

AUTHORS: Chen Yi, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, Nancy Rao, John Roeder, Jennifer Bain, and a number of [unidentified] audience members.

Transcribed by Zackary Harrison.

TITLE: In Dialogue with Chen Yi: Compositional Images, Techniques, and Influences

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ABSTRACT: This is an edited transcript of the question and answer period that concluded a special session on Chen Yi's music on November 3, 2017, sponsored by the Committee on the Status of Women at the 2017 Society for Music Theory annual meeting in Arlington, VA. Many of the questions centered on issues related to Chinese traditional music, Chinese aesthetics, or the interplay between Chinese and Western compositional techniques.

NO ACCOMPANYING FILES

In Dialogue with Chen Yi: Compositional Images, Techniques, and Influences¹

Speakers: Chen Yi, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, Nancy Rao, John Roeder, Jennifer Bain, and a number of [unidentified] audience members

Jennifer Bain: I would like to open our session to questions, starting with our panelists.

John Roeder: I have a question for Nancy. In the video you showed, I had the sense of *shi* as a force directed downward through the characters. But as I understood your description of the Chen Yi passage, those gestures were sweeping upwards. Is that a different sort of *shi*?

Nancy Rao: Actually, in my conception of the *shi*, it doesn't really make a difference whether it is downward motion or upward swinging, because it is primarily about where the energy goes. So, while in that particular calligraphy video the *shi* is going downward, he could very well be writing horizontally, though Chinese calligraphers don't write that way as frequently. The upward motion in this case is for me a force pushing forward. In fact, in this piece I found the moment when the music starts to go downward very interesting. In my perception it signals a change of the scene. But that was also only temporary and later to be balanced by upward motion again.

Audience member 1: I have a question for the composer. I see you show your graph of the form of the piece and then you said the golden section is very important for you. So my question is: Do you compose from your graph? Do you compose from the point that you want to make a climax, or do you go by your energy, by your natural language?

Chen Yi: That is a very interesting question about the process of my composition. I usually write out one page of draft by pencil first. I know about the idea, the image at least, and then I start to calculate: for this commission I would write twelve minutes or fifteen minutes of music and I would decide, if I stay with this tempo, how many

¹ This "Dialogue" is an edited transcription of the question and answer period from a special session, The Music of Chen Yi, held on November 3, 2017 at the 2017 Society for Music Theory (SMT) annual meeting in Arlington, VA, sponsored by the SMT Committee on the Status of Women. It was transcribed from an audio recording by Zackary Harrison and edited by Jennifer Bain, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, Nancy Rao and John Roeder. Revised and peer-reviewed versions of the introduction and papers from that session will appear in *Music Theory Online* 26.3 in the fall of 2020 (<https://www.mtosmt.org/>): Jennifer Bain, "Introduction: The Music of Chen Yi"; Chen Yi, "Compositional Process and Technique in *Happy Rain on a Spring Night* (2004)"; Nancy Rao, "The Concept of *Shi* and *Happy Rain on A Spring Night* by Chen Yi"; John Roeder, "Interactions of Folk Melody and Transformational (Dis)continuities in Chen Yi's *Ba Ban*"; and Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, "Experiencing Chen Yi's music: Local and Cosmopolitan Reciprocities in *Ning* for Pipa, Violin, and Cello (2002)."

measures there would be in the meter. And all I would have to change is tempo and from there I would have a rough idea. Then I describe the images verbally, using adjectives, and then I would see where to put this, and with which texture. However, these spots could be changed because when you write up to that point, these instrumental groups might not fit, or the sound might not be connected. Then you switch. But all these images have specific instrumentation. The instrumentation would be there already, because the commission would specify it. So the most important thing is to find out the right image for that particular instrumentation.

