

AIR Contemporary Music Collective is a Beijing-based platform for the creation and presentation of contemporary music for Chinese traditional instruments. Its inaugural concert, featuring five premieres, will be held on July 6th at the Central Conservatory of Music. The following essay is intended to consolidate and publicize some thoughts on the status of contemporary music in China—particularly its complex relationship with traditional genres and practices.

A Garden of Forking Paths – Tradition and the Avant-Garde

Haotian Yu

For composer Helmut Lachenmann—whose prolific writings form, in part, the ideological backbone of the “mainstream” European avant-garde—there exists an ontological, fundamental divide between the so-called “Western” classical tradition and the diverse musical cultures of the non-West. In the non-West, music (bound, as it is, to ritual contexts) maintains a “magical function”ⁱ; in the West (at least since the beginnings of “Music History” proper in the High Middle Ages), music has, in marked contrast, been “an object...of research...a mirror for progressively developing human possibilities in the domains of perception and sense impression.”ⁱⁱ

The venerable traditions of Chinese music, which of course belong to the non-West, are traditions of magic. Chinese literature abounds with corroborating evidence. Tao Yuanming writes of the stringless *guqin*; for this greatest of pre-Tang poets, mastery of the seven-stringed zither was not an end in itself but rather a Dao-oriented ritual practice. When one attained oneness with the Dao, the practice of this ritual became irrelevant; the instrument’s strings could then be removed.

If the West’s paragon—Beethoven, a revolutionary fanatic who single-handedly illuminated new realms of sound and time—exemplifies the “pioneer” spirit of the Western classical tradition, then China’s preeminent musical literatus—Ji Kang, a poet-recluse whose reactionary music embodied an ultimately fatal struggle *against* political change—represents the profound nostalgia of the Chinese canon. Wagner writes of *Zukunftsmusik*; without exception, Chinese literati musicians were singularly interested in the music of remote antiquity.

The static dream of magical ritual and the teleological crusade of deliberate progression seem to be mutually exclusive, indeed antagonized; how, then, can they meaningfully intersect? Existing historical narratives would suggest that the creation of new, highly experimental work for traditional Chinese instruments—as is the primary *raison d’être* of AIR—is some kind of colonial perversion: a forced displacement of the *guqin*, *sheng*, and *dizi* from their natural ritual habitat. As something of a nostalgist myself, there is a part of me that agrees with this conclusion: while the chronological sprint of the Western classical tradition can absorb, to its benefit, diverse influences, the world of magic and ritual is a delicate one that rests on a foundation of purity. Truly authentic experiences of Chinese music, particularly the “classical” music of literate society, are, like local dialects and folk crafts, a vanishing commodity. I’ve derived little satisfaction from recent developments in Chinese performance practice, and have indeed often lamented what I can only describe as the Westernized sterilization of its most distinctive aspects: the replacement of quintessentially Chinese silk strings with abrasive metal;

the aggressive transformation of traditional pieces from spontaneous rhapsody into codified, standardized examination material; the conservatory-style glorification of speed and volume as markers of excellence. Incursions into playing new, contemporary, and undoubtedly Western music may seem like the final death blows to the delicate existence of this ritual heritage.

However, it is my belief that the only way we are to preserve the utopic, timeless dream embodied by the music of the ancients is to wholeheartedly and uncompromisingly embrace the forward thrust of “Western” teleology. This thrust is spearheaded by radical, avant-garde music: art that, as Lachenmann writes, challenges us on new levels of sense perception.

Specifically, I believe that Chinese music, like any serious discipline of study, needs to move from river to delta. Chinese music has become a muddied, tumultuous slog, in which combatting forces of orthodoxy, modernity, tradition and radicalism are caught in a confusing swirl of irresolution. My vision for AIR is not that of yet another attempted bridge between the magic-music of Chinese tradition and the history-propelling music of the West; I see these as irreconcilable. Rather, AIR is a radical new path of hard line avant-garde art which stands on its own creative merits, in a biome altogether independent from tradition. The existence of new art is necessary and inevitable—our contemporary human experience is undeniably a teleological one, and art is inexorably bound to human experience; it is apparent to me, then, that the only way to preserve the purity of tradition and ensure the contemporary relevance of new art is to ensure that this new art, inevitably bound to our times as it will be, is radical and experimental, rather than ambiguous and referential.

Each of the five works written for this upcoming inaugural AIR concert is radically contemporary. What I mean by this is that each work, in some way, creates its own conceptual and experiential universe and axioms, which, to be legitimately experienced, must be encountered on its own terms and not in reference to existing axioms. New art cannot be merely new sights and sounds, but rather new realities.

