

Owen Underhill

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The piece that I have composed for this project is called Slender Gold. I came up with that title actually from a form of Chinese calligraphy which I saw when I was on a trip many years ago to Taiwan, with Mark Armanini. I went to the Palace Museum there which is one of the most amazing collections of Chinese artefacts in the world and there I got quite interested in calligraphy. I thought particularly beautiful was this form of calligraphy from 12th Century called Slender Gold, and that stuck in my head and I took some information back. When I had this opportunity to write this piece using a combination of Chinese instruments and western instruments, I thought, "Well, what subject matter should I use for this piece?" And suddenly I remembered that I always had this interest in this calligraphy.

So, I took it out and I studied it and Emperor Huizong was the calligrapher. What was interesting is that he was an Emperor and also probably not such a good Emperor, because his kingdom ended up being invaded. But, he was a wonderful artist and he was very interested in painting and in calligraphy. I found that kind of that there would be this artist who became a failed Emperor, in a way. And so I started constructing my piece following that. And first, you know, appealed to me about this calligraphy is it's very slender, it's very beautiful, it's got lots of turns and it looks very original. So, I've been to some calligraphy exhibitions and I like calligraphy, but this seemed particularly original and interesting.

At first I thought maybe I can sort of create some music that has bold beginnings and then has these after effect, and kind of the speed of calligraphy, and I started dividing my music into bars and as if it was calligraphy, you know, set in a line. I did that for bit and actually there's a couple sections in my music which I call calligraphy one and calligraphy two, which have this kind of rhythm to them. They have an attack and then it's as if you were writing in time very quickly, because that's one of the other factors of this particular form of calligraphy. It has a kind of speed and flowing quality to it.

As I developed my piece I found I couldn't actually make a correspondence there, but it did prove to be the inspiration for the piece. My piece of music, first of all, begins with a simple melody and this melody everyone plays it monophonically. Then it goes into one of these calligraphy sections and then the music starts to dance. Then I have a second melody and a second calligraphy section. It's a fairly simple piece that was inspired from this Slender Gold calligraphy. Well I suppose the, you know, the piece is meant to have a kind of simplicity and poetic and clear quality to it, so in that sense it kind of speaks for itself.

It was an interesting project and I've actually been waiting for some time for an opportunity to write a piece with Chinese instruments. And, of course, there are many

composers here in Vancouver, like Mark and John Oliver, and I think also Dorothy, to some extent, that have been doing quite a lot of that and it's a really interesting aspect of the cross-cultural experience of Vancouver.

So, this was my opportunity and what I tried to do was – aside from the overall idea from the piece coming from calligraphy – was to learn something about the instruments and write something that would be idiomatic for all the instruments actually, the Western instruments as well as the Chinese instruments. And so, in a sense, you know, for example my opening melody of the piece, Dorothy told me it's very similar to a Chinese melody, a famous Chinese melody the first two measures, Dah, Dee, Dah, Dee. I thought, "Oh, I didn't know that." And then to some extent maybe there are some, it's meant to be embracing and friendly to the culture of those instruments, but not to necessarily sound, you know, sound intercultural or sound anything other than maybe my music written for these instruments. But, I would say it's a kind of by-product of trying to embrace the quality of all 52

these instruments that it does have this kind of unified sound. And then maybe, at first in my piece I didn't have these melodies, but I found when I put the melody in and all the instruments played the melody it had a kind of beautiful quality and also a unifying quality for the mix of instruments.

Well, I suppose this piece fits in well to my musical canon. I tend to approach each piece as a new opportunity and this was very much a new opportunity. But, I think it does represent my general aesthetic in terms of what I prefer - a more poetic clear, clean kind of writing style. At first I gave more attention to the Chinese instruments, because I was, you know, wanting to write properly for the Pipa and the Zhongruan etc. And I would say I tried not to treat them as just using contemporary techniques on those instruments. So, for example, with the Sheng I wanted to use the traditional Sheng and its diatonic scale rather than the chromatic Sheng which gave all the chromatic possibilities. And actually that worked better for me anyways because you could still do clusters and interesting sounds on the traditional Sheng. So, I tried to work within the normal properties of those instruments. In the beginning, I went back and forth between the Chinese and western instruments but I found as I got into the piece that it fairly naturally developed as a mixed ensemble. So, I would say overall I just treated this as a very fascinating and interesting ensemble of instruments with different properties and, you know, different cultural backgrounds and so on. And the piece came out of that, I didn't try and force it one way or the other.