For example, the orchestra piece *Momentum* could not be written for a solo flute. I needed the full orchestra to fit my image of this piece. For *Happy Rain on a Spring Night*, the instrumentation and the length were given in the commission. I decided on the image of quiet rain. To realize the image, I decided to use a texture that paired a violin and cello, and then flipped it to cello-violin, which would finish the first section. When I wrote out the draft by pencil I knew how long it was, and then I could calculate how long the rest of the music would be to achieve the 0.6 proportion.

This process allows me to write faster because I have the length in mind. When I was a student, I had to write 20 measures at a time, week after week, to show my teacher. It was hard. The night before my lessons I didn't sleep, because if you didn't finish enough pages you couldn't go to your lesson. It is hard to know how to continue a passage if you don't have an image in mind. But if you do have the whole image as a whole structure, like an organic whole, then you can put things into order.

Returning to your question about the compositional process, different pieces could be done in different ways. But I used the same method to construct this piece as I did for *Qi*, the mixed quartet for flute, cello, piano, percussion. I wrote the whole draft in a hotel lobby in Vienna. It was really cool when Dennis Russell Davies, the conductor of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, who was to drive me to the Graz festival, walked into the lobby. He said, "What are you doing with that little piece of paper?" I was calculating the numbers of these proportions. If you do it this way you can compose very fast!

Nancy Rao: If I may ask a follow up question: what you said makes a lot of sense. I always felt your music has a very strong image to which one can easily relate. How important then is pitch structure, something like a C sharp in this piece? I keep feeling that the low G going up to high C sharp is important. So how does a concentration or a focus on the role of the C sharp or a G help you portray your image in a musical sense?

Chen Yi: The G and C sharp form a tritone. It was my basic interval to use because if I used a perfect 5th or perfect 4th (although I use them as decoration), it would be hard for me to develop further, because you can't switch to another key very easily. But the tritone is not consonant in tonal music. I also used this C sharp because the violin could play it loudly and brightly as a harmonic. When you play the third harmonic on an open string it's sharp; it's light and brighter.

Nancy Rao: That makes a lot of sense.

Chen Yi: And so those are the combinations.

Nancy: So they are the combined considerations. Because you first have this C sharp played as a harmonic on the cello, and when I hear it a second time, it just makes the first one resonate retrospectively. It is so beautiful. Then you start to use that pitch to begin the next section, so I thought that C sharp must be symbolic, but now I see that it's really because of the instrumentation.

Chen Yi: Instrumentation is very important for me. When I write instrumental music, it is important to do it idiomatically. If that pitch would sound well and easily, then it would be the best to write for a specific instrument. In this case it just came down to the question: what could be done easily on the stringed instruments? And also, you could do it quite freely whenever you need natural harmonics, and artificial harmonics you could do easily as well.

Audience member number 2: Thank you. I have a lot of questions, but I will just pose one. Talking about writing idiomatically for instruments, I was wondering specifically with contemporary Chinese and Chinese-American music, it seems like there are a lot of pieces that have been written for particular instruments. For example, last week I played one of your husband's pieces [composer Zhou Long]. The piece was originally written for *pipa* but we were asked to play it on marimba. Or suppose a piece was written for *dizi* and they wanted us to play it on flute. When you had an idea for a piece for a western instrument, and you wanted to try it on a Chinese instrument or vice versa, how do you navigate that? And how important is it for you that when something works really well on *pipa*, you hope it also works well on marimba.

Chen Yi: This is a little tricky. We have adapted many pieces from each other's tradition, for example, a piece originally written for a Western ensemble then adapted partially for Chinese instruments, or switched completely from a [Western] orchestral work to a whole orchestra of Chinese instruments. First of all, we have to know both instrumentations very well because some Chinese instruments don't cover the same

