

Living Composition: Advanced Study, Analysis and New Creation

Koji Nakano¹

Abstract

Over a decade ago, I created the term “living composition.” For me, the word “living” means transforming over time in the way nature changes every hour, day, and month, and through the seasons. The purpose of creating such a “living” composition is to capture the ever-changing beauty in nature that amuses, inspires, and enriches our daily lives.

As a composer, I have written a variety of living compositions, the majority of which were co-created through collaborations with Thai classical musicians. In this paper, I discuss the concept of living composition as flexible music in my *Eternal Chanting* “*From somewhere...*” and *Ancient Chanting*, including the flexible musical elements, notations, interpretations, instrumentations, and performance results. I also discuss how each living composition transmutes, through its Western notation, into a new hybrid score that bridges Asian and Western musical traditions.

Keywords: Koji Nakano; living composition; Asian traditional music; cross-cultural elements; flexible music

¹Lecturer, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Burapha University, Thailand

1. Living Composition as Flexible Music

1.1. Inventing a New Notation with Flexible Musical Elements

I composed *Eternal Chanting* “From somewhere...” for my portrait concert “Music, Dance and Film: Innovation and Tradition in the Works of Koji Nakano,” and premiered it as part of the Music and Performing Arts Festival 2010 at the Eastern Center of Art and Culture at Burapha University in Thailand. The instrumentation includes three female Thai classical singers, who sing and play *ching*, accompanied by five Thai classical musicians, one playing *chap*, two playing *krap phuang*, and two playing a set of two *khong mong*.

Figure 1 shows the vocal score of *Eternal Chanting* for the three female singers. The first notation shows which pitch to sing and the second indicates where the singer stands on stage. The third, fourth, and fifth notations show the text to be sung, with small superscripted numbers (1, 2, and 3) indicating the order the text is sung in, from top to bottom. The 6th notation indicates which singer plays *ching*. For example, for the first line, Singer I, positioned in the middle (M) of the stage, sings the pitch *So* with the text “Do.” Before Singer I runs out of breath, Singer II, positioned on the right (R), plays *ching* as a cue for Singer III, positioned on the left (L), who sings the pitch *So* with an “o” vowel at the beginning of the second line. Then, Singer I, positioned in the middle (M), plays *ching* as a cue for Singer III, on the left (L), who sings the pitch *So* with an “o” vowel. At the very end of the second line, Singer III sings to slide up the pitch *So* to *Do* with the text “Ko” to merge with Singer II, who sings the exact same pitch and text at the beginning of the third line. Thus, the portamento sung by Singer III becomes a musical cue for Singer II to enter at the beginning of the third line. As soon as Singer III meets Singer II on the third line, Singer III begins to fade out, as her breath expires. Before Singer II, who has carried the note forward, runs out of breath, Singer III plays *ching* as a cue for Singer II to slide up the pitch *Do* to *Re* with the text “Ka” at the very end of the third line. Thus, Singer I can sing the exact same pitch and text at the beginning of fourth line with Singer II.

Figure 1: The Score of *Eternal Chanting*, 2010

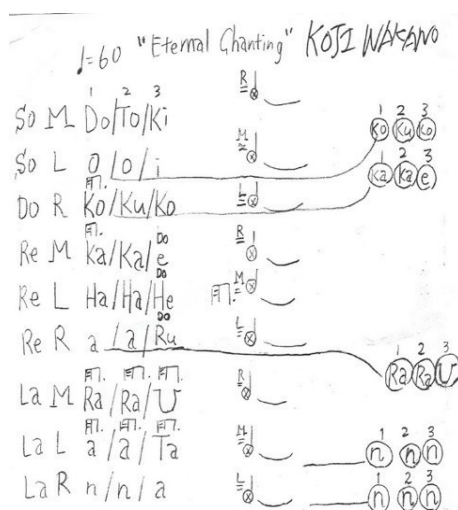


Figure 2: Standing Position of the Thai Classical Singers for *Eternal Chanting*, 2010



1.2 Ornamentation and Elaboration

For the score of *Eternal Chanting* “From Somewhere....,” there is a rhythmic indication of two 32nd notes and a dotted 8th note above the text in the third, fourth, seventh, and eighth lines. When each singer sees this notation, she is free to ornament or elaborate the given pitch in Thai classical singing style. The melodic and rhythmic ornamentation or elaboration can happen right on or before or right after singing the text with this notation, depending on one’s vocal techniques.

