John Oliver
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Well, the first thing I want to say about it is—you referred to the title The Bridge—and, I think, in this music I'm trying, in every way, to be as non-Western and non-Chinese as possible.

So, where does that leave me? That leaves me somewhere in a grey zone, I think. I'm not consciously thinking of style. I'm not thinking of whether my music sounds Chinese or sounds Western—it's not really of much interest to me as a concept. But, when I work with sound, when I work with musical materials, I can feel, or I can sense, their cultural roots. And I do work consciously with that.

But the result is, well, the result is up to the listener to comment on and experience in their own way. So, even the title, which came to me after having written much of the music, I thought of making it a longer title, like "A Bridge Over the River something," and I thought no, that's a Chinese title—I'm going to stay away from that because I didn't want to imply a story. There's no story in the music. I can't tell you this section is a depiction of this or…there's nothing concrete about this music. It's music to listen to. So, I would say that you, as the listener, you walk on the bridge and you look at the view, and you listen. So that's why it's called The Bridge.

It's also called The Bridge because of actual technical things going on in the music. The music is in three parts. The first part is a kind of pushing forward of musical material that's very Western in its concept. A lot of Western music is based on the concept of progress or goal—oriented towards a goal—and that concept permeates a lot of contemporary Western music. For example, the music will begin with a very small cell of material and that material will build and expand. This kind of thing comes out of Bartok and Debussy and so on. And I have studied all that music and it is part of my heritage, in a way, and I have a tendency to enjoy those kinds of processes. Yet, at the same time, I also like many, many different ways of making music and organizing music.

So, the three parts present, in the opening, this kind of, what I call, the expanding wedge, which is something that starts with small material and moves outward, whether it's getting louder, whether it's getting more pitches going out to the extremes of the register—and you hear that in the piano figure that you see in the beginning.

The music begins with a wave. The whole ensemble is going rrrr, rrrr, rrrr, like this. And of course half of a wave is an expansion. A wave is something that could expand and get larger and smaller. And at the end of that opening three or four bars, then the piano actually expands right out to the edge and bashes the edges of the piano.

And then the dizi goes brrrrr, does a short wave and then we come into the main material. And the main material…came to me as an inspiration. It was not pre-planned. I just got an idea actually, for this opening rustling and this crazy piano expansion. And I said, “That is a great opening!”

So, in that sense I’m just like any other composer who is playing around with some musical material and he found something cool. So, I wrote that opening gesture and then the viola plays a G, for two reasons. First of all, they can double the note on the lowest string to play two Gs at once. And so this creates a very big resonance on the instrument. Many of the things I…when I write music, for me, resonance and colour [are] on the same plane, or same value, as melody and harmony and these other things.

So, for me, every sound that is made on every instrument is very, very important. It’s not theoretical in a Western sense of motivic development, this kind of thing: it’s what Western composers—any composer—would probably call orchestration. But, for me, it’s actually part of the compositional material. [Viola] plays the G back and forth in this kind of very angry Western New Music style. Bah! Bah! Bah! Bah! Bah! Bah! Bah! And then he 38

goes, Dah! Dah! Dah!. So he adds another little faster element.

Then he makes the notes bend slightly, by, the unison G, he moves it slightly up and down, and this creates a kind of shimmering in the room, because the harmonics of the string start to ripple and create a different feeling in the room, that is in your ear. And so the viola plays G also because G is one of the most common tones in Chinese music. When I play with Chinese musicians, it's either in G or D.

So we're in G: it's good. Everybody's going to like that. Also I chose G because the sanxian is tuned in G, D, G. So the natural resonance of the sanxian is also G. So the viola plays this Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah! And then the wave comes back, the whole band comes back in with the wave, Duddleduddledeedleduddle, like this and…the echo of that wave is in what the viola is doing also with this wave, at a smaller level, very, very small like this. Dee, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah, just very small movements. And then the viola adds the fifth, just the D above. Very simple, nothing going on. It's not even Beethoven's Fifth. It's not even da, da, da, da, although it is two notes, come to think of it.

So then viola finishes their, his, statement and the sanxian comes in with the same musical material, but it doesn't sound the same at all. So, if Western music posits 'here is a motif, let's develop the motif by giving it to different instruments and developing according to this kind of model of coherence and unity of place,' a very kind of Platonic, Aristotelian idea that permeates Western music—the unity of time and place, very important in Western music—but [then] as soon as sanxian goes, dee, dee, doo, doo, doo, it sounds like folk music! It sounds completely different. And it's this contrast and kind of exploration of this idea of what is musical material and what is culture. And so as soon as sanxian dialogues with viola, we get a real cultural exchange, with the same musical material. Because the musical material is so simple, you can't call it Western and you can't call it Chinese. It's not possible.

So as the music goes along, you'll see at bar 33, for those who have a score, you'll see the first duel between viola and sanxian. And this is where this little wedge figure gets thrown back and forth between the two instruments. And the viola is still in the angry mode, Daga, Daga, Daga, Daga, like this, and the band—the sanxian is just going, Daga, daga, daga, daga. And the sanxian, even though it's… a folk instrument and it's very loud, it's impossible for this instrument to sound angry, like the viola can sound angry with all of the rosin on the string.

