

Ning Wang

Time: January 2011

Location: China Conservatory of Music

For an ensemble of Chinese and Western instruments, my commission is for a concerto with four lead instruments. You have to think about what they would play, how they would express their individualities, and still match them to your music's expressive contents. In the conceptualization stage, what came to mind was a way of singing, of the aboriginals in Inner Mongolia and Tibet, called HuMai. The locals there call it Tsu-ur. One person doing it can sound a bass pitch and some higher pitches at the same time. Some tribes of the North Pole seem to know this way of singing too. There is instrumental Tsu-ur and vocal Tsu-ur. I chose its sound and material for extracting one aspect of my compositional expressions' resources. That is what the title means.

For the aspect of choosing soloists, the question was how to express this material using instruments. Tsu-ur sings overtones, so I chose the Double Bass for its ease in sounding harmonics. I chose the Cello for its timbre, which is close sound of Morin Khuur, the Mongolian instrument that plays in Tsu-ur.

The Chinese instrument chosen is Guanzi. The Guanzi player can play Sheng. Sheng is polyphonic; it has more functions; Guanzi is very distinctive instrument. It has a feeling of desolation and is suited to express that kind of emotion. Xiao is in the middle range and Dizi is a treble instrument. Guanzi and Cello sometime are close in timbre, but are of different families. One is a wind instrument and another is a string instruments. This is more or less the idea of my music's expression and materials.

Sometimes the creative process is very complicated, because you cannot say where the inspiration comes from. If there is a commission for four instruments, you consider what instruments to center it with. Some commissions have limitation, like this one, for example: an instrument chosen as soloist by one of the six composers in this project is not to be used by another. They gave me ideas for reference; I have my own choice, and this was how my four leads were determined. Of course the instrument I chose match what I am to express. My music just happens to involve much playing of harmonics.

Music expression is in fact not purely for sound acoustics or timbre. These are external factors, all technical and formal things. The true inner content of my music is to express a desire for peace. This is legend in this. Ages ago there was a war. Soldiers on both sides knew Tsu-ur singing. Surrounded, the general in defense did not fight. Instead, he sang, to the surrounding army, resulting in everyone singing together, and ending the war. This is the story, combining the timbre and material of Tsu-ur, and my expression of desire for piece.

We people of the East appreciate a musical work habitually following a certain plot quality. However, music is with polysemy or ambiguity and therefore cannot be clearly explained in words. From a developing music process, different feeling may be experienced. This is a function of music itself. I design contents into the music, and you can follow this design to understand this music. You can, of course, not follow it because music has its many negotiated meanings. In here, you can hear very kind sections feeling the beauty of life, and some very horrible feeling too. In face of an impending war's tragic outbreak, how is peace to be arrived at using wisdom? In the end, the solution is a kind of a peaceful method.

It is best for the performers to know the plot of the story so that they can put emotion in. Of course that can be done without such knowledge, but the investing would be more accurate and deep, with the infusing of expressions of the performer themselves. After the core is determined, the rest is technical, such as how to express in form, instrumentation, sound acoustics and structural design. All techniques serve the art. Once the aesthetics is decided, the rest are technical issues.

You think of something every step of the way. In the very beginning, for example, the Double Bass creates an 82

environment of an open grassland. Then the harmony gets weaker, then some dissonant sounds, like wind sound. A gradual developmental process of accumulation then brings horrible news. These things are all in my mind, to be shown through techniques. From a peaceful environment to a war zone, in fact, there is information to let music become nervous. You can not go immediately from kindness to tension immediately. There is a process.

Because of the nature of the piece, you consider all the time the status and emphasis of the four lead instruments. If you write a usual chamber piece, all instruments become lead. The process therefore should give focus to the four instruments.

It sometimes is hard to say from a purely technical angle. Some of my colleagues commented that the relationships between materials in some of my compositions are far-fetched. One of my work called YiHua (Alienation) expresses life developing into humans, and then civilization and technology, and how man starts destroy the environment for living. Such is the inner content of this product of Performance Art by me. Its materials are all very far from each other, all unrelated. If you listen to it from end to end, however, these materials fit as if they originally structured together as they should be. Actually, some of this is based on my feeling, which cannot be said clearly in language.

