INTERCULTURAL MUSIC: CREATION AND INTERPRETATION

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Heaven and Hell, Visual and Sonic Gestures towards Transcendent Oneness

Bruce Crossman

Personal and Cultural Dimensions

Growing up in a visually artistic household in New Zealand, I remember the vivid impression of impassioned discussions about abstract art and correlations to modernist music — spoken with the urgency of a life-force. Chinese composer and scholar Chou Wen-chung clarifies this sense of urgency within creativity as having the life-important role of being a source of ‘mobility’ between three dimensions — “heaven, earth, and humanity.” He describes the artistic figure in ancient Chinese culture, the wenren, as being broadly responsible for ‘creativity’ across multiple artistic media. In earlier writings, he notes that in ancient China the same aesthetics apply across music, visual arts and poetry. The artistic source of inspiration comes from ‘oneness’, across multiple disciplines. In this sense my music is multi-dimensional, drawing on gestural principles of visual arts practice applied sonically to express inner emotional sensibilities. These sonic ‘marks’ are drawn from an interaction with East and South East Asian cultures on the philosophical, visual and sonic levels as well as the painterly richness of my father’s abstract art. My multi-dimensional approach seeks to express a spiritual life-force within composition.

Gesture, spirit and emotion are locked into the sound world of music, a point echoed by renowned Korean Kayagan (zither) player, Hwang Byung-ki, who points to this link, between what is sensed and the sound in his discussion of Korean folk music (jori). He cites the musicians’ words as indicating “something so inexplicably subtle that it can only be felt deep in the heart.” Similarly, in the more refined court music (chungak) genre, he notes the link of sound to both the spiritual and emotional, citing a musical treatise that states: “Ae comes down from heaven to stay in the human mind… It touches the heart of everyone with blood in his veins and activates his spirit.” This reverberates with the heaven and earth ideas in Chinese culture cited at the outset. Chou notes that this mobile multi-dimensional creativity closely resembles Daoist philosophy, especially Zhuang Zi’s definition of the ‘Dao’ as “that which moves among things.” The principle I draw from this East Asian approach to creativity for my own music, is that at the heart of composition is a deep-felt emotion and spiritual sensibility linking heaven and earth.

Emotions and Single Sonic Gestures

The impetus behind composing Daragang Magayon Cantata (2001) was a strong personal anti-colonial imperialism, emotion that resonated with the poet’s cultural protest in the work’s text. Merlinda Bobis’s revisionist retelling of a Filipino myth, concerning Daragang Magayon (beautiful maiden), utilises a volcanic image, inspired from the eruptive Mount Mayon volcano in the Philippines, as a symbol of feminine beauty and rage against the stereotyping of the female role in society. This suppressed rage forms both a feminist and personal cultural protest at the outset of the cantata:

Daragang Magayon,
in this half-light, you stun me.
You repeat a crestpeak
breaking against the sky;
a once-upheaval caught
at its height — against the clouds,
a breast heaved and held
with no letting go of breath,
that swell of fury from all ages

Bobis eroticises this feminist protest thought as the “steady furnace of my loin also sharpens the edge of thought” which I interpret on a more universal level as a protest against colonial imperialism — in the sense of prescribing the European avant-garde values as the only model for Pacific creativity. Whilst
I believe in acknowledging a European cultural ‘root’ within Australasian composition, I feel it should also resonate with its Pacific locale. *Darangang* draws on the chromaticism of a Schoenbergian tradition but places the gritty minor second dissonances in gong-like, rubber-stopped single sonorities low in the piano (see Example 1). My use of these isolated interval resonances was a reaction against Austro-Hungarian composer Schoenberg’s early use of strict linear progression and forward-pushing dissonant non-octave harmony. The rubber-stopped piano sonorities are intended to evoke the sounds of Filipino Kulintang percussion ensembles. Traditional Moro percussion music from the Southern Philippines features bossed bronze gongs of luminous sonic quality. The single stroke sensuality is self-contained. This single entity approach is characteristic of South East and East Asian musics and has its roots in Chinese Confucian philosophy. Francisco Feliciano observes that the approach generates a practice where “each single tone or aggregate of tones is a musical entity in itself” and parallels the aesthetic behind Chinese painting’s single brush stroke emphasis. American composer John Cage has a similar view; his liberating diatribe against avant-garde musical doctrine speaks of discovering sounds in the moment that are self-sufficient. “A sound does not view itself as thought, as ought, as needing another for its elucidation … it is occupied with the performance of its characteristics.” Thus in my music, the singleness of sonority becomes an emotion-fuelled protest against a European musical imperialism to locate the music more within my own locale — the Pacific.