So we have this duel back and forth. And then what happens is this wedge-shape expands so that it takes up the distance of a minor third and then finally a perfect fourth and at this time, at this moment, then the whole orchestra comes in with a harmonic envelope for the sound. And guanzi comes in with a melody, which covers a descending fourth.

So now we have covered the territory that is the music, which is G to D and then the minor third before G is down to E, and then of course down one more whole tone to D. So we have G, D…framing it in this D. Once this melodic statement has been made, then we have a duel between the two main solo instruments. It's called a triple concerto, we'll talk about that a bit later. The percussion…plays a secondary role. He's a kind of secondary soloist, mainly it's a duel between sanxian and viola, with percussion playing this supporting role, if you will.

So we get to this duel, a more extended solo duel. There's no accompaniment now, it's just viola and sanxian, and they are playing with this material which is the ascending fifth and the descending third. And after…once they've done this duel, the new melody, the inversion melody, comes in at 55, yeah. So as I said before, the first duo between sanxian and viola expands the wedge and creates the descent down the minor third.

Once it gets there, this kind of gives birth to its inversion, which is the ascending minor third and then going up to the fifth. The second tune is Dah, Dah, Dah, Dah, Dakadakadeedah. And this is a new kind of thing where I integrate finally this sliding motif and the diatonic fifth motif. So this very slippery thing that started out the piece, the wave, the slippery wave, and the ascending fifth, come together. This fifth is now filled in.

So the second melody is a kind of development of the first one. And this second melody simply gets picked 39

up by everybody and we go marching right through to the end of this movement with this rather joyful and glorious sort of thing. But to mention that they have another duel at 65, I think, yes, before we end up going into the final section.

And so this gives birth to a second movement that is a slow movement. And once again we hear this very narrow wedge, first in sanxian, but now it becomes a sigh because the way sanxian articulation works, the note disappears fairly quickly. And so I have sanxian play the note and then move it slightly. So bah, a little sigh, bah, bah, bah, bah-uh-uh, so it goes above and below, echoing the wave from the opening, expands this sighing figure until it is a whole tone. The whole tone is D to C, and this becomes the basis for the second movement.

So when you hear this completely new sound, it's enveloped by harmonics and a kind of resonance that gives a kind of cocoon to the whole music. After establishing this resonance, basically of D major, with a dominant seventh, so the C is present, the viola articulates a melody at what looks like bar 108. (And I need a D reference pitch because I can't think of it just off the top of my head. [Plays]) So the viola starts in bar 108, Dah, dah, dee, dah, doh, just a simple articulation of a triad in an expanding kind of motif.

This becomes the basis for the whole next section. Now what I'm doing in the second movement is, if in the first movement I was articulating a kind of Western idea about expanding materials, in the second movement I'm articulating a very medieval concept from the 14th century. And it's derived from isorhythmic motets of Machaut. And the notion is that you have a melody, in that time they took Gregorian Chant melodies and they made the tune go at different speeds.

So the tenor voice would go very, very slowly on the chant, and then the voices above would go faster and the voice below may or may not go at a different speed, may leave out notes, this kind of thing. This kind of technique became very popular in serial music, in Western music of the 1950s and '60s because it was kind of a number game. And the basic idea is quite simple. You take the notes of the melody and then they have a certain rhythmic profile, but you only take part of that rhythmic profile and then you reassign that subset of the rhythmic profile to the rest of the notes, until it goes on very long. And it creates a kind of unity where the music is always moving in the same way, but where the notes pause on the longer notes, continues to change as it repeats. And this is why it's called isorhythmic. It means, same rhythm over the time of different notes.

And they actually refer to this as "colour "and "talea," which are the same principles that guide Indian music, Indian raga in a sense. But here it's entirely written out, which is the tradition of Western music.

So what I've done is to take this melody and to write it out and to create what I call a kind of "echo chamber" of the other two solos. So the viola plays a very beautiful melody with a certain rhythmic profile. And then sanxian echoes all but two of the notes,

echoes those notes at a faster rhythm. So that when the viola gets to the crest of the melodic structure, sanxian articulates the three notes—three or four notes—that the viola has played and will play. So it's a kind of echo chamber through a magnifying glass or something like this, with the vibraphone echoing the sanxian part.

So it kind of creates this resonance around the viola melody for the whole duration, with the other strings underneath creating a kind of continuous sound that is, as I say, a cocoon for the whole thing to evolve.

So this is a way to bring the listener's attention directly onto melody only. So to explore melodic feeling in a context where that melody continues to be supported by echoes. But the echoes don't distract from the melody. If it were traditional Western counterpoint, then the voices would imitate by repetition and establish an equal kind of relationship, one with the other. And you would hear them bouncing together and try to follow the evolution of both lines in a kind of equal way.

So in this sense, I'm using an imitation that is kind of, you could say, mystical. It's…you don't know exactly how these resonances are being created, but it creates a great coherence of the whole passage, which is a very medieval type of thing to think about.

So I will say that this is not a new thing for me. I have explored these kinds of ideas in many different ways in 40

different pieces, usually in slow movements in my other music. So it's a wonderful thing that occurs. And I think, also, I need to say that I chose the dominant seventh chord because it—and the shape, the melody is shaped the way it is—because the dominant seventh chord is a pivotal chord in Western music. When it was used in the classical period—when the whole birth of biography and the hero and nationalism, all of these things, created a very driving type of music where harmonic function became very important—the role of the dominant seventh chord was always to resolve and to move things forward, push things forward.

