Cultural Fingerprints: An Evolving Curriculum in Contemporary Music Composition

Chinary Ung, DMA[1]

Abstract

The western conservatory tradition requires substantial study in European music history, theory, counterpoint, and orchestration in order to provide the necessary qualifications to pursue composition. This process favors imitation as a means of gaining a practical understanding of historical forms. Because it is rooted in the practice of European music, this course of study excludes a serious investigation of other traditions that may play a central role in one's cultural identity. The degree to which this forms barriers for young composers from Asia is a particular concern of mine. I advocate for a shift in priorities that raises the profile of Asian cultural practices as a vital part of becoming a composer. My paper refers to writings by Chou Wen-chung, who wrote persuasively on this topic, and by José Maceda, whose inquiries into Southeast Asian music unc[1]overed a rich terrain. I use my own work as an example of how the study of one's particular heritage can help inform a personal creative voice. My intent is not to suggest models, but rather to suggest possible paths that better suit those of us from Asian backgrounds so that we can take advantage of the richness this provides.

Keywords: music composition; education; intercultural research; Southeast Asia

[1] Distinguished Professor, University of California, San Diego and Presidential Fellow: Senior Composer in Residence, Chapman University

Introduction

I have spent over 50 years in the United States, and I have taught composition for almost 40 years. The appearance of voices from Asia in the context of the western concert tradition is perhaps the most important development in music over the last 60 years. The order of events is no doubt familiar to you: Japanese and Korean composers coming to prominence in the 1950s and 60s, followed by Chinese composers in the 70s and 80s. It is my view that the next great wave of composers will come from Southeast Asia, where it is clear there is a great deal of interest and a deep reservoir of talent.

The project of inclusion of new voices in music is not a matter of extending the reach of western classical music, but rather of seeking out something new that has not been heard before. People from different cultures are armed with a repository of experiences and traditions that inform a truly unique cultural identity, and from this foundation a composer's individual voice will reflect both her own personality and a broader cultural character. When we teach in the United States, we tend to be chiefly concerned with developing a composer's individual voice, or what I call a *musical fingerprint.* I make the proposition that the process of developing this musical fingerprint is not merely a matter of looking inward, or even of obtaining a practical skill-set, but, rather, it involves obtaining a sort of cultural literacy so that a composer's creative musical instinct resonates more broadly. In a sense, this is part of knowing oneself—where one comes from.

Part of the challenge with this objective is the compressed timeframe of the average composer's education. The western conservatory tradition requires substantial study in European music history, theory, counterpoint, and orchestration in order to provide the necessary qualifications to pursue composition. This is, for all intents, an immersive process of study and practice that favors imitation as a means of gaining a practical understanding of historical forms. Imitation, though, has its risks. A composer can be

consumed with it as she develops her craft. This technical concern can drift into an aesthetic principle, eventually producing a composer who has a command of the conventions of classical music but whose voice has never been allowed to sound clearly.

It seems crucial then to discover means of identifying interest and talent in composition in students at an earlier age—before they reach University. Not only could they extend their years in training but they could also be encouraged to engage in intercultural studies, beginning with their own and extending to other regions in turn. In other art forms besides music we notice that students at the pre-college level are encouraged to engage in the creation of new work. Students in writing and painting make new poems and artworks while simultaneously studying literature and art history. By contrast, composition is almost never pursued by young people at similar stages in their studies.

While we contemplate the question of *when* to pursue composition let us discuss *what* a study in cultural practices might entail, from the perspective of a composer. In order to do this, I will refer to some ideas presened by José Maceda and Chou Wen-chung, who were part of the first generation of Asian composers and educators within the field of contemporary music.