By this I do not mean a wholesale rejection of the past. Indeed, in my own work, I attempt to use what I have sometimes termed “transformative applications of ancient Chinese aesthetics” to inform my approach to “physicality, gestural, and ritual.” *sudden sculptures of the wind*, my personal contribution to this concert, is in fact heavily indebted to traditional performance-practice mentalities. Much to my own satisfaction, most people find these influences undetectable. When people approach my music with expectations of finding a vehicle to access the magical spirituality of the past, they will—if I have succeeded—be thoroughly disappointed. I am not interested in reconnecting people to antiquity through stylistic time travel, but rather in adapting ideas of antiquity to contexts of the present, so as to create truly novel experiences of time, form, and sound. I use what composer Liza Lim calls patterns: an aesthetic’s deep and unique underlying structures—its “functions and forces”—rather than its concrete objects, which are often nothing more than stylistic markers.ⁱⁱⁱ I’m more intent, in other words, on accessing the vital syntax of ancient Chinese music than employing “an orientalist appropriation of mere surface features”^{iv} (i.e. its outer sonic morphology).

Far too often, this morphology is as far as composers go in their quest to work with tradition: this sonic “skin” becomes nothing more than a symbol, a reference (with little value in and of itself) that appropriates the memory of antiquity. Classically-trained composers at major conservatories are certainly guilty of this, concocting unnatural mixtures of Chinese melody and textbook harmony, but nowhere is this more apparent than in the circles of quasi-traditional Chinese pop, where altogether banal, generically Americanized pop conventions are sprinkled

with pentatonic glitter and MIDI *guzheng* and *pipa* twangs, which supposedly allow this otherwise non-Chinese “music” to enter into communion with the ritual magic of the ancients.

When new music in Chinese contexts fails to stand aggressively apart from these pseudo-traditional compromises, there are consequences. Firstly, we witness a loss of teleological meaning, since this new work fails to challenge audiences on its own terms as a radical experiential space, instead capitalizing off an appeal to antiquity and to the familiar. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we witness a perversion of the past, since the past belongs to an altogether different worldview; when composers mix antiquity so carelessly with incompatible new aesthetics, they contaminate and vandalize this heritage.

By pursuing the true avant-garde and thereby creating a relevant contemporary strain of teleologically-informed “Chinese music,” we actually also create a secure space for traditional music, in which it is protected from the contaminating pressures of modernity. Indeed, neither specific sounds nor attributes of style can capture the essence of traditional music: rather, traditional music, at its core, is a worldview, a philosophy grounded in a particular cosmology and experience of history irreconcilable with the cultural demands of ever-changing modernity. Its survival—its magical potency—depends on the preservation of this worldview.

On how one goes about doing this I am perhaps less authorized to speak, being an outsider to the actual artistic practice of traditional music. But it seems obvious to me that, in an era when such a worldview is under constant siege from the intrusive arm of modernization, traditional music must become, like the great landscape paintings of the Song and Yuan dynasties or the profound bronze artistry of the Shang, the domain of museums and academia. I envision reconstructions of Zhou dynasty *yayue* based on rigorous, fastidious academic research rather than carelessly employed as publicity stunts for ticket sales; in such a world, music for *guqin* from the Ming dynasty *shenqi mipu* could be enjoyed in quality, thoroughly researched recordings on period silk-string instruments from the authentic intimacy of the living room, rather than be massacred by steel strings and amplification in halls designed for titanic nine-foot Steinways. We do not throw our Tang dynasty ceramics into the washing machine.

In a broader metaphysical sense, what I advocate for is essentially a plural perspective, an acknowledgement that, in order to attain any sense of cultural authenticity, contemporary Chinese society must simultaneously embrace two worldviews: the circular, magical time of the *Laozi* and *Shan Hai Jing*, and also the progressive history of modern technological and social change. But any attempt to marry these into a unified, pseudo-universal philosophy is destructive: to suppose that recent developments in Chinese technology and society at large are only another temporary ascent in an oscillating sine graph of eternity is cynical; to suppose that the tradition is irrelevant to our future-bound crusade is to deny the unique roots of Chinese culture. Like Li Bai’s wanderer on the mountain paths of Shu, the contemporary Chinese experience is grounded in an everyday reality of progress and change, but we can still, at any time, reach up and brush the celestial canopy of timeless antiquity with our fingers; our unique cultural vantage point should be one in which both modernity and antiquity remain wonderfully distinct and equally accessible.

-Haotian Yu

Chinese-Canadian composer Haotian Yu is co-artistic director of AIR. His work reflects an interest in bringing the unique gesturality of traditional Chinese performance practice to contemporary music contexts; using irrational form to suggest non-linear, ritualized time; and

exploring musical analogies for organizational principles of ancient poetry and literati landscape art. His work has been recognized by national prizes in Canada, including the Serge Garant 1st prize and two Young Composer Awards from the SOCAN foundation. He is a third-year composition major at the Eastman School of Music, where he is a recipient of the Lois S. Rogers full-tuition merit scholarship and President of OSSIA New Music; important mentors include Brian Cherney, Robert Morris, Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez, Oliver Schneller, and Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon.

ⁱ Helmut Lachenmann, “Hearing [Hören] is Defenseless—without Listening [Hören]” (trans. Derrick Calandrella), *Circuit* 13, no. 2 (2003): 27-50.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim Rutherford-Johnson, “Patterns of Shimmer: Liza Lim’s Compositional Ethnography,” *Tempo* 65, no. 258 (2011): 2-9.

^{iv} *Ibid.*