1.3 Transcribing the Flexible Musical Ideas on the Western Notated Score

In 2016, I composed *Imagined Sceneries* for two sopranos, koto, chamber ensemble, and pre-recorded tracks co-commissioned by Anne Harley and Isabella Ramos during my artist residencies at MacDowell Colony and Yaddo. The piece consists of seven parts and can be performed with or without narration. The texts were drawn from “*The Tale of Genji*,” written by Murasaki Shikibu in the early 11th century, which is considered the world’s oldest novel. Throughout the piece, I chose to show nine ukiyoe prints made by Emina Masao (1913-1980), currently housed in the collections of the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery at Scripps College, USA.

During my research for this multimedia work in December 2015, I read *The Tale of Genji*'s oldest script in Japanese and traveled to Kyoto, where I visited sites that appear in the story and interviewed locals. I discovered that many of those ancient sites have been burned out, relocated, or rebuilt throughout Japan's history. As a result, these days, they have nearly been forgotten.

While composing *Imagined Sceneries*, I came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to recreate Kyoto's Heian landscape. It could be only reimaged, or "re-sounded," from its remains as an interdisciplinary work. Thus, *Imagined Sceneries* juxtaposes live music with digital projections of prints from print artist Ebina Masao's 1953 series "*Tale of Genji*," with electronically manipulated soundscapes of the novel's sites that I had recorded during my time in Kyoto. Because the text of *Eternal Chanting* "*From somewhere...*" talks about music coming from an unknown place (See Figure 3), I decided to transcribe and insert *Eternal Chanting* as the first part of *Imagined Sceneries* with the Western notated score (See Figure 4).

Figure 3: Japanese Texts and English Translations of *Eternal Chanting*

<i>Doko Kara ka</i>	<i>From somewhere</i>
<i>Toku Kara</i>	<i>in the distance,</i>
<i>Kikoeru Uta</i>	<i>I hear a song.</i>

Figure 4: The Excerpt of the 1st Section from the Score of *Imagined Sceneries* (Page 3)

*3 Sing the indicated pitch and sustain the note as long as possible.
As the end of your singing will overlap with the beginning of next singer, please wait for next finger cymbal as a cue and fade out gradually.

*4 Play finger cymbal as a cue for the next singer before the breath will run out.

1.4 Flexible Instrumentation

My living composition *Ancient Chanting* exemplifies the way flexible instrumentation works. The instrumentation can be varied depending on the number of musicians performing the piece. In 2011, I co-created the original version of *Ancient Chanting* in collaboration with the Payap University Thai Music Ensemble, which consisted of nine Thai classical musicians. The piece was premiered as part of the 2011 Thailand International Composition Festival. In 2015, I co-created the second version of *Ancient Chanting* with the MUPA Thai Music Ensemble, which consisted of six Thai classical musicians. The performance was also presented with new choreographed Thai dance. This version was premiered at the 4th China-ASEAN Music Week 2015 hosted by the Guangxi Arts University in China. In the same year, I also co-created the third version of *Ancient Chanting* for the members of the MUPA Company of Arts, which consisted of three Thai classical musicians and one Thai classical dancer, who was also the choreographer and dancer for its second version. For the new version, the pi nai player also performed taphon. It was premiered at the 33rd Asian Composers Leagues Festival and Conference in the Philippines in 2015.