But as a young musician, I sang, for example, barbershop quartets and I loved the way things always resolved onto a pure dominant seventh chord and would just sit there, and it was so beautiful, I loved this sound. And for me, and then of course discovering the music of Wagner and Brahms and others, discovering how that sound can resolve in different ways, or even just become quite static.

So that the statis of the dominant seventh chord, as it's realized through the viola line, gives us the fourths and the seconds that we would hear in a Chinese melody. But it gives us the continuous resonance, as the memory retains it, the continuous resonance of this dominant seventh chord as well. So this is why I say I'm not trying to be Western or trying to be Chinese, but I want to explore a sound that is common to both. And so that's what is happening, especially in this middle movement.

It gives birth, once it comes to a possible natural conclusion, it gives birth to the third movement. At 145, finally it's come to a place where it could rest, and alto flute and guanzi hold the D and the C. And then a few bars later we have an articulation of the sanxian's realization, at double the speed, and it becomes a new material, becomes new material altogether, especially because…well, the listener will hear that it moves—during the course of the second movement—it moves from this dominant seventh resonance and introduces the minor third. About two thirds of the way through, the minor third starts to push its way into the music and it creates this happy/sad kind of feeling in the music.

Then that motif, that D major/minor sound, becomes the first motif of the third movement. Da, Da, Da, Da, Da, Dee, Dum, and that is then the motif that drives the whole third movement. And so, I'll just get back to the bridge idea, because I'm going to describe how the bridge works in the third movement.

So in the second movement, the bridge is created by this medieval technique and the continuous resonance of this dominant seventh chord and the coexistence of these things. So you're on a bridge, sort of overlooking a moment in music history where the music of the west started to employ these techniques that could only be derived from sort of very reflective thinking about writing down music and organizing things on an almost quasi-mathematical basis.

And so you're looking at something where, still, melody is at the centre of everything, as it continues to be in all the music of Asia, of the whole Asian continent. Melody continues to drive everything to the present day. In the West, polyphony was being born, it was in the midst of being born in the 14th century. And so you're sort of, in the second movement, you're standing on a bridge looking at a moment in music history where Western and Eastern musics are pulling themselves apart and exploring different ways of making music, and refining different ways. In most of Asia, melodic ornamentation and modes become very, very important and the articulation of melodic shape becomes the central issue. In the west, polyphony becomes the central issue and there is a reduction of ornamentation and more of the sensitivity of how melody—more than one melody—will interact, it becomes very important.

So the bridge is happening in that regard in the second movement. In the third movement, I take this motif and I begin to give it harmonic context. And the harmonic context I give it is what are called third-related chords and these chords don't imply any one specific direction. They can go almost anywhere, and it's based on the idea of playing a chord and then playing another chord where at least one of the notes, usually two, are shared between the two chords.

And so as you explore these common—what I call common-tone—chords, you can move in many different 41

ways and this became a big exploration of jazz music and also of the minimalists, like Phillip Glass and Steve Reich, especially, I would say, Phillip Glass. And so there's—this is another kind of bridge that can happen because everyone knows that Western classical music has been in the Conservatories in China for years.

So the idea of using and exploring triadic and diatonic harmony, is pretty well everywhere in the world right now. And so I find that these kinds of chords and this way of thinking, is a way that is not—well, not so classical. It's not so…it's more contemporary and it's not embedded in the kind of classical repertoire of Mozart and Beethoven and whatnot. So for me, it's a more contemporary way to bridge all sorts of musics, from jazz to world music of various kinds, and also a way to bring a motif and re-contextualize its feeling.

You refer to the word "feeling" in your questions, and it's interesting because I—the word isn't something I think very much about. I don't think about—like, I'm not trying necessarily to tell people how to feel when they listen, but there's definitely feeling in all music. So it's a good question.

So we get to this third movement where the chords are connected in this way and the motif is being re-contextualized and given new meaning and new feeling every time it goes into a new section, or the chord changes. So understanding what I was doing, I just also have to say that…another thing that you'll see as one aspect…that goes through a lot of the music, is that I like rhythmic flexibility: I like things to move and to articulate themselves, speed up and slow down. So there are actual written out speedings up and slowings down, terrible, don't try to translate that. Accelerando and decelerando is probably a better thing, take the Italian word, because that's what it means.

And so there are these moments where there are cadences throughout this third movement that slow down, and it's always a slowing down on a three to four ratio or a three to two ratio. These kinds of three against two, three against four things occur all through my music, just ask all of the Chinese musicians in town who've been dealing with my music for the last decade or so. They know to expect it to happen.

So what happens in the third movement in terms of…we start to get this feeling of how a melody gets…how a melody's or a motif's meaning changes when it gets put in a different harmony. It becomes a very Western idea at that point. And I found myself at the end of a section and, I have to tell you which bar it is, it's bar 184. I just got to the end of that phrase and it was like a flash, you know: these things happen, you know, if you plan a piece out entirely from beginning to end and then proceed as though you are an architect or some—or a bricklayer—then it might not be so interesting.