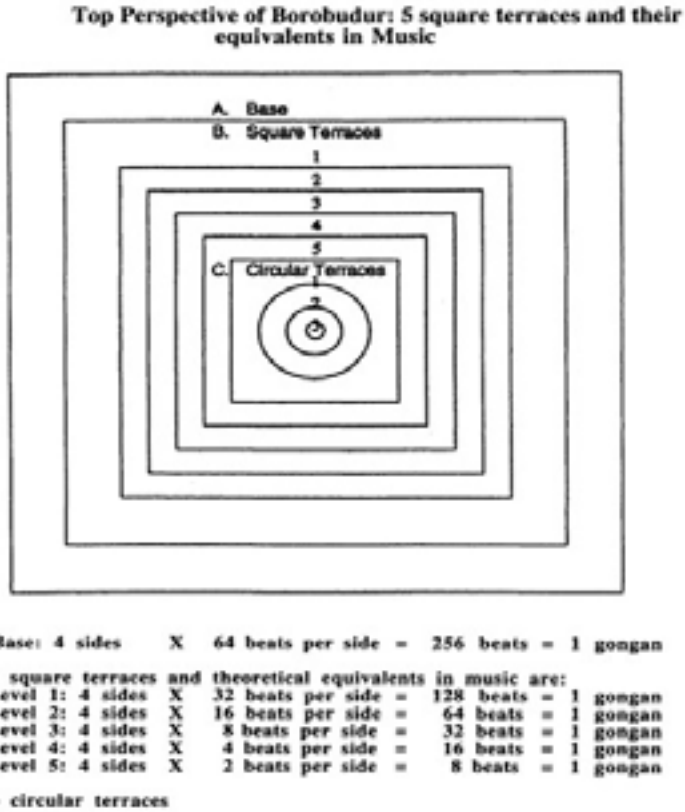
Maceda (1995) notes that the "search for new ideas in music composition lies not only in modern technology but also in concepts that can be gathered from the past, as a basis of what this past can do for the presented." In other words, one should seek out elements from the past in order to produce a living artistic heritage that can extend into the future.

An example of how this might work comes from Maceda himself, who developed a fascinating hypothesis that derives a proportional scheme from the terraced structure of the *Candi Borobudur* in order to elucidate the musical structures that govern the Indonesian *gamelan*. Maceda simplifies the *Borobudur* into a series of graduated,

nested squares, indicating how the different levels of beat lengths correspond to the levels of this important temple.

Example 1a: *Borobudur*

Example 1b: Map of *Borobudur* as a structural model for music[2]



In this example, as one moves up each level (or layer), the value of the corresponding beat structure is halved. Note that the number of musical levels corresponds exactly to the number of levels on the temple itself. To quote Maceda (2001), “a search for a square as a principle of structure in music or architecture may find initial leads in mathematical problems in antiquity.”

[2] From Maceda, J. (2001). The Structure of Principal Court Musics of East and Southeast Asia.

Chou Wen-chung, in a 2001 address titled "Music—What Is Its Future?" spoke on the merging of cultures:

> What I have been speaking of is not "new" culture but a "merger" or "*re*-merger" of legacies; not cultural "influence" but a "confluence." In contrast to "borrowing" by the West from the East in the past, or the East from the West today, "merger" means coming together, sharing each other's heritage, complementing and revitalizing legacies.

He went on to consider the possibility of "a new era, not of globalization, but of global partnership."

By advocating for a thorough investigation of not only cultural practices but also for the capacity to move across borders, Chou and Maceda proposed an interesting and vital way forward. When Maceda addressed composition, there was a clear connection between field research he had carried out in traditional music and theoretical inquiries he had pursued. His work tended to favor the notion of communal expression, rather than the strictly personal or abstract.