*Example 1 Darangang Magayon Cantata* (Bars 1–6) — Single Sonorous Resonances

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**Spiritual Dimensions**

The spiritual dimensions in my music also began to assert themselves more consciously, especially after the encouragement of valuing this dimension I found present in Asian music. Chou points out that in Western culture the focus of the ‘creator’ is associated with innovation, whereas in traditional Asian culture the title is associated with the earlier-cited higher purpose of moving between dimensions, or the Daoist idea of “that which gives birth to things.”

Hwang also talks of this mobility in Korean music, quoting from King Sejong’s annals that: “Akk is an artistic accomplishment…to harmonise man with the supreme being, to calm both heaven and earth.”

Hwang is talking of a yin-yang balance that has a heavenly communication within artistic expression. I see this connection to a higher level as a moment of glossolalia — gift of tongues — where heavenly spirit interacts with earth-bound humanity to refresh with a moment of indescribable beauty; the composer’s role in this is to seek to evoke the moment sonically.

In my short composition *Majesty* (2005), the inspiration is this glossolalia moment within the Judaic-Christian tradition. In the Christian writings of the Acts of the Apostles, there is a description of this transfiguration moment as “tongues of fire” (See Example 2). I seek to evoke this Pentecostal worship via a dramatic contrast from samulnori-inspired rubber-stopped low note rhythms to a sudden higher rich sonority resonance — the latter being a juxtaposition of dominant seventh tension with an approximation of Korean *kyeunyonjo*-scale fragments. The dissonant European-style avant-garde use of the seventh chord versus a more open-sounding, Eastern style of gentle seconds and fifth intervals, provides a bitter-sweet tension to my music — a hell and heaven moment. Grace-note surges within the moment help to give a sudden lift to the sound. I realised on reflection that moments of Hwang’s heart-stopping string surges on *keumagum* on “Sounds of the Night — Tempestuously” had inspired these breathing-in surges in my music. Just as Hwang valued touching on the earlier cited ‘inexplicable’ in music, I too was subconsciously and consciously encouraged by this Asian seeking for the higher level to reach out in my composition to express a heart-felt connection to the ‘supreme being.’

**Example 2** Majesty (Bars 18 – 23) Glossolalia Moment

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Visual Solutions

The sonic-gesture approach in my composition has another source — the visual dimension. The nexus between visual and sound is an approach that is encouraged within my family background through conversations with my father, the abstractionist painter Wallace Crossman. In Chinese culture, visual and musical worlds are also linked and I find this encouraging to my own way of thinking. In his search for cultural 'roots', composer Chou Wen-chung looked to calligraphy to discover the aesthetics behind Chinese music.29 Chou discovered that the process of making the mark became the essence of the art. He reveals his own practice source as "if the artist's heart or mind is at one with the ink then he achieves yun, the response. Out of this theory came my compositions."30 This oneness of mark and purpose is something I observed at an exhibition of Chinese calligraphy, entitled The Poetic Mandarin, at the New South Wales Art Gallery in 2005.31 Calligrapher Feng Chengxiu's 'Couplet in Running Script'32 displays a strength of gestural mark yet has tentative touches in the brushwork that suggest the artist's heart — his background motivation. His humble beginnings nurtured by dream towards fruition of desires33 seem to be present in the mark's insecurity yet strength, which is something I feel a resonance with in my own artistic struggles — a dream can maybe help progress life (see Figure 1). Edmund Capon succinctly sums up this imbuing of the artistic mark with meaning in his observations about early Chinese thoughts on calligraphy by stating, "that moment of making the mark, of flying the brush and ink across the paper, imposes the ego and instinct of self."34 Australian composer Liza Lim also recounts a calligraphical motivation behind her recent music; a vivid observation about the nexus between ink and movement inspired her. Journalist Matthew Westwood recalls Lim's joy "at watching two elderly Chinese men at the Metropolitan Museum in New York tracing ancient Chinese calligraphy in the air."35 What I draw from these approaches is that the essence of art can be the visual giving birth to the kinetic to express the heart of the artist.