Table 1: Numbers of Musicians for the Three Versions of *Ancient Chanting*

Ancient Chanting	Instrumentation	Year
Original Version	9 Musicians	2010
Second Version	6 Musicians	2015
Third Version	3 Musicians	2015

Figure 5a: The Stage Set of *Ancient Chanting* for the Original Version (2010)

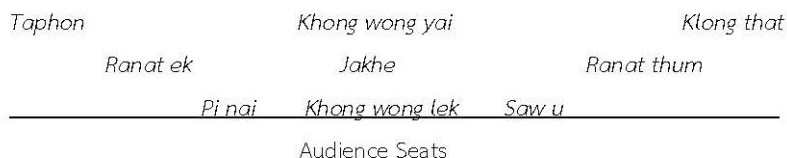


Figure 5b: The Stage Set of *Ancient Chanting* for the Second Version (2015)



Figure 5c: The Stage Set of *Ancient Chanting* for the Third Version (2015)

1.5 The Use of Visual Metaphor for Semi-Improvisation in Structural Music

Ancient Chanting has a simple musical form of A-B-A'+ Coda. For each section, there is no written score, and so each musician must memorize every musical idea with my specific instructions to co-create music. For example, musicians join in one by one accordingly to the entrance order of Section A (See Table 2a). At the beginning, *jakhe* plays the four quarter notes for two measures (but others only play one measure). After playing the repeated notes, each musician improvises an arched musical phrase (See Figure 6a).

Figure 6a: The Transcribed Score for the Beginning of Section A in *Ancient Chanting* (Original Version)

♩ = 60
4/4 x | x | x | x | I x | x | x | x | I *45-90 seconds II
fff (loudest) < > PP
*Improvise an arched musical phrase by speeding up gradually and create a climax with the fastest rhythm/tempo, then slow down a bit as a musical cue for the entrance of the next musician.

After the long musical phrase, each musician must play the repeated quarter notes throughout the section as if they were the heartbeats of music. Once in a while, one can also play his or her musical idea or have a musical rest, but not at the same time others rest. Thus, the rhythmic heartbeats will be always heard continuously throughout Section A.

Table 2a: Entrance Order of Section A for 9 Instruments in the Original Version of *Ancient Chanting*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1	<i>Jakhe</i>
2	<i>Klong that</i>
3	<i>Ranat ek</i>
4	<i>Khong wong lek</i>

5	<i>Saw u</i>
6	<i>Ranat thum</i>
7	<i>Taphon</i>
8	<i>Pi nai</i>
9	<i>Khong wong yai</i>

Table 2b: Entrance Order of Section A for 6 Instruments in the Second Version of *Ancient Chanting*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1	<i>Jakhe</i>
2	<i>Klong that</i>
3	<i>Ranat ek</i>
4	<i>Saw u</i>
5	<i>Taphon</i>
6	<i>Pi nai</i>

Table 2c: Entrance Order of Section A for 4 Instruments in the Third Version of *Ancient Chanting*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1	<i>Ranat ek</i>
2	<i>Taphon (pinai doubling taphon)</i>
3	<i>Saw u</i>
4	<i>Pi nai</i>

At the beginning of Section B, the repeated notes gradually fade out one by one, and the sound of moving “clouds and winds” fades in with the new entrance order (See Table 3a). As a result, the music slowly transforms to be more abstract, as “the weather gradually changes right before a storm is coming.” After all musicians (except *pi nai*) join in, *pi nai* plays a continuous melody, as if “a dragon suddenly appears in the sky.” While the *pi nai*’s melody slowly climbs for a few minutes, I asked the other musicians to be “the sky” to support *pi nai*. I also explained, “As the weather is gradually clearing up, it creates the most beautiful scenery. That will be the perfect time for *pi nai* (as the dragon) to reach the highest place in the sky, the climax of this whole piece.” The use of visual metaphors

during the rehearsals has proven to be very effective. It also encourages every musician to be more interactive through the co-creative process as an ensemble.