My personal view is that Chinese people pay more attention to story and plot, while Westerners focus on the form of the sound, such as pitch systems and relations between timbres. Chinese people are more concerned about the meaning within the music. The point of emphasis is different. I am influenced by Chinese habits. I always think about what things are expressing what I listen to or see something. This is our habits. Westerners hears a duration of sound as a form. Form itself is a kind of content.

I am more inclined to the habit of how Chinese people appreciate. My very early works include some for expressing a central thought and some purely formal ones, but I seldom write such works nowadays. Among my works, those written using the relation of a series of pitches but without any ideological considerations are very few. Now I think about issues, such as social, human, and cultural ones. Issues of East and West are within the scope of my consideration.

For example, my work entitled YiHua contains Performance Art. Nobody know when it starts. Performers just go on stage from time to time. As the first one do so, the music starts. This expresses the state of the Earth when cells multiply without order. The entire beginning expresses this process. Then people start to hunt and to farm, producing culture, art and written words, making technology, atom bombs, and benefits that result in mankind destroying itself. This process is what the music expresses. In most of my music, materials are there to serve the expression of my

music's inner contents. Mankind must consider what it should do to survive this environment.

My third symphony named HuHuanWeiLai (Call for Future) for two choirs and a big symphonic orchestra is in seven movements, each expressing today's society, including religion and faith, war, education, family, and the entire society's transforming, etc.

Some commissions come with limits and some do not. Some limits are in contents. If there is a limit, you compose in its general directions; otherwise, it is like you write what you choose. You can write music of flower-birds-fish-insect (traditional subject matters of certain style of Chinese Painting), or natural scenery and sounds. I still want to write of humanities and human relations. Now there is war everyday. The loss of life everywhere is so horrible. So many weapons and nuclear things are destroying mind kind. I therefore remain focused on that.

To get an commission so open is a happy matter. It does not impose many limits. The composers can express themselves freely. The difficulty, in the end, is what to write. To think of what to write in the absence of limits has a degree of difficulty.

I could have written music of flower, bird, fish and insect. I could have written music of humanity. In the beginning, I thought about the four instruments and what would match them. I also wanted to dig out some folk 83

tradition belonging to aboriginals that can deeply represent national culture, and then showcase it well into a composition. However, I am not satisfied by just adding a melody of folk music; instead I want to abstract its essence.

Sometimes, composing is going blindly from jumbled thoughts in the beginning to relatively matured ones. Gradually organizing chaos into clues, then slowing focusing and gathering them takes a long time. Everyone's thinking habits is actually not the same. Everyone's creative angle is also different. My compositional process for every piece is different. I cannot say when this inspiration comes. Sometimes it comes when you watch television, sometimes when you see something, or hear something in concert. This kind of inspiring is possible any time any where. Some may compose half a day without one suitable idea; that is them without the process of having found anything to inspire them. Composers can also be good at capturing, at pondering, at ideation, and at choosing. Sometimes, many ideas are even all very good, and the problem is what to choose. Having no idea is a pain, and so is having many.

For example you want to write in this form, and the one which is most suited to this limit and your expressive extent is the best match.

First, it is a chamber piece led by four instruments, you have to consider which musical instrument can be used, or you can only choose that others have not chosen. The lead instruments must express their own unique feature; in order to express these features, you must consider what materials to give to which instruments, according to what they are suited for expressing. It is a continuous search for matching suitable expressions to your central idea, so that you can start writing.

Each person's perspective is different. Sometimes, looking at things, I may like what is liked by other. Not everyone like aboriginal things. Some composers dismiss them as earthy. Some deem focusing on them as unnecessary. They can face other directions. For example, I write galaxy, solar system, comics things, without anything aboriginal, nor culture. You can write whatever however.