Figure 1 FEUG Chengxiu Couplet, in Running Script — The Mark Expresses Meaning. Images used with kind permission of the Art Gallery of NSW.
My own recent music, *Blossom Sadness* (2006)\(^{29}\) for the Korean-based New Asia String Quartet, takes on this visual impetus. Its harmonic, bitter-sweet sounds of dissonant seventh and soft third intervals arise out of bare drone sounds to create a rich chunk of sound which I see as similar to the painterly layered, colour-rich chunks of visual dynamics in Wallace Crossman’s *Oasis*.\(^{29}\) For me, these sonic-marks have an emotional importance in the way that the calligraphy uses ink to lay bare the heart. The visual has also suggested structural solutions for the musical dimension. A late night perusal of a monograph of modern Japanese art suggested a juxtaposition of ideas as a way of bringing back opposing materials in *Blossom’s* closing. Yasuda Yukihiro’s vivid floral-red sits luminously out from the stiller dull-yellow haze in “Princess Nukda at Asuka in Spring.”\(^{27}\) Stillness juxtaposed against vivid red, created a vibrancy which made the colour sing; this led to my compositional strategy of recurring the opening quieter drones of my music against massive climactic chunks of bitter-sweet chorale versus samulnori-inspired movement. A blaze of rhythmic energy and stillness brought back a sense of recapitulation to the opening sounds yet simultaneously created a cumulative explosion of sound to end the work to reconcile competing desires within my intuition. This resonated with what I already knew of ancient Chinese painting where space or lack of activity is used to lift vigorous activity. As Yang Xin notes: “Artists taking this approach may highlight certain areas and leave large areas blank … drawing attention to the main subject matter.”\(^{32}\) *Blossom’s* opening deploys this technique in its use of extensive drones sections used to highlight interval-rich fragments, but it extends this idea even further at the aforementioned end-time contrast of drone with climactic dance. (See Example 3).

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**Example 3: Blossom Sadness (2006) – Drones versus Climactic Chorale and Dance**
Conclusion

On reflection, I believe that my personal creative process in composition is multi-dimensional and has been deepened by an engagement with East and South East Asian culture. My personal compositional ecology resonates with these Asian cultures’ objective embodiment of feeling and spiritual sensibility within artistic expression to reach out to a higher level. The dialogue has moved from a personal dual visual-musical paradigm to one drawn from Asia-Pacific cultures’ of the painter-poet-composer perspective. Perhaps above all, this search for creative identity has become about moving across things: differing artistic media, Pacific-European cultural resonances and earthly-heavenly spiritual transcedency.

Endnotes


2 Ibid., p. 214.


5 Ibid., p. 813.


8 Bobis, M. 1998, Summer was a Fast Train without Terminal. Spinifex, Melbourne, p. 68.


10 Bobis, Summer, p. 68.

11 Ibid.


18 Chou, ‘Weirren and Culture’, p. 213.


24 Ibid., p. 76.


27 Ibid., 46.

28 Ibid., 10.


30 Crossman, B. 2005-6, Blossom Sadness, unpublished score.