Figure 6b: The Transcribed Score for the Beginning of Section B in *Ancient Chanting* (Original Version)

(.I= 60)

4/6 x | x | x | x | x | x | *

(PP)

II

*Improvise music with the image of “clouds and wind,” which are gradually changing right before a storm comes. Please make your musical idea clearly distinct from other musicians with the use of different tempos, timbres, registers, and dynamics.

Table 3a: Entrance Order of Section B for 9 Instruments in the Original Version of *Ancient Chanting*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1	<i>Jakhe</i>
2	<i>Klong that</i>
3	<i>Ranat ek</i>
4	<i>Khong wong lek</i>
5	<i>Saw u</i>
6	<i>Ranat thum</i>
7	<i>Taphon</i>
8	<i>Khong wong yai</i>
9	<i>Pi nai</i> plays with a continuous melodic line, as “a dragon ascending gradually into the sky.”

Table 3b: Entrance Order of Section B for 6 Instruments in the Second Version of *Ancient Chanting*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1	<i>Jakhe</i>
2	<i>Klong that</i>
3	<i>Ranat ek</i>
4	<i>Saw u</i>
5	<i>Taphon</i>
6	<i>Pi nai</i> plays a continuous melodic line, as “a dragon ascending gradually into the sky.”

Table 3c: Entrance Order of Section B for 4 Instruments in the Third Version of *Ancient Chanting*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1	<i>Ranat ek</i>
2	<i>Taphon (pi nai doubling taphon)</i>
3	<i>Saw u</i>
4	<i>Pi nai plays a continuous melodic line, as “a dragon ascending gradually into the sky.”</i>

Right after creating a dramatic climax at the end of Section B, *pi nai* starts playing a new musical phrase at the beginning of Section A’ (See Figure 6c), and the others join in one by one, accordingly to the entrance order (See Table 4a). The musical idea relates to the repeated notes in Section A, but this time all musicians play eight quarter notes. After playing the eight quarter-note gesture, each musician plays short instrumental improvisations (except *pi nai*), ending one’s part as “a storm quickly passing through, destroying everything, leaving only silence remaining.” For *pi nai*, after the repeated notes, I asked him to play a continuous melodic line as if “the dragon were gradually disappearing,” and ending at any time of his choice before the entrance of percussion(s).

Figure 6c: The Transcribed Score for the Beginning of Section A’ in *Ancient Chanting* (Original Version)

(.I= 60)

4/4 x| x| x| I x| x| x| x| I * 8 seconds II

fff

*Improvise a musical idea with the fastest rhythm and speed for 8 seconds and stop playing, as “a storm quickly passing through, destroying everything, leaving only silence remaining.”

Table 4a: Entrance Order of Section A’ and Coda for 9 Instruments in the Original Version of *Ancient Chanting*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1 (Section A’)	<i>Pi nai</i>
2	<i>Khong wong yai</i>
3	<i>Ranat thum</i>
4	<i>Saw u</i>
5	<i>Khong wong lek</i>

6	<i>Jakhe</i>
7	<i>Ranat ek</i>
8	<i>Klong that</i>
9 (Coda)	<i>Taphon corresponds with klong that's fastest musical gesture and the duo plays about 1 to 2 minutes (Taphon won't play the idea of repeated notes, but improvise interlocking rhythms with klong that).</i>
10	<i>Taphon fades out with the eight quarter-note gesture.</i>

Table 4b: Entrance Order of Section A' and Coda for 6 Instruments in the Second Version of *Ancient Chanting*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1 (Section A')	<i>Pi nai</i>
2	<i>Saw u</i>
3	<i>Jakhe</i>
4	<i>Klong that</i>
5 (Coda)	<i>Taphon corresponds klong that's fastest musical gesture and the duo plays about one to two minutes (Taphon won't play the idea of repeated notes, yet but improvise interlocking rhythms with klong that).</i>
6	<i>Taphon fades out with the eight quarter-note gesture.</i>