scales that Western instruments can. The tuning is different, and it is hard to do chromatic scales right sometimes. And then you have to know which phrases cannot be replicated on different instruments. Take the *pipa* for example; its fingerings would be hard to translate into any western instruments, unless you combined two instruments to imitate it. In my trio *Ning* for violin, cello, and *pipa*, I used the combination of violin and cello to imitate the *pipa* fingering, by plucking chords in pizzicato, one after the other. But since the *pipa* part is the hardest to imitate, this trio had only one version. Many of my works have two or more versions adapted for one or two or three instruments or a larger ensemble. But it is not possible for this piece. The fingering is very hard to imitate because there are many techniques involved with both hands. The fingering signifies the style. To take another example, while the normal Chinese fiddle, the *erhu*, has the same tuning with the open fifth as in a violin, the *erhu* players trained in traditional music don't play the same scale that you play on a violin. The 4th step is higher; it is like an f sharp. And so whenever you use that instrument for modulation it doesn't work, because it would go to another key; it doesn't match the chord, and so you have to avoid that pitch. For example, you avoid doubling that pitch, because a unison on it would not sound as well as a unison on other pitches. Those are the tricks. As long as you learn those instruments well, you can easily adapt your instrumentation. The Peking opera violin (*jinghu*) has a different tuning; the inner string is a microtone lower, making a wider fifth. If you avoid doubling this pitch with western instruments it will be easy for you. Or you can use the clash intentionally to create an accent. Then people will say, "Oh, you pretended it was a Peking opera fiddle." So those are considerations of musical language. If you learn, it's not hard. I have a chart I will email you; it's very technical.

Audience Member Number 3: I am directing this question to Nancy, but you have to help me for a minute. About five years ago there was a Chinese composer who became very famous in this country. He had an opera performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and he composed the background music for a movie that was about nature, as I remember.

John Roeder: Tan Dun.

Audience Member Number 3: Okay. Now, when you were talking about *shi*, and I heard Chen Yi's music, it was very easy to relate to that psychological intensity that you conveyed in relation to her music. Is this a Chinese characteristic? Could you apply that same principle to the other composer's music also?

Nancy Rao: I do agree that it's a Chinese characteristic. It is really easy for me to hear that characteristic in the music and I can see where it's coming from. But I'm not saying that there's one characteristic that all Chinese composers share. It's a Chinese

characteristic that many Chinese composers use and there are many other characteristics also. Some composers are wedded to the aesthetics of *shi* more than others. I think *shi* is a very important element and in Chen Yi's and Zhou Long's work I hear a lot of it. Some of Tan Dun's works have that kind of a breath going through it, but not all.

Audience Member Number 4: Thank you so much to all the panelists. All these thoughts are really inspiring. But aside from the Chinese perspective, I would like to ask about the Western perspective from Dr. Roeder and Dr. Kielian-Gilbert. When I, as someone who is Chinese, listened to the pieces you have shared, I heard all the pentatonic references first and foremost, and I hear references of—I'm a *pipa* player, so I know—the martial sounds so deeply introduced in the beginning. But for you who learn from the program notes or interviews, and who are trying to discern these references based on those evidences, it is different. What are some of the difficulties that you faced, and how does all the new, learned knowledge influence your first hearing of the piece? How would that inform your understanding or how does it not help you to understand the piece?

John Roeder:

Let me speak about my experience listening to Baban. I'm somewhat familiar with the style of the folk tune because I've written about it before. Silk-and-bamboo music is not just about pitch. In Chen Yi's piano piece, the folk tune is embellished in particular ways that mimic the sound of the attacks of the instruments. The attacks of the folk-tune pitches are made noisy by embellishing semitones and tritones. I respond to them first as a mimicking of the sound of the instruments. But also the particular intervals that she chose are not pentatonic intervals. That's what's very striking about the passage. It presents you immediately with a curious world that presents a pentatonic melody and even imitates the sounds of the ensemble but also gives a hint right away of a bigger universe. I didn't have time to cover that in my paper but it's one of the piece's aesthetic effects that is accomplished ingeniously through simple but effective means.