Well, I would say that a mixed ensemble like this is part of the new inter-cultural world, certainly here in Vancouver. There's some history behind mixed ensembles here in Vancouver, maybe also in China and in other countries as well. But, in general, what I try and do is just write my ideas within the instruments available. So, even, I know some composers say they're scared of the string quartet, let's say, because it has all this rich history, to me it doesn't matter, [laughs] yes a string quartet has a history but, you know, what I'm trying to do is write my music for that ensemble and that may have some reference to the history. In this case, it's kind of a new history, in that you're in no way burdened by either Chinese cultural music or Western culture because it's a mix. So, there's no problem there, it's like a new field, if you like, and that's one of the things that appealed to me.

As previously mentioned, I did have this idea coming from the, you know, the characters and the calligraphy. At the beginning I actually divided up my music so those sections, every eight beats or so there's an attack and then there's some motion as if the particular character of calligraphy is being composed. After that I worked fairly freely and intuitively, and I suppose if I'd have found a one-to-one correspondence I would have gone that way, but I didn't find that that was best approach to compose the piece. So, just like Dorothy said that she heard this Chinese melody at the beginning of my piece, the fact that I used these eight beat patterns may, in fact, present similarities to

Chinese music. And I would say that that just was a natural outgrowth of my work on it. I didn't want to make it a kind of studied approach to copying anything.

In terms of pitch, I am interested in scales even in any of my pieces. So, I would say what I'm interested in is simple scales or diatonic scales that might have interesting juxtapositions that don't sound like they're copying tonal music. So, in this piece there are some simple scales, the melodies are fairly traditional. If you like, what I did do, for example, with the Zheng is that I did retune it, so rather than keep it entirely within a pentatonic scale I filled in other notes within the scale so there's other chromatic notes. But, generally speaking I don't go to a 20th Century full chromaticism with all 12 notes going at the same time.

Well, I make that choice probably in most of my music because I'm interested in finding that kind of fresh approach to tonality and one that is sort of moving forward if you like. In my mind, that we've already had a kind of atonality in the early 20th Century and 12 tone music and so on. And so I kind of think that we're in the period now already for 50 years where we should be exploring new combinations of tonality, so that's kind of what I'm doing. And in this case it presented some interesting possibilities using the Chinese instruments and how I would tune them and that played a little bit into my choice of notes.

When I looked at the possibilities of the Chinese instruments, I think I used most every one. I did use the Sheng because I've always loved that instrument instead of the [Suona]. Even though that's an amazing 53

instrument, it's so loud and piercing. That player also played the Sheng, so, I decided to go with the Sheng in that case. Then when, in terms of the Western instruments, I decided because I already had the Dizi I would use the alto flute. So, I'd use a low flute in combination with the higher Chinese flute, and then I thought I'll also use a bass clarinet rather than a clarinet. So I kind of thought of those three wind instruments together, to make a somewhat different combination. For the percussion I decided to mostly use the Chinese percussion instruments that were available and I think I used one Chinese gong and I'm using these big un-tuned bass drums, the Dagou. And other than that there is a glockenspiel that I am using. With the choices that I could make I wanted to make a kind of interesting palette together. I thought of it as a kind of mix and I tried to create something that would give me the most interesting mix of sounds. And generally speaking in my piece, as I said, it kind of all fits together. There are parts you get two Erhu together, but in general I just tried to use different combinations of the full ensemble.

Well, I think, as I said, the piece kind of evolves in a natural way, so hopefully that will just play itself out for the listener. In terms of the ensemble I think it's maybe a little more subtle or quiet a piece than some of the others. So, it's a matter of, I think sort of capturing that and learning how to listen to each other to sort of capture the world of the piece. And the reading sessions, and by the way the reading sessions were very helpful in creating the piece and checking how well the things were working, particularly for the Chinese instruments. They seem to be getting to that after playing it a little bit, so it's just a matter of sort of understanding the aesthetics of the world of the piece and it requires quite a bit of listening and attention to detail.

This was the first time that I wrote for a number of these instruments and pretty much it worked out alright. But, if I have the opportunity to write again for Pipa and Jing or and I think I could probably go a step further in maybe the complexity of the music that I would write for those instruments. As I said, I think it's kind of a new area and what I find interesting in intercultural ensembles and music is the ability to take them in many different directions. So, this piece, I've taken it kind of in the direction of my music and that's maybe just one way of many ways.