So I have this hallucination of a piano concerto style, arpeggio, and I just wrote it down and I said, that's good, I like that. And so, Da, ra, ra, dee, dee, dum, down on the D chord. And then the strings do a kind of arpeggio that's a typical accompaniment

figure and then we're back to the melody again. So it's kind of an intervention-like, a jump cut in a film or—just suddenly you have a window on a piece of classical music and then it disappears again. It was like a warning or something, something's going on here.

The second warning comes I think a few bars later. Does it come—no, I think the next warning is what I call the Chopin intervention, and the Chopin intervention comes at bar 202. We get to the end of another phrase and then all of a sudden the piano's playing a triad, a C minor triad, Bum, Bum, Bum, Bum, exactly like one of the preludes of Chopin. Sounds exactly like a prelude of Chopin. And then keeps the resonance going by an articulation in the right hand, and the articulation is of course a minor third, which is the motific interval that opens the motif.

And then…so the music continues now with this piano accompaniment that is sounding a little bit, let's admit it, a little bit like Phillip Glass, I suppose, just because Phillip Glass did this a lot: he just sort of arpeggiated the same chords over and over and over again. So whenever you arpeggiate chords, it either sounds to you like you're stuck in a Hanon exercise or you're playing Phillip Glass, whatever.

So the music continues now and the chords start to change quite regularly. And it builds momentum and builds quite a bit of momentum with the soloist in alternation with the orchestra. And it creates now a kind of, in 42

Western music you would call it a ritornello, I believe, something from the late Baroque era where you'd have several soloists and they'd be alternating with the group.

So this happens and establishes quite a bit of tension and it moves around in somewhat unpredictable ways, but there's a great coherence to the whole thing because of these harmonic changes. And then the second Chopin intervention comes, and it's down a fourth. So, predictable in a sense.

And then I just say that everything builds to what I can only describe as a joyous sort of ending, and it really—it infuses the body with all of these resonances and all of these instruments playing together, and for me, that is a completion of the bringing together of the two cultures. To have a bringing together of the harmonic and the melodic in a kind of continuously joyous music. It brings out, I would say, the best spirit of both. This is my hope. That's what happens.

I think one of the reasons a composer does this, writes at all, is because of the process of writing. It's an enjoyable thing to do, and it's a way to enlighten your mind musically and this is why a composer writes. If a composer doesn't enjoy this enlightenment, this exploration, this kind of invention, then they don't write. They become theorists, they do other things in music.

You have to have this fascination with invention and a kind of philosophical approach to creating music, which is one of the reasons that I sometimes have trouble thinking about or talking about music in overly sort of theoretical or cultural ways, because I'm not interested in consciously extending specific technical things. I'm not an academic. So I'm not really interested in directly reflecting on extending a legacy. I'm more of an inventor, and I'm interested in whatever culture I come across and whatever music I come across. So in that sense, I think that it's very personal. And that what can be passed on through my music, is the music itself and the context I give certain things. So when I talk about how I've revisited a medieval concept and given it a different way of doing it, that different way came through not just the window of medieval music. If I had been only a medieval scholar, my view probably would have been quite narrow and I might not have thought of the kinds of things that I thought of. So I think the…what it reveals, what this piece specifically I could say reveals to me, is that a very, very broad knowledge of new music and classical music—as much knowledge as you can, as a young composer, grasp and obtain—the more you learn about music, the more you have, the more prepared you are when that moment of inspiration comes.

And so I think it's important for young composers to study as much music as they can. You can start with things that inspire you. But I think also, don't avoid things that irk you or that you don't like perhaps. Go find out why you don't like it, you know, you might learn something. And certainly I've learned things from music that I've tried to like, but I never really did like, you know. But I learned concepts. I learned procedures. I learned ways of putting things together that enriches my capacity to do that.

And so I think that that's almost more important than anything else. So style is something that, for me, is secondary to sort of digging into the content of how music is put together and things like that. So I guess my advice to a young composer would be, don't worry so much about the style that you may be writing in. But to really…in other words, don't worry about that, do whatever you want, in a sense. But don't think of the style of how it sounds, but think of its construction and try to look at it as though you're designing a building. Or really think about design as you go.

And I think that, in that way, you can really build a satisfying piece of music. When…you find yourself at a point…I think you need to have understood and analyzed enough music. You actually have to analyze how it's put together: how rhythm is handled, how chords are handled, how motif is handled in the classical repertoire. When you get into contemporary music, there may be other factors that come into play. You may find that a composer has designed a piece based on the analysis of traffic or something like that. And you may say oh, that can't be done. But in fact maybe it can be done, and maybe it can be done well. So I think those are some things to really consider. And then very important for me, I think I said at the outset, is 43

to really understand, not just those abstract ideas about how music is put together, but also very concrete things like how instruments sound, how they are played, what their tuning system is—as much as you can learn about the actual physical properties of the instruments that you will write for.

I think it's really important not to have illusions about music as an abstract phenomenon. It is an abstract phenomenon, but it is also a phenomenon realized through musicians who do things on physical instruments. Music is anything you want it to be. In fact you can ignore musicians and do everything on computers if you want, to be entirely in the realm of the abstract and entirely within a realm where you have control of every last sound. So that, of course, is possible. But if you're writing for musicians, that's another ball game, and you really have to know the tools you're writing for. And if there's a musician behind that tool, you've got to know what they're doing and how they do it. An example might be, for example, I was writing a piece recently and there was a Persian musician playing a tar in this ensemble. And the tar was tuned according to their mode, that has 17 intervals instead of 12, and I was very excited.

