. In her dissertation titled, “The Solo Violin Works of
Samuel Adler, Chen Yi, and Shulamit Ran,” Ioana Galu called this 4-note idea the “Lin
motive.” The Lin motive provides a familiar gesture for the ear to latch onto in
different parts of the piece, but it undergoes some kind of change each time it
returns. This lack of formal structure, coupled with the nonexistent rhythmic
grounding that a piano accompaniment would provide, gives Memory a distinctive
improvisatory lament feel.

The notes immediately following the opening Lin motive has a folk-like
quality- the dotted 16th figure shows up in the Fisherman’s Song as well. Beginning
with the pickup to m. 4, a downward gesture suggests a cry or sob. Galu calls this
gesture the “Lament motive.” Like the Lin motive, the Lament motive comes back
in several places, a little different each time. The 8-note tail at the end of this first
lament (mm. 6-7) closes the first phrase of the piece, a total of seven measures.
When the Lin motive returns at the start of the next phrase (m. 8), the energy level
has risen, and instead of tapering off at the end of the lament, the phrase grows into

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24 Galu, “The Solo Violin Works of Samuel Adler, Chen Yi, and Shulamit Ran: A
Performer’s Perspective,” 31.
25 Ibid., 32.
26 Ibid.
a contrasting rhythmic idea in m. 14. Chen writes accents on every note in mm. 14-15, as if in anger. This anger culminates in a spoken-like passage from mm. 16-19. Though the time signature hasn’t changed, it becomes difficult to pinpoint downbeats because of the multiple slides and glissandi. Finally, in m. 20, the phrase ends with the tail that ended the first phrase, this time using 6-notes instead of 8.

The first time signature change takes place in m. 23. Up until this point, Chen Yi has used 4/4, but for that one measure, she uses 5/4 to initiate a written out accelerando that builds to another variation of the Lin motive in m. 28. This reiteration of the motive feels climatic and desperate due to the high register and use of repeating notes instead of held notes. The Lament motive that follows starting in the upbeat to m. 31 begins in octaves, but becomes more dissonant as the passage continues. Chen saturates the music with major and minor 7th chords, and the meter changes to ¾ in m. 33 and back to 4/4 two measures later, then to 5/4 in m. 37 and back to 4/4 a measure later. In the midst of this confusion and chaos, the Lin motive returns (middle of m. 37) as accented major 7ths chords- the most distorted variation of this motive yet. Instead of having the Lament motive follow this variation of the Lin motive, Chen writes a series of major 7th trills, mm. 42-44, that grow to a fortississimo dynamic marking in m. 45. The descent takes place rather quickly in the following measure; a descending glissando trill leads into an 8-note tail, similar to the one that closed the first phrase of the piece. The final Lament motive uses the same exact notes as the first statement of this motive but in an octave lower. The piece ends with the Lin motive played in harmonics, possibly depicting the transparency of a spirit.
While both *Memory* and the *Fisherman’s Song* have clear Chinese and Western influences, the styles in which Chen writes each piece show a clear development of personal and musical identity that I can only relate to on a surface level. As an American born Chinese, I know the feeling of breaking stereotypes and molds, sometimes without even realizing it. Chen Yi’s compositions have reached wide audiences and received acclaim and recognition, not because she has conquered a new frontier, but because she has written music that is genuine and simply beautiful. The raw emotion that permeates her music leaves no one unscathed.
Bibliography