I guess I would leave that to the listener in terms of how my piece relates to traditional Chinese or Western music. I would say it's got a bit of all of it in there, just naturally, right, so I don't think it sounds totally like a piece of Western instruments, because the way that the Chinese instruments play in the piece and they sound, I think, sort of as Chinese instruments in the piece, and neither does it sound like a traditional piece of Western music. As I say, I didn't want to write it as a kind of techniques, contemporary techniques for instruments which is sounding then like a sort of avant-garde piece of music. I wasn't really interested in doing that, so it's probably some mix of the different cultures. Because the instruments of themselves have such

character on their own that they carry cultural character, they carry unique sounds, the way the instruments bend or the strings bend, or the Sheng is very remarkable instrument. So, hopefully I wrote well enough for those instruments that their kind of natural quality speaks through.

As mentioned, the calligraphy section sort of falls into eight beat patterns. But, the melodies I wrote in three/four to make it kind of contrast to that so one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three, one. And then the dance part actually I decided to use some mixed meter, so that's in a kind of seven/eight, one two three four five six seven, one two three four five six seven, one. So, that's a little tricky but it changes meter in there but it's to give a kind of lightness and dancing quality. So, I guess overall it's a combination of twos and threes in there and that's how I get contrast in between the sections.

Culture and music are embedded together. I mean and that is, you know, one of the things that's fascinating about our contemporary global world that has so many cultures. For example, in this city or in many parts of the world all existing together is that you have these multiple cultures and multiple voices. And one of the things that I appreciate about Vancouver is there's a kind of sense of, you know, all these brilliant musicians who've come into Vancouver from China and Vietnam and many different countries. They seem to want to play together and 54

they want to experiment and try things out, like this whole project, so that sort of opens up new possibilities. And I think that that's a sort of experimental area and it's something I'm sure that will continue to happen in Vancouver and probably here more than some other cities. And it'll be interesting to see over the next 20, 30 years what kind of tradition and ensembles come out of that here in this city.

[Mark Armanini: I think Owen has really captured something unique actually, it's very non-traditional Chinese but it sounds Chinese, and it's got a really interesting character to it.]

I actually don't know how to characterize my piece at this time [laughs]. I'm looking forward to the upcoming time when we'll all be together and to hear all the pieces again and the concert. It's interesting to hear Mark say that he thinks my piece sounds a little bit Chinese [laughs] and maybe that's true. I didn't necessarily try and make it that way, so I think probably every piece is going to be unique on the concert. Maybe one thing I can say is I tried not to treat this as – even though there's 15 instruments – I tried not to treat it like an orchestra. I tried to treat it as a chamber ensemble, which I could get some smaller combinations and make it speak as a chamber piece rather than something sort of old and orchestral, I didn't try and do that at all.

Well I'd say a chamber music aesthetic tends to be a more intimate aesthetic, it tends to be a more clear and transparent aesthetic. Where an orchestral aesthetic tends to be bigger, bolder, flashier, and that's kind of what I tried not to do in my piece [laughs]. I chose the combinations of piece essentially from what was provided. I made a few little choices, but rather than, you know, write for just 10 instruments or something, I decided why not try the whole thing. So I just kind of chose the most interesting combination out of the whole thing.

Some of the combinations that came about in the piece, I would say, is some of the multi-note chords are both in the piano and in the Jing, which I had retuned, so it kind of goes back and forth between those two instruments. I didn't do a lot of mixing of the two Erhu and the other violin, viola, cello bass, I kind of used those as different combinations. There's an Erhu solo in the piece and there are a couple of times when the Erhu played with the other Western strings. But, I mostly didn't combine them maybe because I thought they would lose their sound within each other if I did that. So, I just sort of worked with the combinations that were available.

After the part in the middle where there are these dances, I decided to include a whole bunch of solos, they're little tiny solos. But, more or less every instrument within maybe a minute and a half section of the piece plays a solo, and hopefully then every instrument was kind of, come through on their own in that part of the piece. I think I arrived at it just by wanting to show each instrument on its own a little bit in the piece. It really didn't come out of calligraphy per se, it sort of came out of these dances into a

more, like a soliloquy or a more sort of free flowing section and with the dance section. And then, yeah it's, oh this is the first part. You've only got half the piece.

Maybe I'll talk a little bit about the process of the piece. I did re-write it a couple of times. I started with this calligraphy idea, I found that was a little too literal, although I had a lot of things that came out of that that were helpful. Then after that we had a meeting at the BC Chinese Music Ensemble and we tried through the music that I had written, which at that time was only within the first half. When I heard how it worked, which was mostly fine, I actually went back and I re-wrote, because I found I had a better idea of those instruments. And then in December we actually read through the whole piece, in my case it was the whole half piece because I completed the first half of the piece. At that session, I found I was on a good track. I did change some of the dynamics, but I pretty much went from there to complete the piece. And it was helpful to have these sessions —because unlike John Oliver, let's say, who'd written quite a few pieces for various combinations of Chinese instruments, I hadn't before. So these steps where I got to hear the music first were very helpful.