Chou Wen-chung (2013) asserts that "it is the creative artist's responsibility to demand crossing of conventionalities to reach the inevitable future." His use of the word "responsibility" here is crucial. He invokes a moral imperative in this search. This is not merely a situation in which one is mining territory for potential compositional materials—the issues run far deeper. In 1981, he proposed a list of 10 principles that might constitute an Asian aesthetic theory for music:

1. Assimilation of foreign musical cultures
2. Interpretation of music for the people and for the elite
3. Timbre as complement to pitch
4. Language as progenitor of esthetics
5. The triad of poetry, painting, and music
6. Allusiveness in expression
7. Terseness in structure
8. Harmony with the universe

9. Beyond imitation of nature
10. Emphasis on spiritual cultivation

Each of these topics is sufficiently rich to deserve its own study. Chou ties spirituality to musical analysis in his reference to "oneness." He sees no disparity between the two, as he makes clear in the following statement: "Spiritual cultivation and material analysis do not have to belong to two different worlds—because we have one world to share!"

1. The Creative Fingerprint

Having offered something of an introduction to the principles of intercultural studies and some of their proposed outcomes, I would like to turn now to composition itself, and how these principles merge with individual creative energy to produce a musical fingerprint. One must strive for a balance between the acquisition of knowledge and skills from a confluence of cultures while reaching inward to a deeper inner self.

Carl Jung (1933) suggests creativity taps into a collective consciousness that is otherwise dormant. A similar notion is associated with Taoist meditation and described in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, which describes the process of turning inward, transcending the cultural plane and accessing a primordial, spiritual plane. Of course, we can address creativity on less metaphysical grounds, too.

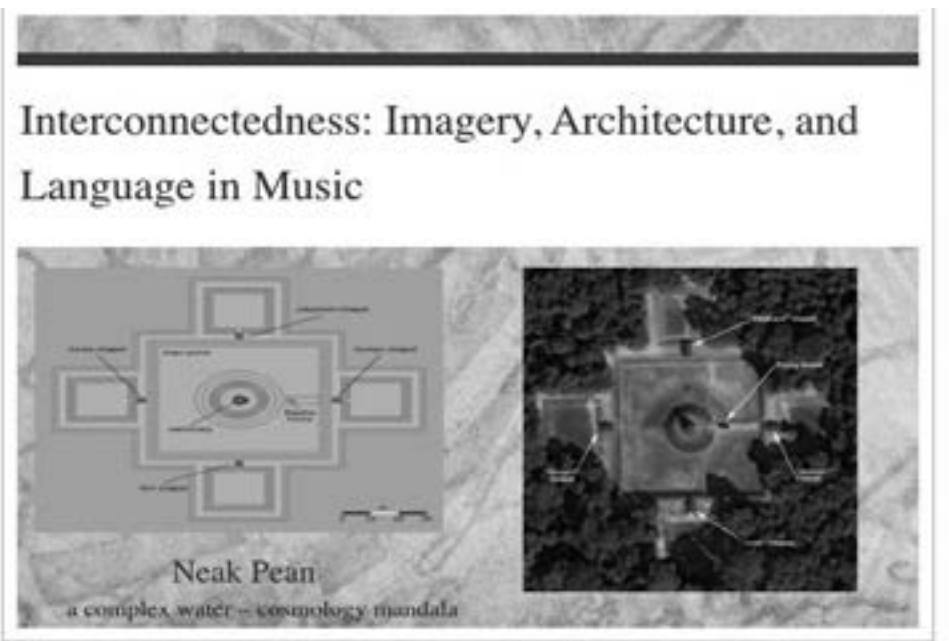
My own journey as a composer has involved a variety of turns, the most significant of which came after completing my formal studies. I had initialy been concerned with pursuing an integration of cultures, blending ideas from different sources into what might be heard as a coherent identity. I then moved beyond this to consider the notion of coexistence of diverse cultures. For the past decade or so I have viewed my approach as running in parallel, where materials are asserted independent from their cultural associations while maintaining a respect for their legacies.

As a means of illustrating some directions that emerge from a consideration of the principles I have introduced thus far, I will use three examples, two of them from my own work.

2.1. *Neak Pean project*

The first example begins with the mystical water mandala, *Neak Pean*. The term *Neak Pean* refers to the intertwining Nagas, or serpents, that surround the central island. The complex was built as a sort of hospital, and the four main pools represent the four elements of Water, Earth, Fire, and Wind. Bathing in the pools restored the individual's balance, thereby healing disease.