Once I selected Tsu-ur, I had to greatly gain familiarity with it, but I actually was familiar, or else I would not have thought of it. Therefore, once I decide I must collect a lot of materials. After the collecting is done, you pick what you are interested in. Then you still need to think of how to perform it, how to put in on instruments. You record things gained from folk into written notation, then you develop it in your own ways.

This involves the issue of ensemble instrumentation: how to structure your system of sound, how you write your rhythm, and the relationships of sounds, of materials, and of structures. These are all technical issues of composition, and everyone has different requirements.

In fact my habits are influencing my students. When they do not know how to write, I always ask them if they can borrow my experience. If you do not know anything and have no idea on what to write or what material to use, I say just write a story. Like the Butterfly Lovers. Or think of a fable. Then you have something to think. What you can end up with is another matter. At the least, you have this crutch for thinking; otherwise you do not even know what to use first.

They need to do some design of sound. In it, there are many issues, such as what techniques to use, Classical or Modern. Sound picture is also an expressive technique you can use. Any variety of technique from ancient to current ones can be used. First you need to consider them. Once there is many pitches sounding, you must involve the relation between them, as well as the relations of sound structures. You must consider all things in the system of sound.

For student compositions, my encouragements depends sometimes on whether the student is a senior student or a junior one. I would encourage the latter in write a bit more traditionally, because he needs a training in the basics. However, if he does not want that, I ask you to write what you can handle according your way of thinking.⁸⁴

There is still tonality. Structural things are still more standard, determined. Things belonging to traditional techniques like melody and harmony are still to be attended to. Really to create in China, what is operable is outside of Chinese Opera. The foundation of the rest belongs to the imported, to basis of the West. What we learn in musical composition are also imported, borrowed from the West. Therefore, the Western tradition has a referentiality. Traditions in China such as folk songs, Chinese Opera, Story Singing still have not been summarized into what is of a operable nature or handling of styles. It is mainly monophonic music.

Senior students can appropriately broaden their use of techniques, using everything they have learned. I do not encourage junior students to do so because if you cannot do tonality well, you cannot do well outside tonality. There must be a process. Therefore, the seniors on a good foundation can appropriately do those tonal thing. They can write all those and even pursuit more things of sound and acoustics.

The form you face in composition is certainly of the West, but value of cultures is equal. It always is. The hundreds of years of Western history and the Chinese Opera's is equal in cultural value. You can use Western techniques to develop traditional Chinese things.

I always encourage them to pay attention to folk music. I myself did not, and I did not study it diligently. My mind back then was filled with techniques. I was not interested in folk song lesson. I felt them to be dispensable. After graduation, however, through continuous learning, work experiences, in-depth social practice continuing to create things, you would discover that some folk things are too precious, and you can dig many good things out of them. With my growth in knowledge and in age, I think I have found a treasure trove in folk music. Becoming more mature, I will also influence my students, to listen to folk song when they cannot find materials, to look through original sound tapes, and dig from them. To use it by program is also a way. You find folk music perhaps to abstract things out for consideration. This is what I encourage them to do.

What I described as rational completion is this: In a process of technical constituting, you design a chord, a structure, a developmental logic. Once you do that and you assign pitches correctly, it is pure rationality, in which human being may become a passive tool because his logical design is already done. You utterly follow this logic to put things right note by note, and you complete this composition.

Once you finish designing a logic you can start to move your pen for purely rational composition.

Pop music's harmony and logic are all borrowed and referenced from the West. A series of principles in performing music, all borrowed and referenced from the West, what China do not have now.

That is not musical instruments; it is like cultures borrowing and referring to each other. Certainly, advanced things should be shared. Excellent culture should be shared by everyone.

China has other principles. Those principles are something else.

If you use them to write large-scale instrumental works, they may not be directly operable. The logic of Chinese Storying Singing Art in fact has been induced by many, but for students to follow that logic in writing instrumental symphonic compositions, it can be a bit hard to operate at times.