Table 4c: Entrance Order of Section A' and Coda for 4 Instruments the Third Version of *Ancient Chanting*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1 (Section A')	<i>Pi nai</i>
2	<i>Ranat ek</i>
3	<i>Saw u</i>
4	<i>Taphon (pi nai doubling taphon)</i> <i>*Taphon improvises various rhythmic patterns with the fastest tempo for 1 to 2 minutes as if a storm is passing through, and gradually fades out with the eight quarter-note gesture.</i>

1.6 Flexible Performance Duration

Each version of *Ancient Chanting*, I changed the number of repeated notes that will be played at the beginning of the three sections. The performance duration also depends on the number of musicians and how long each improvisation will last in every section. For the original version, the performance duration of Section A would be between

6 and 9 minutes, for the second version, between 4 and 7 minutes, and between 2 and 5 minutes for the third version. Section B could be performed around 4 to 6 minutes for the original version, 3 to 5 minutes for the second version, and 2 to 4 minutes for the third. Section A' is approximately 4 to 5 minutes for the original, 3 to 4 minutes for the second, and 2 to 3 minutes for the third.

At the rehearsals, I asked all the musicians to play every sound with their real feeling and imagination so the musical results would be authentic and believable for the audience. For improvisation, if they performed well-constructed and very intriguing music, I asked them to play these ideas, even it meant that part would be a bit shorter or longer than the suggested time (See Figures 7a, 7b, and 7c).

Figure 7a: The Original Version of *Ancient Chanting*: Approximate Performance Duration of Three Sections and Coda

Section A	Section B	Section A' and Coda
6-9 minutes	4-6 minutes	4-5 minutes

Figure 7b: The Second Version of *Ancient Chanting*: Approximate Performance Duration of Three Sections and Coda

Section A	Section B	Section A' and Coda
4-7 minutes	3-5 minutes	3-4 minutes

Figure 7c: The Third Version of *Ancient Chanting*: Approximate Performance Duration of Three Sections and Coda

Section A	Section B	Section A' and Coda
2-5 minutes	2-4 minutes	2-3 minutes

1.7 Transcribing Flexible Music with the Western Notated Score for Chinese Musical Instruments

In 2015, I composed *Time Song IV: Diverse Voices*, commissioned by the Taipei Chinese Orchestra for its Traditional Arts Festival in Taiwan. The piece was dedicated to Chinese American Composer Chou Wen-chung and premiered for the special concert to

Table 5a: Entrance Order of 9 Chinese Musical Instruments in Section A for *Time Song IV: Diverse Voices*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1 (Section A')	<i>Pipa</i>
2	<i>Dagu</i>
3	<i>Zheng</i>
4	<i>Dizi</i>
5	<i>Yangqin</i>
6	<i>Erhu</i>
7	<i>Paigu</i>
8	<i>Gaoyin Suona</i>
9	<i>Gaoyin Sheng</i>

Table 5b: Entrance Order of 9 Chinese Musical Instruments in Section B for *Time Song IV: Diverse Voices*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1 (Section A')	<i>Pipa</i>
2	<i>Dagu</i>
3	<i>Zheng</i>
4	<i>Dizi</i>
5	<i>Yangqin</i>
6	<i>Erhu</i>
7	<i>Paigu</i>
8	<i>Gaoyin Sheng</i>
9	<i>Gaoyin Suona</i> stands up and plays a continuous melodic line, as "a dragon ascending gradually into the sky."

Table 5c: Entrance Order of 9 Chinese Musical Instruments in Section A' and Coda for *Time Song IV: Diverse Voices*

Entrance Order	Instrument
1 (Section A')	After playing the six quarter-note gesture, <i>Gaoyin Suona</i> plays a short melody and sits down.
2	<i>Gaoyin Sheng</i>
3	<i>Yangqin</i>
4	<i>Erhu</i>

5	<i>Dizi</i>
6	<i>Zheng</i>
7	<i>Pipa</i>
8 (Coda)	<i>Dagu</i> improvises various rhythmic patterns with the fastest tempo for 30 seconds, and gradually fades out with the six quarter-note gesture.
9	<i>Paigu</i> improvises various rhythmic patterns with the fastest tempo for 25 seconds, and gradually fades out with the six quarter-note gesture.