And I created a part for this wonderful local musician, Ali Razmi, and he learned it, and then he had to show me how certain things that I wanted him to do, were not really possible. And I thought in the abstract that they were, but when I saw how his hand moved on the instrument and really looked very carefully and talked with him, I realized he's right, these kinds of things really can't be done. They're so difficult to do that you have to ask yourself, as a composer, do I ask him to struggle beyond a reasonable proposition, and take the consequences of the result, how that will sound in performance, or do I write a part for him that he's going to be able to play fantastically? Well for me the answer is always the same. I adjust everything so that the musician can do their part of the job really, really well. So for me, that connection between the concept of the piece and how it's written down for the musicians…that enables the musician to communicate to the audience. This is very important. This communication link is very, very important. If you want your music to be understood, you have to make sure the musician can do it and that they understand it at some intuitive level as well.

They have to feel that as they play the notes, the notes have meaning. They have to feel that meaning while they're playing. And I think the downfall of some contemporary music is that the musicians are not invited to feel the music as they play it. The composer hasn't made this link where they can be in the musician's shoes, as it were, or in the musician's fingers and ears, to really feel that musician playing their part. So some contemporary music will not engage the performer in that way. Again, it depends on context. There may be musicians who are trained in a very technical way, and for them it's no problem, they don't care. But for a lot of musicians, I would say perhaps moreso, my sense is that, especially musicians who are trained in more traditional practices of the Asian continent, they have to have a feeling for it. They're not…they

don’t really enjoy technical playing, just technical, without the feeling of the music. It has to have feeling or else it might as well not be played.

So I share that kind of view of music, that it has to have that human dimension, because that’s what it’s for. I mean, that’s what we’re here for. That’s why we make music. It’s part of our psychic make-up. It makes us tick. It’s like…it’s about as important as eating.

All I can say is that there is this sensitivity to feeling. But I’m not directing it. I’m not a dictator. I don’t tell people how to feel. If they can’t feel it through the notes I’ve written down on the page, then I’ve failed. I don’t need to say anything about feeling. So this is my point. This is why when I say I have difficulty talking about feeling, because the feeling has to be in the music or else I’ve failed.

So I can’t direct a listener to feel this thing or that thing. It’s up to them, as I said at the beginning, to go on the bridge, they look at the view and they listen. I’ve done my job. I created the musical recipe for people to play, and if I’ve done it right, then I conveyed that feeling to the musician and then they are enabled to communicate the feeling to the audience.

So for me, the feeling will come if the musicians look at the tempi, and they play the tempo I’ve written; if 44

they play the right notes; if they play with feeling. If they do all of these things that I can list to you—and they don't sound like I'm talking about feeling, of course I'm not talking about feeling—but, if you don't play the music as I've written it, then you can't start to feel anything. So the most important thing is to really, really, as a musician, be very conscious of how the speed goes and how these building blocks of the music all work together. And, you know, this is the case in all of the music I've ever heard. Play a piece of Beethoven, play a piece of Mozart. If the musicians haven't prepared all of these technical things—these building blocks—correctly, they can't create feeling, actually. So in a sense, these things are…I would say…it's a prerequisite for creating feeling in music, to understand how it's working together and how things work together to make the feeling happen.

So it's, you know, it's sad when you see a musician who can't actually dominate the notes. They can't get it right. They're technically not on top of it, but they have great feeling. And so this is a very tense moment for an audience because they can hear maybe wrong notes or slip-ups here and there, technical problems, but they understand this musician has great feeling. So both of these things are required for the music to succeed. The musician has to dominate all of the technical details in the piece and also have feeling.

The greatest challenge, I think, in writing for instruments that I haven't grown up with, is to be able to create a kind of music that sounds idiomatic on the instrument, but that doesn't sound like I'm just trying to be a folk musician and play the instrument in a folk way. So it's difficult to write for because I don't know it as well as I know Western instruments. So this is why I think it's so important to go, as a composer, to understand the idiom of the instrument as much as you can—study as much as you can—so that you can write it as well as you can. But it's going to be true that if you want to write out very specific notes for a musician to play, and you haven't grown up with the instrument, that maybe they will feel a bit distanced from the part you write for them. And the tar player is just—he's a fantastic musician: he plays his instrument so beautifully. And, you know, you have a choice to write a part that is almost improvised, in which case, as a composer, you're not doing very much, or you create a part where you're writing out everything and they have very little room to move, but then they're reading a lot of notes, and so the more notes a musician has to read, the harder it is to get past those notes, where they're actually getting some…[where] they can be comfortable enough to give it more feeling. So this is always the great challenge: the more a musician has to process with their brain, the harder it is for them to get to a point where they can actually get the feeling out. And so this is why it's so important for new music that people want to hear a second time, [it] gets played two, three, four times, because all music—whether it's new music or old music—doesn't actually enter the musician's feeling centre until it's been played more than once, two, three, four times.

I always say, to sort of clarify this problem, I say to anybody, 'would you want to hear a famous musician like Yo-Yo Ma…would you like to hear their very first recording of a cello suite, or the one that they made, you know, last year or a few years ago?' With new music, oftentimes people only get a first recording of a first performance, and this is not a very musical performance. It's just a kind of reading where you get an idea of how it might sound if it was allowed to become music, in a fullest sense, where people feel satisfied from the beginning to the end of a piece.