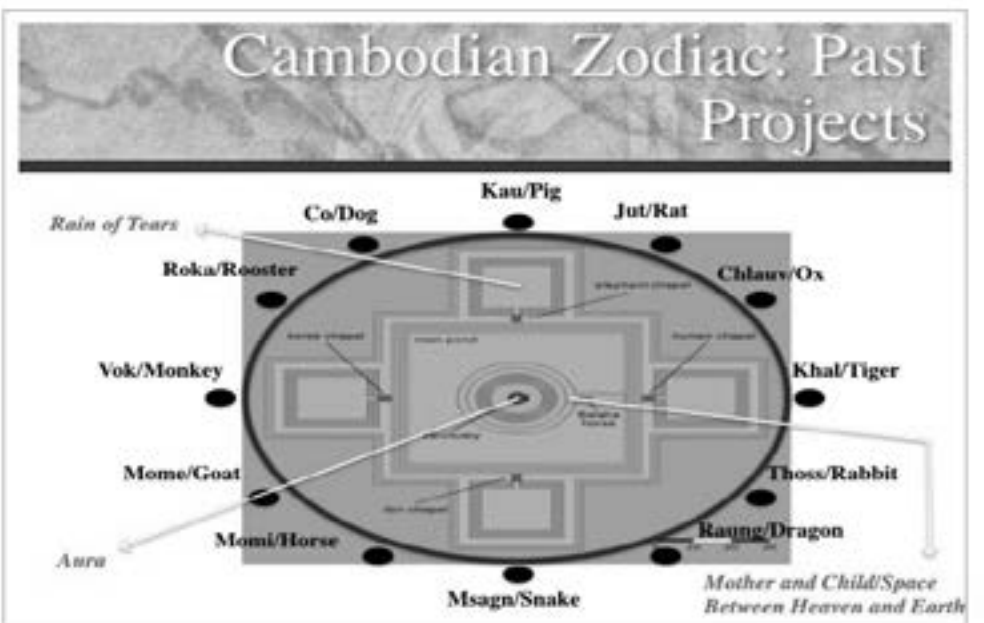
Example 2: Map of *Neak Pean* with aerial view of the complex



The intertwining *Nagas* have actually played a part in several pieces thus far, but my current thinking is to ascribe to the several pools in the complex a separate ensemble. If you notice the map, there are actually five pools—the four on the sides that represent the elements and the central pool that surrounds the island. This central pool could be associated with the cosmic realm by adding a fifth element to the mix.

My project will have four *pinpeat* ensembles from different regions in Cambodia (representing the four elements), plus a mixture of winds, strings, and voices that will represent the celestial realm. Surrounding them at 12 stations will be pairs of barrel drums representing the positions of the Khmer zodiac. This is a multimedia project that will involve a mixture of youth and expert performers, along with a team of six performers on the *Khleng Ek,* also known as the "singing kite." In addition, there will be five laptop performers, each one aligned with one of the five ensembles.