Marianne Kielian-Gilbert: And as you suggest in your discussion, picking up the levels of pentatonicism can suggest this kind of emergent quality. I was speaking obviously from a very Western perspective coming to this music because I haven't studied it before and I have shied away from it. I shied away from Stravinsky for many years, just because it was so overwhelming with so many people talking about it. This invitation was a challenge for me and it was really an opportunity that I probably would have liked to have had earlier too. If we don't attempt new ways of embracing experience, and allow for some kind of a check (a music theory) so that we keep ourselves honest, not just grounded or honest in some way. For me the question of dealing with this music, which should not be excluded from our teaching any more than Stravinsky, is a question of

confronting biases that we have and approaching those aspects that one simply doesn't understand. Another issue that I think John Roeder addressed in co-editing the essay collection *Analytical and Cross-Cultural Studies in World Music* is the potential to go through what people refer to as modalities of patterning (accent, periodicity) that can be applied in many different dimensions as one way into the music. I certainly think, and I didn't talk about this that much, but Chen Yi's idea about texture and timbre are another potential modality that counter the bias toward privileging the parameters of pitch and rhythm. And so, for me, part of experiencing Chen Yi's composition *Ning* for violin, *pipa*, and cello was also trying to get outside of (my usual) frames.

Jennifer Bain: I might just add one thing to that comment, which is that whatever your background knowledge is, you bring elements of that to your analysis. For example, when I, as a medievalist, looked at *Happy Rain on a Spring Night*, I noticed that the opening scale sequence cycles through the modes, from Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, to Locrian.

Chen Yi: I did that intentionally because I didn't want to use a pure chromatic collection or a pure pentatonic. It's a synthetic scale. If you study Messiaen, for example, you know how he uses a manmade scale that doesn't match any style. If my student wrote a whole-tone scale in a piece for a lesson with me, I would say, "No, no, no! It can be identified right away, and that's not you." You have to design your own. In that case, that scale was by design. It is not Phrygian for the whole time, but purposefully switches to Dorian in the middle.

Audience Member Number 5: My question is directed to Nancy. You showed the Chinese calligraphy: the dry pen, the thick pen, the thin pen making the lines. Does that in any way play out in the music as far as texture is concerned; is it a factor that comes into play in this piece?

Nancy Rao: Actually, the calligraphy in the video is not by Chen Yi; it's by someone else who is very good in calligraphy. I used it simply as a way to explain *shi* because I don't have the words to explain what the video can show. "Dry ink" and the other terms describing the flow through the whole action of writing explain a lot about *shi*. And *shi* is in Chinese music so I think they are connected.

Audience Member Number 6: Thank you for this wonderful panel. I have a question for the composer, Professor Chen. I am very interested in how you conceptualize harmony not in the tonal sense but just as vertical sonic structures. Just with the background knowledge that first you were the concertmaster of a Peking opera orchestra, and that in Peking opera orchestras, although there are multiple instruments, often it's just basically

improvising on one line that the singer also... No? Okay, I am sorry if I'm wrong about that. Then please enlighten me on how you arrive at these kinds of the sonorities that you do come to from Chinese folk-influenced melodies.

Chen Yi: This is interesting. You realize that my harmonic language is different from diatonic or chromatic harmony, although we did study this traditionally throughout eight years in the conservatory. But we also studied atonal music writing, so we know how to construct vertically from bunches of pitches. That is the inspiration for me. I don't use pure chromatic or diatonic harmonic progressions at all in any of these pieces, because after you learn atonal music you know how to construct a bunch of pitches not only vertically but also in a progression, because you are not going to be still or sustained; you have to move so they become progressions. My main method is what I call a "cloud effect." When you look at a cloudy sky, it seems still, it doesn't move at all. But when you really look into the details, many lines are moving, and those became my orchestral image. I wrote many woodwind instruments with complicated motion, yet this whole block of sound doesn't move. That is the cloud effect that I use.