Oh, it's a terrific project and I like the mix of the three composers from China and the three composers here from Vancouver. I'm looking forward to the week coming up where we spend some time together, because so far I've just met Ning Wang when he came out. I hope that maybe these pieces get done in China as well, maybe that's part of the project I wish it might happen, because I think that would be the natural next step for this 55



project.

I think every composer works hard on figuring out their own voice or their own style so, in this sense, composers are kind of in their own worlds. I think what's interesting here is: six composers from their own worlds – and in this case three here are from Vancouver and three from China – but they all have the same task, [laugh] which is to write for this ensemble. So, maybe an interesting question is kind of how this task has sort of changed the way that they would normally work. So far I've just heard the pieces in read-throughs and in some cases the pieces have changed. So, you know, until I have the opportunity to really hear them in the context of the concert, it's hard to answer specific questions. But, I'm looking forward to spending time together and talking about differences: how is it to be a composer in Beijing or Shanghai, as opposed to what it's like to be a composer in Vancouver. I think that it's also very interesting for composers to think about, where they fit in within the culture, within educational institutions, within the cities that they live in. That, as well as the pieces that are composed, is a very interesting dialogue. So I'm looking forward to talk about those kind of things.

Well, I'm a teacher in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University. And it's a rather unique situation for composers, because pretty much the whole music program is a composition program, and we also have here dance, film, theatre, visual art, and art and culture studies. So, it means that our composers can do quite a bit of collaboration and they can learn to write for dance and theatre and film. And that's one of the strengths of our program and also historically we've done quite a lot of electro-acoustic and computer music already for three decades here at Simon Fraser University.

In terms of teaching composition, I feel that it's really about helping composers to find their own voice, it's not about teaching them to compose like I would. So I always try in my teaching to respond to the individual student and help them to develop themselves to find their own original voice.

First of all, rather than having students write exercises or copy this or copy that, you want to give them an opportunity to bring in something that's important to them that comes from them. Then you start to nudge them along and question what they're doing and enter into a kind of dialogue. And hopefully, if that's an open dialogue and if both sides are kind of sensitive to the dialogue, they move along their own path and you help them along their way. So, I suppose, composition teaching is a little bit different than teaching violin or piano, it's more acting like a guide, I guess. That might be one way to put it.

There's a lot of practical stuff to learn as a composer too, how to notate your music and notation is very complicated. How to make interesting rhythms, you know, probably in this world now of technology, there's a tendency to copy things a lot, or copy and paste or something like that. So, I think how to have things that might repeat but are

also changing, there's a lot of detail in fact, in developing ideas. So, usually what you would do in my experience is you'd work within a particular piece that a student is working on. You try and help them to make that the best piece possible, to notate it, to realize the idea and to find the best structure for that piece. After they've completed that piece you can put that aside and say, "How could that be a stepping stone to something different?" so that they come on a path from piece to piece. That's maybe a sense of what the dialogue would be like.

Well, our music students, because they're in a School for the Contemporary Arts, they tend to take a lot of subjects outside of music more than you might in a standard bachelor of music or conservatory music program. So, they also will do some dance and some theatre and when they study cultural history, they'll do so within the context of different art forms. So, that's one thing that's a little bit different. Within the music program they have the opportunity to write for acoustic instruments and also they do quite a bit of electro-acoustic and computer music, or to work for dance, theatre and film. Usually most of our students do all of those things. But we have three streams now, one is a composition stream, one is an electroacoustic music stream, and one is a collaboration stream. So, that allows students to kind of focus within those areas.

The way we do it with the acoustic instruments is that we bring in small numbers of professional players every 56

year and different ensembles, such as a string trio one year or a brass quintet the next. And that is actually a treat for the composers because they get to hear their music played very well. It's also a challenge for them, because they've got to be professional and notate the music properly and get it done on time, but this, I think, has worked quite well in our program.

One other thing that is very important to mention about our program is that for over 20 years now we have had a Javanese gamelan orchestra. And this started actually with Expo '86 when the Indonesian pavilion was here. They had a wonderful series of performances all through that fair. And they had two gamelans and one of them they donated to Simon Fraser University, because we had a faculty member who had a love of the gamelan, Martin Bartlett. And so we've been teaching gamelan for all that time. You can do up to three courses in gamelan. Out of this has come a kind of community gamelan of people that have graduated. We've had many of our students go to Java. It's actually a kind of perfect thing for composers. Since the time of Colin McPhee in the 1930s, the gamelan I think, because of the way it's layered, the rhythmic aspects of the gamelan are fascinating for composers. And because we're not a performance program this is an interesting performance activity, and a very easy thing for them to start to learn. So, they can start at the first level playing the big gong every 32 beats, and many of them go all the way through the levels so that they become quite proficient on, you know, bonang and the other instruments. So, it's been a really integral part of our music program.