Example 3: Map of *Neak Pean* with zodiac superimposed

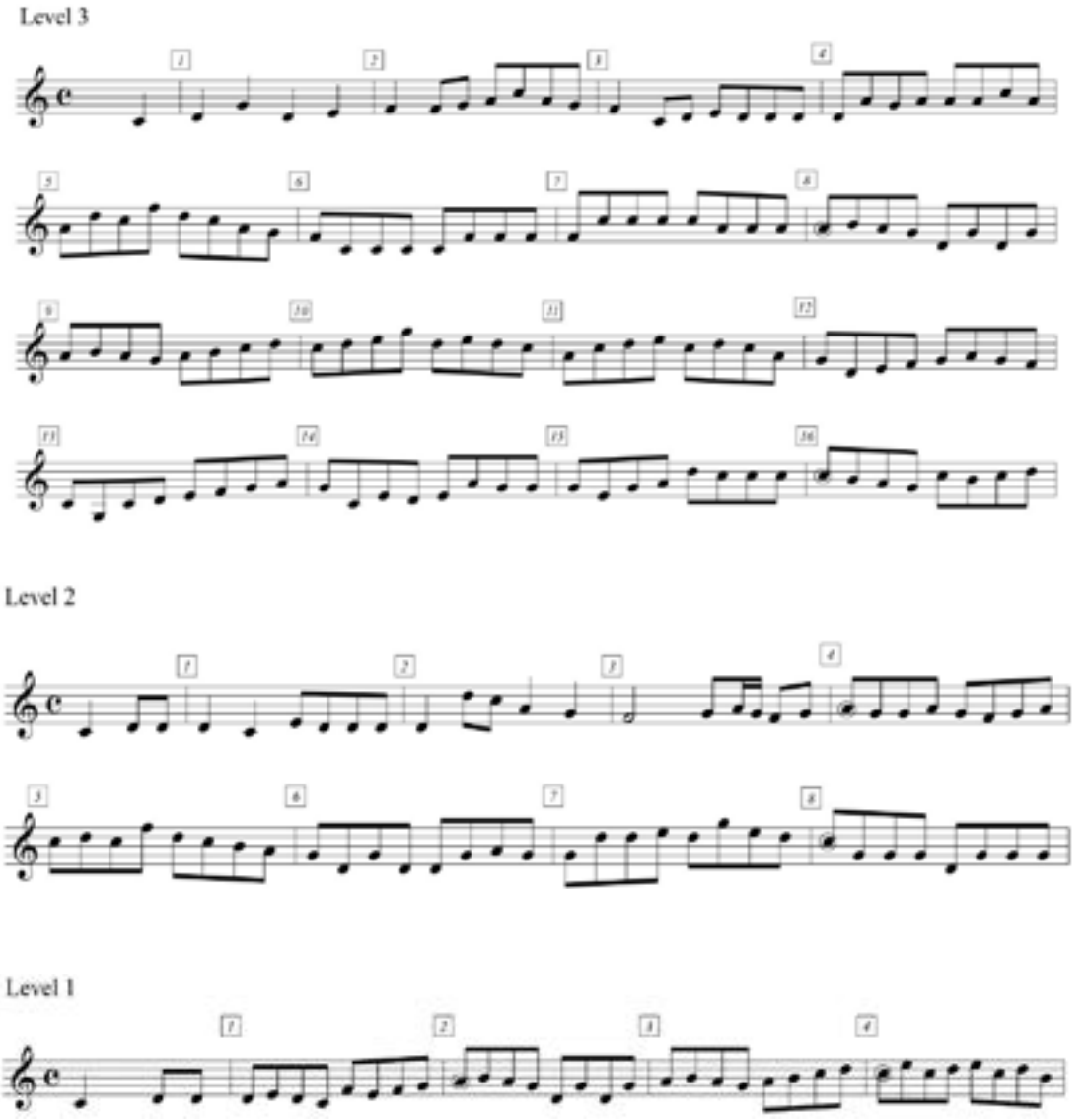


2.2 *Khek Mon.*

The next example comes from the living musical traditions of Southeast Asia. There is a principle of time expansion that is well understood by performers of the percussion-dominated *pinpeat* tradition but that somehow has escaped the notice of composers of western concert music.

The *Khek Mon* is a set of interdependent pieces constructed along three distinct levels (or *chuan*) in which each successive level is twice as long as the previous one. One can think of the first level (*mouy chuan*) as a model that provides source material. It is 12 measures long and features a melodic line derived from a traditional folk tune. Level 2 (*pe chuan*) is twice as long as the first level, and level 3 is twice as long as level 2, representing a time expansion from 12 to 24 to 48 measures as we traverse each level (*see* Example 4).

