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Analysing the Semiotic Contribution of Traditional Aesthetics to Contemporary Chinese Music

ABSTRACT

Background

In view of its wedding of a deep aesthetic tradition with modernist compositional techniques contemporary Chinese music could be a useful site for exploring new approaches to analysis that involve cultural meanings that are shared with other art forms. In my talk I will consider contributions from traditional artistic practices to the analysis of Contemporary Chinese Music. My presentation will introduce the works of Gao Weijie (b. 1938), a Distinguished Professor of composition at China Conservatory of Music and one of the most respected composers of his generation. Gao has navigated cultural difference in especially creative and provocative ways. This essay will briefly analyse two chamber works inspired by ancient Chinese poetry: *Winter Snow* (2005) for piano and *The Road* (1996) for violin and piano. I will argue that these two works serve to illustrate the intermingling of western composition techniques and the semiotics of Chinese culture, in particular intersections with Chinese painting and poetry.

Aims and repertoire studied

This essay will briefly analyse two chamber works inspired by ancient Chinese poetry: *Winter Snow* (2005) for piano and *The Road* (1996) for violin and piano. I will argue that these two works serve to illustrate the intermingling of western composition techniques and the semiotics of Chinese culture, in particular intersections with Chinese painting and poetry.

Methods

Gao developed Milton Babbitt's combinatoriality theory and Messiaen's modes of limited transposition to arrive at techniques of "partial combinatoriality" and "non-octave repeating scales" used in his works.

Gao's use of combinatoriality is 'partial' in that it involves collections smaller than the 12-tone aggregate. An example

from the opening of *Winter Snow* will be shown. This composition is saturated with the all-interval tetrachords 4-Z15 and 4-Z29. In the first gesture (labeled X1) two forms of 4-Z15 are overlapped together forming the hexachord 6-Z4. In the second gesture (Y1) these six pitch classes are reordered in the soprano and bass, which are mirror inversions of one another. The consecutive trichords (3-4) of each voice are reversed in the other voice and so together form two "vertical" instances of 6-Z4, a "hexachordal aggregate," as it were. This sort of procedure can involve 6-, 8-, or 10-element sets rather than the 12-tone chromatic, and is in this sense a "partial combinatoriality."

The Road illustrates the technique Gao calls non-octave repeating scale and is one of many approaches Gao takes to pitch cycles. Such scales are inspired by Messiaen's modes of limited transposition but are not closed. The non-octave repeating scale alternates tones and semitones but inserts a consecutive whole tone to prevent closure at the octave and repetition of the cycle. Thus the series 121212(2)121212(2)12.... avoids octave repetition after the seventh tone with the introduction of a consecutive whole step.

The piano work *Winter Snow* is inspired by the Tang dynasty poem *River Snow* written by Liu Tsung-yuan (773-819). The poem appears at the top of Gao's manuscript, although it is not reproduced in the published version. In an interview, Gao explained his understanding of the poem and suggested its importance for composition of this piece. "In the fields of winter snow, the silvery and austere sight is full of purity, just like the Tang Poet Liu Tsung-yuan's famous line 'A hundred mountains no trace of a bird, a thousand paths without a footprint'. What seems tranquil and simple can become frightening once a storm arrives. The winter snowfields are pregnant of unpredictable possibilities. In the crystalline there hides

mystery and ambiguity, danger and violence. In the expanses is also contained conspiracy and in the lightness there can be felt weight. The piece expresses the complexity of feelings and impressions that the composer feels when taking a stroll in the snowy landscape.” In *Winter Snow* Gao evokes a variety of visual characteristics through sound and notation. In Gao’s score inversional or mirror symmetry is highlighted at the beginning. The point of Gao’s commentary above expresses this taken on the poem, and his music might contribute a new way of hearing the poem and seeing the painting that would be fully consonant with tradition. If such a reevaluation or transvaluation of tradition is possible and then the sharp modernist/traditionalist divide ought to be called in question.

The Road is inspired by the poem Encountering Sorrow dating from the Warring States period of ancient China written by Qu Yuan. Gao quotes the 97th pair of sentences in the *Encountering Sorrow* to express his veneration of the poet and to ally himself with the poet’s task, the task of any artist: “The way ahead is long, and has no ending; yet high and low I’ll search, my will unbending”. Inspired by Qu Yuan’s poetry, the composer uses the voice of the violin to imitate the tones and contours that would be used to recite the poetry. I will consider several passages in connection with three aspects of Chinese poetic recitation: timing, the four tones of the Chinese phonetic system, and the traditional poetic elaboration of tones.

Implications

Through analysing a few passages and examples, I will show that Gao Weijie has found inspiration from both western composers whose techniques he has developed in novel, imaginative ways and from ancient Chinese culture, painting and poetry. The two works presented are conversations with Chinese artistic culture and explorations of new ways of making music. In Gao’s art there are important clues for understanding the semiotics of Chinese culture and the potential of that culture for creating new music.

Keywords

Chinese Contemporary Music, Gao Weijie, Semiotics, Compositional techniques

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