Figure 10a: The Excerpt of Pipa's Short Cadenza in Section A from *Time Song IV: Diverse Voices* (Page 2)

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<Time Song IV: Diverse Voices for Chinese musical instrument>

The musical score is arranged vertically for eight instruments: Bangdi, Gaoyin Sheng, Gaoyin Suona, Yangqin, Zheng, Pipa, Paigu, Dagou, and Erhu. Each instrument has its own staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes several measures of music, with some measures containing rests. Above the Pipa staff, there are performance notes and a diagram of a "Cadenza" exercise. The diagram shows a melodic line starting with a * symbol, followed by a series of eighth notes, and ending with a trill-like figure. Below the diagram, the text reads: "Cadenza n° 1". To the right of the diagram, there is a bracket indicating a duration of 15-20 seconds. Below the diagram, the text reads: "poco a poco accel." and "rall.". Below the diagram, there are five numbered performance notes: 1) "Cadenza" should be very expressive and energetic. 2) "Cadenza" must show various traditional and contemporary techniques of Pipa in one large phrase but it shouldn't be based on any melodic ideas. 3) Keep a musical flow and continuity from the previous measure with accelerating and retarding as indicated. 4) Don't use A & G(A) in all registers as well as the use of trills, tremolos and repeated notes as much as possible. 5) All rhythms should be faster than a quarter-note value. 6) The ending gesture must be very clear and so it will be an entrance clue for Dagou.

Bangdi

Gaoyin Sheng

Gaoyin Suona

Yangqin

Zheng

Pipa

Paigu

Dagou

Erhu

poco a poco accel.

15-20"

rall.

"Cadenza" n° 1

15-20"

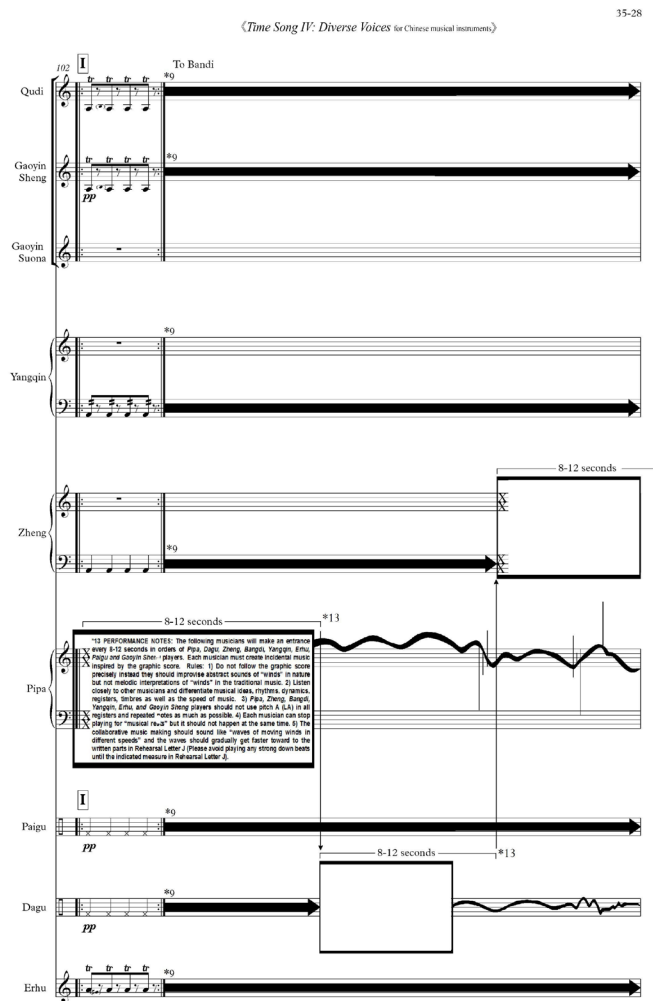
poco a poco accel.

rall.