We require students to study Western techniques seriously, for it is the basis for completing a composition. Folk music culture of China is a required subject, where students can get many inspirations, but not how to write harmony. Much music of China is monophonic, although some ethnicity do have polyphony. There is a gap between such polyphony and what is applicable to composing. It is not very operational. Therefore, these things can be used as material, and you can dig something out of it. To really put technical issues down to your pen, sometimes you really have to borrow from and refer to things of the West.

Eager to progress, some students of the middle school attached to the conservatory feel traditional music as meaningless and behind their times. They then write many non-tonal things. I do not think those are suitable for them because they need to go step by step, not skipping any step in the training process. As in learning to paint, 85

all basic skills are necessary.

Senior student can actually have this kind of thinking. A doctoral student of mine who recently graduated wrote for the orchestra in his undergrad years, but already he was somewhat affected by the twentieth century. His melodies were very symbolic. As a graduate student, he started working on Conceptual Art, using a concept to dominate a musical performance. He worked not his pen but his mind, with good ideas that no one else could think of.

Only he has this kind of thinking. I let him develop this in this direction because he had already learned the traditional things. I would not allow an undergraduate student to give me this, but I think it is good for the graduate level. I therefore encouraged him to continue to explore. He later has a piece that he calls "A little media art", in which I let him think of a piece of music in his mind and that is how a piece of music is completed, without a need to perform it, and therefore crucial to the extreme.

Some who are interested in this folk music, especially at the graduate level, get really interested in it. More people are interested in folk music, but not getting inspiration from the conceptual, thus they have no idea or interest in it. The mentioned student has the interest and enthusiasm for it, so he gets inspired.

The reason is complicated. One reason is that students want to show themselves, feeling themselves to be superior. Another reason is teachers forcing students, setting students on a crooked path.

This phenomenon may be not common but it does exist, especially for young teachers, who always want to do more themselves, but we can not pull up the seedlings in order to help them grow faster.

Students will encounter all these in their study. In composition study they cannot possibly be in touch with everything so fully unless it is a course requirement. Without that, sometimes if you ask a student write like Bach, he would not be able to.

Very few go there in composing. Even going Bach is impossible for them, let alone the Renaissance before Bach. They would not think of it. Also there are very few works and audio for those. You cannot listen to things like Gregorian Chants without doing some serious collecting. Bach's work are everywhere, but things before that are very scarce. Very few are in touch with that. No one would think of that stuff.

What he can write is something more Modern. That is because he has heard more of it. Some students like to chase after fashions; some feel that writing more dissonance, changes and complications means they are at a higher level.

Speaking of techniques, like those of polyphony and scales, they are related to the West. But what I write using them, so to speak, should have no audible trace of Western Music. I try as much as possible to nationalize it.

However, some people compose very traditional melody even though their entire sound is Western. In its bones it is Western, but the melody is national. There are many pieces like that.

That is, the music he writes remain Western Music; things in his skeleton framework are those of Western functional system, but his melody is written in a style color to a folk melody. We call this a style of two skin layers, as if the skin of the music and the meat of the music do not stick together.

That is his own choice, nobody knows why.

The operation process of my musical notes and the sound he makes are not alike.

I cannot say how, but it would not progress this way. It has much to do with the directions of voice leading. That is to say, when you go from one note to another note, I would, for others playing at the same time, choose notes that I think of as suitable, but I cannot make you an example now.

Everyone has a different way of doing it, perhaps very well in one work and very bad in another. There is no standard view on this issue either.

Every time you write a work, the concept of the piece would be different. There is no fixed pattern.⁸⁶

Composition is actually a very detailed and accurate process. It is unlike a single gestured Chinese Brush Painting, not the details in painting of Western Realism. The actual composition process is very precise; all voice leading choices are yours.

The exchange of East and West is now a hot topic and a trend. On this basis, the search for the two countries' musical instruments can stimulate composers to explore these two kinds of instruments' coordination. In putting together instruments of East and West, perhaps Westerners would understand Eastern instruments more when you let them play and use. Chinese people, however, is actually very familiar with Western instruments because Western instruments are more common; Westerner are not very familiar with Eastern instruments.