So for me, new music should have [repeat performances]…You know, of course the pieces that people feel moved [about], not all new music needs repeat performances, but when people sense that this is music that has something to offer, I think much more effort should be put into taking those pieces and getting them played many, many times, so that finally people can have the full experience of the music. It's the only way we can create a new canon of new music, is through repeat performances.

Well, I can write whatever I want, because I know that the musicians I'm writing for also grew up with the notation. So there's no translation. So that's how I would write for Western instruments. I know…well, but still, I have to be practical and I…for example, the music education system in Canada is a certain way and the music education system in France is a certain way. So I have to be practical because I live here, to write music that the 45

musicians can process in a way that they will get to that moment, where they will be able to feel it. I hope they get to that moment before the first performance, that they understand that level before they are doing the first performance.

The more—as I said, the more information you put out to the musician on the page, the longer it takes them to get to that point. They have to master the technical first, and that's their first concern, it always is. In Europe, you know, the conservatories train technically in a much sort of harder way, and the musicians can do technical things a little bit faster than musicians in North America, especially in a kind of European music that everybody knows. European new music—very complex sounds, lots going on—they get there faster than North Americans. So I have to be practical in that sense. But I do know that when I write something down on the page, there's no translation. Pretty well most people who have the right education, they know what's going on. Even so, there are always issues of rhythmic complexity that I have to explain to almost everybody.

When I write for Chinese musicians, I know they will translate to cipher notation. And certain rhythmic ideas will be foreign to them entirely, and they have to have it explained by example. So these kinds of things are difficult because I'm not a specialist in all of the world's music. I learn as much as I can as I go along. Geez, I grew up listening to a lot of jazz, so for me, this kind of thing is second nature and I have no problem producing it. But because of the romantic tradition of classical music, people have a tendency to elongate and they change the tempo when they do these kinds of rhythms. But my sense of it is more like, you could say jazz music or African music, where everything locks in. And so I have to face that and explain that concept with examples, using my hands and clapping and making vocal sounds to actually demonstrate how to do these things. It's very difficult.

I find ways to make the music complex without making it too complex for any single musician. So, for example, I will, when I write for orchestra, I will write out multiple parts where the musicians will move at different speeds, but the conductor will conduct in four, and the musicians will move at different speeds. And as long as they do their part correctly, it will create the kind of texture or complex music that I want for that piece.

So I tend to try to create parts, individual parts, where the musicians can master the individual parts. You know, that said, there are new music specialist groups in Canada that are just as good as the European ones. It's just that we're a smaller country and our education system is not quite as proud of its music, as you'll witness in any public education. And so it doesn't build it from a very early age. And also because of the kind of colonial past and the multicultural present, we don't end up with this kind of 'pride in the nation's culture.'

And when you look at France or Germany or any country in Europe, there's a knowledge of our music that is ours, and I think that creates a certain kind of tension

and striving to perfect the nation's music. We don't have a nation's music. You ask somebody: 'name me a Canadian piece,' and they will have trouble. The national anthem is not even something you would consider a 'Canadian piece.' It's just a national anthem. So, you know, whereas you ask any Canadian to name a dozen German composers, and they'll come up with it like that [snaps fingers]. French composers, probably a little bit less, but they'll still come up with some. So this is a cultural problem that is somehow all wrapped up in how I approach music for our musicians. And also, I have to say that I think I made a conscious decision many years ago to allow the simple idea to be the starting point or the kernel, the source. And to allow a kind of simple idea to predominate, even if the working out might be complex in some way. And it's very important for me, for the music to be heard on a visceral level, and for you to be able, as a listener, to hear it without any technical explanation of anything. The music should begin and you derive something from it, without a lecture, without anybody saying anything. Music has to speak for itself, and for me, that's very, very important.

I think of folk music as being not a separate thing. It's just music that people make without reading music. They make it because they pick up an instrument and they start to learn to play it, and they meet other masters of the instrument and those people teach them how to play. And so for me there's not really…the only, the 46

principal difference between the two is that a folk musician is often self-taught and doesn't read music. They learn tunes and they put them in their mind. And when you put a tune in your mind by memory, those tunes are often not very complex. They're simpler. They're easier to remember, and they usually capture the imagination of the audience faster because the audience also can capture it the same way that the folk musician did, by ear. So for me, that's a really big and important connection to an audience. So for me, because I don't view it in a, I guess, in an academic way, I don't think of borrowing specific tunes or…I don't think of it in any kind of historical context at all: I think of it as though I am a folk musician. In other words, I try to put myself in the skin of a folk musician. So this is how, in fact, this piece, you might say the first movement of this piece just came that way. I watched Gelina play sanxian and I've heard her play a number of pieces, including some bluegrass transcriptions that she did with Red Chamber [Ensemble]: it's fantastic, you know. Sanxian is essentially a banjo without frets, you know, a slightly lower pitch and quite a different way of playing, but still…