Example 4: *Khek Mon*[3]



[3] From Bophany, M. (1969). Université Royale des Beaux-Arts (URBA). *Musique Khmère,* Phnom-Penh: Imprimerie Sangkum Reastr Niyum, 128-132.

Interestingly, the surface of this music is similar at each level, maintaining the same tempo and consisting mostly of eighth note figuration. There are, however, structural pitches that are marked by strikes on the *sampho,* the two-sided drum. The above example shows excerpts from each level, with structural pitches indicated by circles. As one might expect, the two-measure span between structural notes on the first level is doubled when encountered in the second level, finally becoming an eight-measure span between structural notes on the third level. Again, these moments feature a strike of the *sampho.*

It is useful to view these pieces together in order to appreciate the idea of proportional expansion. However, it must be understood that, in practice, each level represents a separate piece of music. Each piece has a different social function in society. For example, *Khek Mon Pe Chuan* (or a level 2 piece) might be played as a warm-up piece for court dancers. Each level indicates a different stage on a formal hierarchy. Level 1 is associated with folk traditions and refers to everyday tangible elements: people, animals, and mortality. Level 2 (again, twice as long) is of a higher order, more formal, and would primarily be heard in court music. Level 3 is the highest order, appealing to a spiritual dimension. This cosmological stratification is a common feature in a variety of traditional Cambodian artistic practices, such as our elaborate tapestries and other textile arts.

Example 5: Cambodian tapestry showing three different planes (analogous to different *chuan*)

Of course, there are many other features one can comment about regarding the *Khek Mon*, including the very beautiful surface-level figuration and ornamentation. This is all grounded in a highly elegant structure, which seems to me to be a very interesting and unique model one might follow as a composer.

2.3. *Rain of Tears*

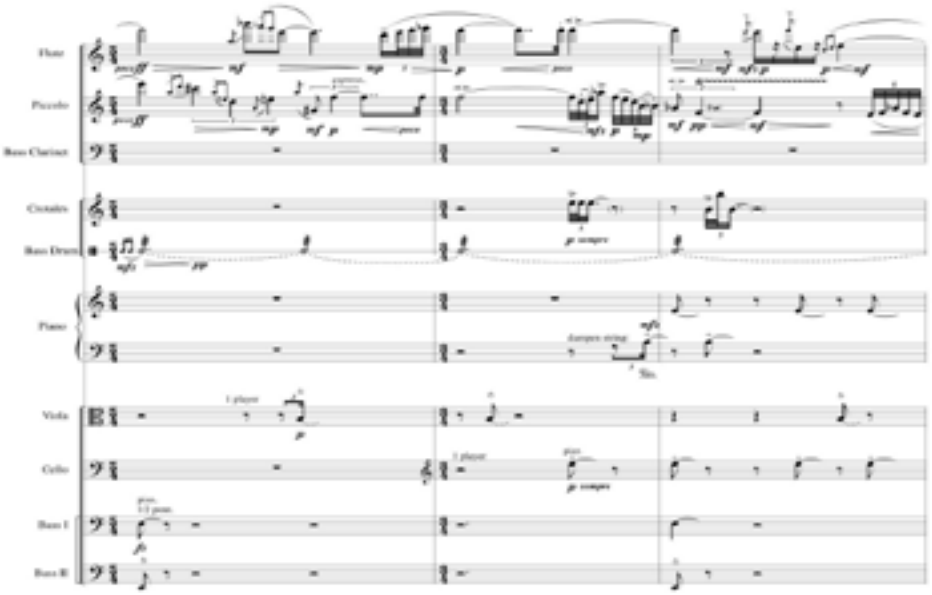
The final example comes from my work, *Rain of Tears.* When I was asked to write a piece for the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra I was struggling with an image that had occurred to me during a dream. In this dream, a huge wave developed and loomed over me, suspended. It was shortly thereafter that the tsunami ravaged Southeast Asia, making the image from my dream even more disturbing. By the time of the SPCO commission, Hurricane Katrina had struck the southern United States. Waves, then, were not only fixed in my own thoughts but were part of a global consciousness, as people contemplated the horrific loss endured by inhabitants of such

disparate places as Banda Aceh and New Orleans. I determined that my music would be a gesture of healing and compassion.[4]