The musical instruments and symphony orchestra of the West are more common. Every country has them, so we hear them as familiar; composers are familiar with them too because they are what is to be learned. In contrast, when our instruments spread to the West, sometimes it is just occasional looks, or appreciation of whatever solo instrumental playing. After all, what is common is the instruments of the West, so Western composers are not familiar with these.

I listened to the works of the project's composers. I think everyone has different ideas and individual choice of using instruments.

Some music is fast, some slow; that is based on the nature of the music.

Every composer has his own choice. I think some of the ideas are not quite the same; it is quite good for people not to all think themselves into the same place.

In choosing different ways of expressing trends and feelings of music, composers of Canada and China are still different.

The habit of thinking and culture basis are different, but the specifics are hard to say.

Folk music of the West is very rational, very formalized, but that of China is very emotional, with this long trail or tail of notes, for you to listen slowly. It may not even put rhythm into notation; for example it does not say how many beats this note lasts, and you deal with it as you want, with no one there to limit you. The West, however, is not like this. It is definite, and people do what is as what it is. Compositionally, they are about the same because Westerners are beginning to borrow and refer to Easterns' thinking.

Learning from each other, they cannot be sharply separated.

Cultural exchange is becoming more frequent as the technology and civilization change, and as information transmits. It will become even more frequent, just as commodities everywhere in the world.

For a long time things will not be all the same because the Chinese people's creative thinking is heavily affected by this inclusiveness and deep roots of their culture. They do not easily change their own culture, but they assimilate things from

others to develop themselves. Some countries, however, are not like that. For example, Korean composers return to Korea after their education in the West say they write Western Music. There is a circle of people doing traditional music there. These two groups do not engage in dialogue. Each does things on its own. Those who write Western music write their so-called Western music, which is not considered Korean music by them. This behavior is difficult to understand.

Since the Han dynasty, China has been influenced by foreign music. Beside Guqin, what Chinese instruments are truly Chinese? Erhu and Pipa came from the North and the West. Perhaps only Guqin is Chinese, and the rest are Western. Yangqin is even more of a Western instrument.

What remains unchanged is the traditional culture of China. It is not to be changed easily. Our habits are still this way, of exploiting techniques of the West to develop China. From the time of the founding of the state, this habit has always been the thinking habit of the Chinese people. He would not think of himself as writing music of another country. We do not understand why Koreans think that way. I talked about this in a lecture I gave 87

in Korea. I said we never deem the music we write to be of the West just because we use techniques of the West.

In discussing, what Chinese music or Chinese style is cannot be said clearly. One view says if you are Chinese, what you write is Chinese music, but Chinese growing up and educated in other countries write Western music. If he comes here to learn and some changes happen to him, then perhaps what he writes is Chinese music. But you cannot say that he writes Western music because he is a Chinese. According to influences in techniques, you can say what Chinese music is, but therein lie many distinctions to be made.

In auditory terms, he does not deem this as Western music. To him, this must be Chinese music, because this thing inside the bones cannot be changed.

In fact, during the twentieth century in the West, there were composers whose music was very Easternized. People like Ravel intentionally learned things of the East. Debussy used the scale of the Gamelan. His music was already away from the bounds of the West, from that Wagnerian style. His music is still actually Western Music, but his style was alternative, in fact very close to Eastern Music.

Nowadays, what I listen to most of the time is aboriginal, distinctive music from various regions. Many were collected from all over the world but unavailable in China. In the past, nobody gets them. They were felt to be like dregs off mud, and not considered worthy. Fortunately, there are people from outside who collect these for distribution overseas; I hear in these recordings too many things of value.

In Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra's "An East-West Crossover" concert on 22 April, 2006, which commissioned and premiered my QingJieLing(Festivity), there were four composers of China and two of Britain. The younger British composer wrote for the Chinese Orchestra in a completely Western orchestration approach. His piece was a piece of Western music played on Chinese instruments. One hears that upon first listening. The sound and scale used by the elder British composer made an obvious first impression that he has studied things of China. That is, Chinese elements were in the piece. The way he handled it was very interesting.