So when I began this piece, you know, I imagined myself playing the viola, and then I imagined myself playing sanxian. One of the things I love about sanxian playing, is how, when a folk melody is played, the pull-off of the string brings the pitch down, deeoh, deeoh, deeoh, this kind of gesture, which is actually common in erhu playing too, and it's a very common ornament, you could say, a part of the music, of Chinese music. So I just imagined this playing, with the simple intervals and that's how I wrote it. So, again, I don't have an academic context where I do a whole bunch of research on Chinese folk melodies and I try to incorporate them in any kind of academic way. It's all more or less done, I guess, intuitively. And so perhaps that's why it's difficult for me to talk about feeling because it's coming out of feeling anyway. The music material itself is coming out of a feeling for the sound, the instruments, and the intervals. When we think of a concerto, we think of the dominant instrument gets in front of the group and dominates. The violin, you know, whatever, the oboe, clarinet, the dizi, the piano, all of these different instruments can make a big dominating sound. And when I actually started on the project, I had this idea. Just a normal idea about doing a concerto for…actually my first thought was violin or dizi. And I thought, okay, or maybe the two of them together. And then I got to thinking and I thought, but that's what everybody does. So I've already written a cello concerto, a guitar concerto, you know, a saxophone concerto, you know, with the soloist standing in front of the orchestra dominating. Although with classical guitar, you have to amplify it to dominate.

And so I thought, why don't I do something different? And this is when…I had always been attracted to sanxian because I've been playing myself a fretless classical guitar, and I very much like the openness that this brings, because I can play any note I want and have the melody be expressed in many different ways. So I was very attracted to

sanxian, and I always noticed that sanxian was a very loud instrument, and that it dominated in the ensemble whenever it plays. And that it had a…it's kind of a folk instrument. It's outside the norm. It's, you know, one sanxian can dominate the whole Chinese orchestra. So I thought, that's a good candidate for a soloist. Nobody's going to pick this instrument because it's too strange. And then I thought, what goes with sanxian? Where can I create a dialogue with a Western instrument? And this is when I said, well, viola's a perfect choice because it's more or less in the same range, and they can have a dialogue of articulation, because they can play any note they want, they can imitate each other's…but it will sound quite different because sanxian plucks, the sound is gone right away. Viola you can sustain it as long as you want. So there's quite a variety, quite a difference between the instruments, yet they're in the same register, so sanxian and viola can essentially play the same musical material and establish similarities, but explore great variety of differences as well.

So at first it was just the two instruments. Well, actually I thought of doing three right [away]. Initially I wanted percussion in to be a kind of countervailing force for these two instruments. And so I told the BC Chinese Music Association—Bill Lai—'yes, okay I'm going to do three.' But as the music evolved, I realized that the percussion would play a secondary role, a kind of supporting role. But even so, in this context, I began to realize that although it is a concerto type of format, the music itself doesn't create, so much, this opposition. There's 47

more of a unity between the ensemble and the soloist. So this is why I'm not so interested in this confrontational presentation where the musicians—the soloists—are up front and everybody else is behind. I'm not so interested in that kind of presentation, although I do think that they need to be somewhat brought forward perhaps, just to make sure people can hear it properly and have the focus. Especially viola tends to disappear in an ensemble fairly easily. So I might bring them forward a little bit, to be a little group in front of the conductor and bring the ensemble behind. But certainly it will not be the usual format of, the soloist beside the conductor and the conductor looking back at the soloist. It's none of this kind of thing. So…and that also, I think, reflects…I guess I'm not so interested in, anymore, in that kind of dominant relationship. I'm interested in exploring things where there's more collaborative sound and approach, a more integrated sound, where you might have musicians who are doing solos and who are more important in this piece, but in the next piece it might be somebody else.

So sort of less emphasis on that kind of dialectic between soloist and accompaniment, and more of an integrated approach. And I think that it's all part and parcel of the same idea of creating a kind of new culture that isn't…that is a new culture in fact. It's not a culture that can be defined as entirely Western or entirely Chinese, or entirely Western and entirely-any-other-culture. You know, we used to call it 'West' and 'East' because, you know, of the interaction of Indian rag with Western music as well. The idea of, in Vancouver it's very much being explored, [the idea] of intercultural music making. But it's very diverse. There's a great variety of what that might mean, and it goes across all types of music and genres of music. You know, it's not purely the university's approach to what classical music and what world music is. It's not a dialogue between the theory department and the ethno musicology department of a university. Sure, there's a dialogue happening there, but the musicians who are playing this kind of music, will also be taking their musical traditions into a popular music idiom, where they'll be doing what they might call 'fusion.' So you may have a kind of Arab jazz fusion with some musicians, or a, you know—I know those Shamisen brothers from Japan, are playing old Japanese folk melodies with a rock band, you know—so the notion that interculturalism is some kind of narrow academic pursuit, is not true. It's actually everywhere right now, and it's quite a common phenomenon.

And I think what's happening is, people are just behaving normally really. They are where they are now, and they're interacting with the people they interact with and they create the culture that speaks to them now, and that's what I'm interested in as well. And so discussions of a kind of, you know, historical context for whether the culture is a Western culture or an Oriental or an Occidental culture, it's not so interesting to me as trying to find that middle ground that can't be defined as either. And that's where I think new music is right now, and I really look forward to hearing the music of our Chinese compatriots, ('compatriots,' that's the wrong word,) colleagues, our Chinese colleagues.