And also you mentioned the Peking opera orchestra. I really appreciated what John Roeder mentioned about the flowered variation. That is the major technique that Chinese traditional players use in ensemble playing because they are improvisational. Each instrument uses its own technique to decorate the main pitch. It was amazing when he sang the main pitches, that means that you really studied this variation technique. The other type of variation technique in Chinese traditional music is proportional enlargement. How do you do this? By making every 8-beat phrase twice or four times longer, then your piece becomes twice or four times longer. It is just like what you study in Renaissance music; it's the same method actually. The Chinese folk music has these two types of major variation techniques. Our farmers don't read, they don't play from scores, but they remember the major pitches, the tunes. So this piece, *Ba Ban*, has more than 300 variations in traditional forms from different regions all over, with different decorations. In my viola concerto, *Xian Shi*, the pitch material is drawn from Chaozhou music from the Guangdong province. They use a fiddle, called a *yehu*, which has a nasal sound, so when they play improvisational ensemble variations, they have the flat tones in the decorations. It signifies the style of the folk music from that region.

When you hear that you know this tune was a variation done in Chaozhou region of the folk tune from the southeast. So that was an excellent example.

John Roeder: I have my colleague Alan Thrasher to thank for that. He is an expert in this style, and he taught me about this, so I can't take credit for it, but thank you.

Audience member number 7: I am very intrigued by the whole concept of *shi* in this music and I am also intrigued by the passing comparison in the beginning to Robert Hatten's concept of gesture.² I am not familiar with Hatten's work although it's long been on my reading list, so I make that disclaimer, but I suppose that you made this comparison as a way of helping us to understand better what *shi* is. But I'm wondering: could you describe this music simply in terms of gesture or are there differences between *shi* and gesture that would make it more important to talk about it in terms of *shi* rather than gesture?

Nancy Rao: It's a very good point. I think Robert Hatten's phrase "energetic shaping through time" is a really great way of explaining *shi*. But I don't think I can talk about the music purely as gesture. *Shi* has something additional to that energetic shaping. It is such a difficult concept to explain, and gesture is just as difficult. Judy Lochhead has also helped us to understand gesture in her recent article, so I think we all understand gesture in many different ways.³ But I do feel that *shi* is such a culturally specific sense of time and energy and that I would not conflate it with the notion of gesture or mimesis. I think they are all elements of *shi*, in fact those two concepts helped me understand elements of *shi*. The concept was very intuitive to me and they gave me language to specify individual aspects of the concept. For me it's still an ongoing project that I continue to explore.

Chen Yi: More abstract or psychological.

Nancy Rao: Right. It is a little bit more, so in my other analysis of Chen Yi's work I talk about *shi*. I connect it to her use of a Peking opera percussion pattern, which is a lot about psychological effect. The psychological element in those gestures is significant. But I guess you could say the same thing about gesture, since gestures generally have a psychological dimension to them, although not all of them. So yes, I think it would be really interesting to explore further.

Audience member number 8: It seems that there's an obvious difference between this music and Western music that's embodied in writing. I did take a class, a beginner's class in calligraphy a long, long time ago and it was a very wonderful experience. I felt that I was painting and I was taught to make flowers and they looked very beautiful, but I couldn't have done that without the technique that I was taught, in other words, without

² Robert Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

³ Judith Lochhead, "'Difference Inhabits Repetition': Sofia Gubaidulina's *String Quartet No.2*," *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music, 1960-2000*, edited by Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft (New York: Oxford, 2016), 102-126.

the physical gestures that I was taught to make with the pen and with the ink. And painting words is very different from writing Western words where we're using a lot of letters that are very abstract; letters mean nothing, we have to put them together. The tools are more abstract, while the Chinese tools are more immediately hooked into nature in some way.