One idea that became very important during the composition of the piece was the Buddhist concept of *shunyata*. Sometimes referred to as a "bubble" or "void," the *shunyata* concerns the positive attributes of emptiness. A principal tenet of Buddhist teaching is that clinging to objects, materials, even to ideas, leads to suffering; thus, when one realizes that the essential nature of things is emptiness, one locates a path toward eliminating suffering. Emptiness is also a way of referring to impermanence. The Buddha said, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," as a means of describing the impermanence of physical states.

My thinking is that the *shunyata* can be a device, for lack of a better word, with which one can achieve the sort of emptiness that can alleviate suffering. From a composer's point of view, it presents a rich set of possibilities that cannot be exhausted by a single image; it seems to call out for multiple interpretations.

Example 6: *Rain of Tears* (mm. 178-180)



[4] The discussion here of *shunyata* and *Rain of Tears* is adapted from an article I co-authored with Adam Greene, titled "Singing Inside *Aura*" in *Music of the Spirit: Asian-Pacific Musical Identity*. Bruce Crossman and Michael Atherton, eds., Australian Music Center, 2008, pp. 33-42.

In *Rain of Tears*, I decided to express *shunyata* primarily through register, where a broad space is opened between high and low notes. As you can see by the above example, this is not exactly a static situation. The flute and piccolo play throughout this section in a highly figurative manner, but, generally speaking, much of the material is quite restrained. In this score example, the *shunyata* idea is expressed by the flute, piccolo, and crotales in the high register and by the drone-like bass drum in the low register. The compassionate texture is represented by the percussive attacks in the strings and piano.

Although I will show only this example, in *Rain of Tears*, I present four different versions of a *shunyata* situation; each passage (which lasts only a few bars) creates this compassionate texture. In these passages, the principle of emptiness emits a sort of signal that invites a specific act of compassion. With each new texture, I wanted to articulate a distinctive sound world, although each is quite delicate. Indeed, the success of the *shunyata* passage depends upon the listener's capacity to differentiate it from the surrounding moments—to hear it as a representation of openness, regardless of the degree of distinction from one texture to the next.

Conclusion

The above examples should not be viewed as models to be emulated. Rather, I have tried to show some ideas for creative work that emerge from an informed and passionate review of Asian cultural resources. In my own work, this represents a lifetime of study and contemplation. The process was certainly not linear.

When we think about teaching composition, there are so many details to consider. Earlier, I mentioned the problems imposed by the limited period of time for compositional instruction, in which the student is forced to consume the entire repertoire

of western compositional techniques within a few years of study. If we are stuck with this timeframe, are we also stuck with the techniques these students are learning?

My focus is to make sure we have clear objectives for the sorts of outcomes we would like to see. When I teach composers, I hope to help them develop their individual voices. Thinking more broadly, my concern is that I do not hear Asian voices coming through as clearly as they should.

José Maceda remarked that one of the problems with western musical composition is that it is overly concerned with craft, often leading young composers to confuse technique with art. What we need to reconsider is a system of values that has been adopted from European traditions. When we accept the system tacitly, we find ourselves in a situation where we have to give up aspects of our own cultural heritage that do not conform to these borrowed standards.

As Chou Wen-chung writes, "If one is blessed with a cross-cultural heritage, one must then regard it as a privilege and obligation to commit oneself to the search in both practices."[5] I emphasize the word "blessed"; it is of vital importance that we recognize and honor the richness that is available to us. We have every reason to have confidence in the vitality and viability of carrying these traditions into the concert hall, transformed by our imaginations. As educators, we must encourage this exploration, so that new Asian voices will sound as clearly as they possibly can.

[5] *See* http://www.chouwenchung.org/

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