Because one of the great, I think one of the interesting, successes of the new music, the international new music movement, that came after the Second World War, was that there was general agreement during that era to explore new sounds, and to try to disconnect those sounds from their culture in a sense. And I have a sense, from what I understand of it, that that leadership came mainly from Europe. Europeans were interested in Asian music. They were interested in ancient Asian music. They were interested in Asian instruments, and they were trying to incorporate, you know,…mainly they were interested in percussion, let's admit it. But they were interested in, for example, the expressivity of shakuhachi or other folk instruments from Asia, and they were trying to incorporate those kinds of musical gestures into their new music. And a kind of international new music style emerged, especially with the predominance of Takemitsu who was the first big composer from Asia to really make a big name for himself on the international scene. And of course now we've got Tan Dun, who's made a big name for himself. I guess he's living in New York probably, but…And now, this is why I'm so interested, because the music that I've heard from my colleagues, who've come from China, to establish themselves here, and of the music I've heard from China, is integrating a lot of these ideas in a uniquely, I would say in a uniquely Chinese way. There is a Chinese new music that is—you can hear it—that it is Chinese new music, but it shares a 48

lot in common, I think, with the kind of new music that was developed in Europe and imitated in North America. So that fertile ground is where we are right now, and it's going to be exciting to actually see how these things work out and what kind of dialogue we establish between pieces. That'll be exciting too.

Well, I think it's a great project. I think it's a really valuable project for everybody involved. Because, you know, the fascinations of composers over the years, over the decades, have led to people, individual composers, pursuing various interests and paths. And what I find really fascinating about just, I don't know, random conversations with people, about my own interests in life and those of others, is that I see that there is a great cross-fertilization of ideas already on many levels. And when I find myself, you know, asking a musician who lives here now, who's come from China, let's say a decade ago, and I find myself in a conversation where I'm just sort of exploring the ideas of Taoism, for example, and I discover that that's not really something that they've looked into, and I think, 'oh, so I have an interest in Chinese culture that has led me into a philosophical tradition that comes from China—of course I read it all in translation—and then, so my own personal, cultural interests, go toward China, even though I've never visited China, and so someone coming here may have also a fascination with Western culture and may have been, I don't know, reading Nietzsche or something, and exploring Western culture and philosophy… And so with this kind of—the French call it 'va-et-vient'—this kind of coming and going of cultural interests across continents, I think there's really an interesting dialogue that can be struck where the concept of culture itself becomes very fluid, and there become so many points where you can begin to have a conversation about a topic, based on—of course a different—understanding of the same topic, let's say Taoism, for example, but that you can find the same kind of…you can build the bridge to that topic through music as well. But what you understand about music is that music does this much more easily than words and philosophy. Philosophy, you have to read in translation.

But I think even in music, there is this aspect of language that is very important and that is not translatable. You have to actually speak and make those words with your own mouth, to get at that point where you are closer to the sound. And I guess I can give an example, when I try to play, when I try to imitate, the phrasing of a Chinese piece, or the way its rhythm goes, I trip, I fall. And I believe that the reason that I can't get under the skin, is because I don't speak any Chinese language, neither Mandarin nor Cantonese. I know a few words, but to get the rhythm! But I've been listening to a lot of translations. I've been attending a lot of events of the BC Chinese Music Association. And so I'm hearing Cantonese and Mandarin over and over and over again, and for me, I don't understand it, but I hear the rhythms and I realize well, this is it: music is an expression of a culture and the main component of a culture is its language. And so the reason a Cantonese opera sounds the way it sounds, is because the words are being sung and

they have rhythm and they have movement. And really, to get under the skin, I think, of the music of a people, [you have] to actually speak their language as well. And I think that's proven to me over and over again: if I try to imitate the phrase of an Indian musician, and they say 'oh, the beautiful way to play that phrase is this way,' and for me, it's not 'beautiful,' it's just—'that's the way you do it.' But for them it's beautiful because it embodies something a little more than just an abstract musical form or gesture. It's got language in it somehow. The music is imbued with the language. So the beauty of the melodic shape is because it reminds you of the language. And so it's saying something to you that isn't words, but it's got all of the feelings that words might bring, without the meaning, which is the beauty of music. So there we are.

Dr. John Oliver

Born Edward John Clavering Oliver in Vancouver, Oliver is the son of Vancouver playwright Thelma Oliver (aka Melissa Cameron). He studied the guitar privately with Robert C. Jordan from 1972-1977. He attended the San Francisco Conservatory of Music from 1977-1979 where he studied composition with John Adams. He transferred to the University of British Columbia in 1979 where he earned a Bachelor of Music in 1982 and was a pupil of Stephen Chatman. He went on to pursue graduate studies in music composition at McGill University with a Master of Music in 1984 and a Doctor of Musical Arts in 1992. From 1988-1989 he studied in Brussels with Philippe Boesmans and studied psychoacoustics in the library at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

In 1988 he was awarded first prize and the Canada Council's grand prize for his 'El Reposo del Fuego' at the CBC National Radio Competition for Young Composers. From 1989-1991 Oliver served as the composer-in-residence of the Canadian Opera Company (COC).

John writes music to intensify the experience of our common humanity. His music typically deals with serious issues, philosophical, moral, spiritual, and existential, and ranges from the dramatic to lyric, ecstatic to placid, tragic to humorous and can be playful or frightening, cathartic and restorative, restful or stirring. He believes in synthesizing the music of the world, past and present.