Audience member number 9: I'd like to follow up on the question about the harmony with a question about mixed ensembles. You write for piano trio (violin, cello, and piano), or mixed ensemble with some Chinese instruments, woodwind. In a trio by Beethoven or Brahms, the piano has the major harmonic function, providing the chords. But it seems to me in your composition that the piano has a more equal role with the other string instruments. How do you treat the piano?

Chen Yi: I use two types of vertical progressions. One, which John Roeder analyzed in that piece, is mostly dealing with atonal textures, that has a specific vertical effect when a whole bunch of pitches show up in a specific spot. I learned these harmonic progressions from Leslie Bassett and Lutoslawski, and Messiaen used them as well. You use a mirror to place the pitches an equal distance from the axis, and this produces a vertical effect that does not sound diatonic or chromatic either. It's not a regular type [of dissonant chord] because you don't have a resolution. That is one method I learned by reading other professors' program notes, as well as entries in the *New Grove Dictionary*. You learn a lot from these theories and then you apply them in your music. But for Chinese instruments, it's hard because you cannot just use any pitch that you want. The instruments don't play those pitches. So you also have to learn the language of each instrument, what they can do. Although you don't play all of them, you have to know, and if you draw a chart then you can figure it out. It's like writing for guitar; you have to figure out the fingering because it is completely different from violin, cello, and double bass. So that is the same thing. When I played in the Peking opera orchestra, it was a Western orchestra so we did have progressions of harmonies that were diatonic, plus additional pitches. We called it the "grape chord" which means do-mi-sol, and you add the la. Then you have the pentatonic chord, do-mi-sol-la, and then we called this a grape shape harmony which is not always purely pentatonic because sometimes one pitch could be different, so it makes the shape of the chord. So that is the other harmonic language.

Audience member number 10: When you came to New York, did Professor Chou's ideas about a kind of cosmopolitan fusion of Chinese music and Western music have any specific influence on you, because obviously he devoted his life to creating this synthesis and yet his own artistic aesthetic is so deeply Chinese.

Chen Yi: Yes.

Audience member number 10: I know you studied with him. I also took a class with him long ago and he had a very decided impact on me.

Chen Yi: Yes, certainly. Thank you for your great question. Professor Chou Wen-chung brought me to Columbia University. When he gave lectures in China, he donated a lot of scores of American composers to the library of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. We learned his music and also started to learn atonal influences and also other American composers from the scores and recordings he donated. Later he also founded the Center for US-China Arts Exchange, which donated many scores and recordings to the library of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

Audience member number 10: Right, I am aware of all of that, but I am asking about his specific influence on your own synthesis.

Chen Yi: Yes, his was the first influence that let the Chinese know that there was something being done outside of China using ancient Chinese music, which was the international music that he wrote. He did deep research into the technique and culture of Chinese calligraphy and music for the *qin* (a 7-string zither, which is the oldest international instrument). He used this technique to construct his compositions, which are basically atonal, using systems he designed to combine these theories with Chinese ancient culture. He did this with his chamber works as well as early orchestral works, and that influenced me a lot because he gave a weekly seminar to Chinese students in the Central Conservatory during his visits. All his pieces have titles taken from Chinese ancient poems, and he did the calligraphy on the cover of the published scores, which you may have seen.

Audience member number 10: Right, but I know he gave a very important lecture, and I'm sure he repeated it more than once for Asian composers, about the fundamental importance of the brush stroke.

Chen Yi: Yes, also fundamental is the inner voice, the concept and the culture behind the music, not just the surface; that is the most important.

Audience member number 10: Yes, as a philosophy the idea of the brush stroke.

Chen Yi: Yes, that is what he taught us, because he considered that my generation had lost the culture because of the Cultural Revolution, when all the traditional culture and methods were destroyed. He would say, you should make it up, now; you should read more, otherwise you will lose your own culture and language. That was his concern.

Jennifer Bain: Thank you to our panel; especially to Chen Yi for coming here and speaking to us. This has been a most stimulating evening.