That was not for a combined orchestra. The compositions were all written for Chinese Orchestra. However, what I was describing was musical styles, and the two of them were different.

This kind of work is not completely without precedent. Sometimes, combinations by chance happen. An orchestra which we invited here wanted to add one or two Chinese, then do things this way sometimes.

It was all occasional, not planned beforehand, on a whim, not as a project.

The ensemble I mentioned was not a symphony orchestra. If a symphony orchestra were to use Chinese instruments, a composition is to be written. What I mentioned was a chamber ensemble visiting China who wanted to add a bit of

Chinese instrument to play with them together. This happened spontaneously. It was not prepared in advance.

The environment is not the same for purposeful composition. What is for Chinese Orchestra is for Chinese Orchestra. But he did not understand folk musical instruments or styles of China, so what he wrote was music of his own. He merely used a performance medium of China, but that kind of occasional combination was not purposeful. It was a kind of temporary interest.

Our national music is not so widespread in the world.

Wind ensembles are very common in the West. Many countries have them. But Western ensembles arriving in China get interest in Chinese instruments. Long time ago, a chamber ensemble playing jazz music wished to get an Erhu or Dizi to play with them, to see what happen, and how the added players would develop, playing their jazz music.

People rarely organize such an ensemble like this. Canada has the right conditions to do it. It has Western Music, and Chinese ensemble. Usually, without such conditions people do not think about this matter.88

But large scale commissioning would not establish such a project. This is unheard of.

Our school has its Chinese orchestral ensemble and symphonic ensemble, but they never play together because no one think like that, or have that interest.

The opportunity for an ensemble that combines and mixes Chinese and Western instruments comes rarely, even though there are many projects for exchanges, because of the limitation in the greater environment and in performance conditions. In China, there are many ensembles of Chinese instruments but to add brass to it requires borrowing people from other ensembles, which is a practical issue. My symphonic work based on the Three Kingdoms story came out on compact discs first, then people in Hong Kong asked if I can re-score it for Chinese instruments plus Western orchestra. I thought the idea is good, so I did it, putting instruments of East and West together. Very interesting.

This could not have been done otherwise, anywhere in the world, because a Chinese orchestras is not going to invite a Western orchestra to play together, and vice versa, so neither can do. So I wrote this for that.

Maybe we should say, anyway, that this is a slow exploration and trial, just like the centuries of history that developed the Western orchestra. In history, one event is one point. More events happen, and they become a line. Perhaps frequent combination of Eastern music and Western music would make the line into a trend. Eastern and Western musical instruments are formed by different ideals. There is no Pipa among Western instruments. So, this kind of combination is very meaningful.

Many histories are formed by a kind of accidental collisions, gradually. At least you have to do something like this for things to slowly get inspired, or for habits to gradually form.

I feel very honored to participate in the exploration, and in the building of such a platform to put talents to use.

Dr. Ning Wang

Dr. Ning Wang was born in 1954. He studied double bass in Art School. In 1978, he entered the Composition Department of Shen Yang Conservatory of Music and began formal composition studies. In 1985 he graduated from the Central Conservatory of Music. His dissertation: <The Orchestration Art of Debussy>, and two orchestra compositions: 'Symphony for String Orchestra' and 'Symphonic Fantasy for Orchestra' became his M.A. degree. Mr. Wang was invited to teach in the China Conservatory of Music Composition Department, and appointed as the director of orchestration and analytical studies. He completed his doctoral dissertation <Source and Course and Development of Chinese National Orchestra>. He has recently published his 3rd Symphony.

Currently he is Director of the Composition Department, Director of Multimedia Music Center of China Conservatory of Music, council member of Chinese & Beijing

Musicians' Association, council member of Chinese Orchestra Association, vice-president of Electroacoustic Music Association of China, member of Chinese Copyright Association of Music, member of Beijing Contemporary Music Association, council member of Learned Society of Film Music and the honorary adviser of B.C. Chinese Music Association in Canada. He had been the adjudicator of many musical competitions with music publication in China and abroad.