*5 PERFORMANCE NOTES: Pipa player must create "Cadenza" for 15-20 seconds in the indicated measure. Rules: 1) "Cadenza" should be very expressive and energetic. 2) "Cadenza" must show various traditional and contemporary techniques of Pipa in one large phrase but it shouldn't be based on any melodic ideas. 3) Keep a musical flow and continuity from the previous measure with accelerating and retarding as indicated. 4) Don't use A & G(A) in all registers as well as the use of trills, tremolos and repeated notes as much as possible. 5) All rhythms should be faster than a quarter-note value. 6) The ending gesture must be very clear and so it will be an entrance clue for Dagou.

Figure 10b: The Score, the Beginning of Section B from *Time Song IV: Diverse Voices* (Page 28)

《Time Song IV: Diverse Voices》for Chinese musical instrument. 35-28



The score is for the beginning of Section B of *Time Song IV: Diverse Voices*. It features seven instruments: Qudi, Gaoyin Sheng, Gaoyin Suona, Yangqin, Zheng, Pipa, and Erhu. The score is written in Western staff notation with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The instruments are arranged in a vertical stack. The Qudi, Gaoyin Sheng, and Gaoyin Suona parts are marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The Yangqin part is marked with a piano (p) dynamic. The Zheng part is marked with a piano (p) dynamic. The Pipa part is marked with a piano (p) dynamic. The Erhu part is marked with a piano (p) dynamic. The score includes a performance note for the Pipa and a copyright notice for the Taipei Chinese Orchestra.

PERFORMANCE NOTES: The following musicians will make an entrance every 8-12 seconds in order of Pipa, Dagu, Zheng, Anguo, Yangqin, Erhu, Paigu and Gaoyin Sheng - players. Each musician must create incidental music inspired by the graphic score. Rules: 1) Do not follow the graphic score precisely instead they should improvise abstract sounds of "winds" in nature but not melodic interpretations of "winds" in the traditional music. 2) Listen closely to other musicians and differentiate musical ideas, rhythms, dynamics, registers, textures as well as the speed of music. 3) Paigu, Zheng, Anguo, Yangqin, Erhu, and Gaoyin Sheng players should not use pitch A (A4) in all registers and repeat notes as much as possible. 4) Each musician can stop playing for "musical flow" but it should not happen at the same time. 5) The collaborative music making should sound like "waves of energy" with no different speeds" and the waves should gradually get faster toward the center path in National Letter. 6) Players should play any notes down beats until the indicated measure in National Letter. 7

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《Time Song IV: Diverse Voices for Chinese musical instruments》

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In this paper, I discussed the concept of living Composition through flexible music. First, I explained how I reinvented the new notations for *Eternal Chanting* “From somewhere...” to include elements of Asian traditional music and performance practices. Second, I described how I transcribed the musical score of *Eternal Chanting* using Western notation, incorporating flexible musical elements, as in the opening of *Imagined Sceneries*. For *Ancient Chanting*, I analyzed three versions I wrote over five years to show how the piece’s performance duration could be varied depending on the number of musicians and the length of their improvisations. Finally, I explained how I used the basic musical ideas and structure of *Ancient Chanting* to compose *Time Song: Diverse Voices* for Chinese musical instruments with Western notation into which I incorporated both aleatoric and graphic writings. The flexible musical elements that are found in my living compositions and their Western notations reflect my unique approach as an Asian composer working in a multicultural world and, in particular, my interest in exploring the interconnectedness of Asian traditional music, as well as cross-cultural elements of Asian and Western musical cultures, performance practices, and aesthetics.

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