Well, the gamelan, they have built that on Javanese traditional gamelan music. So, they usually learn traditional pieces, and in notation, numbered notation and so on, so they learn it's also very I think, good to learn a totally different system of notation of music. So, that I think is helpful. I mean, notation is principally the way we transmit our ideas so it's important to know how best way to do that, and if you don't notate your music well it's not going to communicate very well. So, it's just something all composers have to work towards, clear presentation, expression of their music through some kind of notation.

Actually, we are moving more and more is because of, maybe technology for one reason, into less division between art forms. The visual medium is very prominent in our world now, so how music and sound fit in with the visual medium is very active, I would say, in the popular culture and also in other art forms of creation. Therefore, I think that it's good for students to have the opportunity to play with dance or play with theatre. In general, I would say most of the students that do that in our program end up performing their music live in theatre and dance or even making electro-acoustic scores or that kind of thing. What collaboration really requires you to do is enter into deep conversation with other artists to try and figure out how your music can work the best within a dance piece, let's say. And that's a very challenging thing and I would say, in general, in most

music programs you don't get that opportunity because the music is over here and the theatre is way over there. And because our students have had this opportunity many of them have gone on then to build their artistic careers around collaboration.

This is technology, right, (plays arpeggio on piano), so I mean the technology is always changing, you know. So, in terms of the, we've had here the World Soundscape Project and Murray Schafer and studio communication from the mid 70s and Barry Truax there, he's one of the sort of leading composers in computer music. But, in general, we've moved away from fancy bits of technology in studios to just trying to work with software, because we've found that students already, on their laptops, usually are as advanced as anything we might purchase and put into a studio. So, I would say they fit together, technology and music totally, and it's a matter of developing the flexibility in the minds of the students of how to use the technology to develop their ideas in the same way as you would if you were writing a piece for piano.

The program here at Simon Fraser University has been kind of like this for 30 years, and that's just the way it started up with this combination of disciplines, and so there are small numbers of faculty in the different disciplines. And that, I think, was kind of forward thinking and it's been that way all along. And everybody who comes here – and I came here in 1981, so I've been here a long time, but what it did for me is that I met many 57

colleagues in theatre and dance and I developed many projects with them. I think it's been very healthy for my own growth as an artist and I've done a lot more interdisciplinary projects I would say, than I otherwise would have. But, the composer always has to be in collaboration even, you know, writing a piece of concert music is a collaboration between the composer and the performers, and by extension also to the audience. I think it's important to learn to work with people and artists of different kinds from music performers, and that, to me, is something that happens a lot in this program because of the interdisciplinary aspect of it.

At Simon Fraser it's a bit more of a non-traditional approach I would say, but we do have contemporary music theory. We do have a kind of harmony course that we have but it's a little less learning the traditional counterpoint and harmony approach. We get different students probably because of the fact we're not a performance program. We get students who have been in jazz or pop music or coming from all sorts of different places that may not fit well within the traditional bachelor of music structure. But, we've had many, many, many outstanding composers that have come through our program here.

Prof. Owen Underhill

Owen Underhill lives in Vancouver where he is active as a composer, conductor and Director of the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University. He is currently serving as Dean (Pro-Tem) of the Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology.

As a composer, Underhill has a substantial catalogue of more than sixty-five works. Among his most recent compositions are : World of Light (2008) for tenor and orchestra, A Middle English Songbook (2006) for choir and ensemble, and Canzone di Petra (2004), a piece for flute and harp which was the winner of the 2007 Western Canadian Music Outstanding Composition Award. His compositions have been performed by leading music organizations in Canada and recent international performances have included the premiere of two new chamber works by the CrossSound Festival in Alaska, and a Boston premiere by the King's Chapel Choir and Arcadian Winds. His music is regularly broadcast on CBC, and has been included on several recordings, including his disc 'Celestial Machine' on the Artifact Music label.

As a conductor, Underhill has made conducting appearances with the Turning Point Ensemble, CBC Radio Orchestra, the Victoria Symphony, the Vancouver Symphony, the National Arts Centre Orchestra. Underhill was Artistic Director of Vancouver New Music from 1987 to 2000. He is currently Artistic Co-Director of the Turning Point Ensemble, a large chamber ensemble of outstanding Vancouver musicians. He is currently serving as the Vice-President of the Canadian Music Centre.