

### **Composer as Cross-Cultural Ambassador**

I am very honored to be here today and to speak with you in a very personal way about the important role that music has in cross-cultural exchanges among all nations. The deepest core of who we are as human beings – our spirit, our striving for a better, more meaningful life – depends on the type of interactions, communications, and resonances that are dynamically present not only in music but in all of the performing and fine arts – dance, theatre, film, painting, sculpture, architecture – to name a few. In music, for example, think about such performers as the conductor Herbert Zipper, the violinists Isaac Stern and Itzhak Perlman, and the ‘cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and their impact on young musicians and audiences in China, in the United States, and elsewhere. Although they explored the Silk Road in different ways and on different musical journeys, their travels were inroads to inspiration, genuine connection, and understanding. In fact, Yo-Yo Ma said that his performing is about “sharing something, not proving something.” What is happening in China this week at the Beijing Modern Music Festival is a timely example of what can happen when composers and performers from around the world get together to celebrate new music – how the music of today can cross borders and influence all of us in the way we look at each other and ourselves.

Certainly, Confucius understood that music and social harmony were one and the same. He acknowledged that traditional music and dance perfectly embody the Chinese concept of *jen* – the highest moral goal of a self-cultivated person. In this case *jen* is the humaneness and the wisdom of Chinese composers. Chinese composers understood perfectly the ideal order of the world and of heaven. Confucius believed that music produces a kind of pleasure which human nature cannot do without. He told his disciples to "be perfected through music." And he said: "If one is a human but not humane, what can one have to do with music?"

I am a composer, and I am constantly looking for inspiration in some likely and some very unlikely places, including in other music, in literature, in painting, in architecture – arts that are part of my own culture and the cultures of others. I have been particularly influenced by ideas and forms I first came upon in Mexico, Europe, Japan, Thailand, and now – with great expectation – in China.

My musical journey includes discovering the music of the East in 1964. I was 16, and I heard the work of the Japanese composer, Toru Takemitsu, at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago. Takemitsu died in 1996 but is still considered Japan’s most innovative composer of concert and film music. He was the first Japanese composer to significantly bring the East and West together in his music. That initial experience was extraordinary for me: the music seemed otherworldly, dissonant, but still lyrical and dramatic – all of which appealed to my young and Italian sensibilities.

I later studied with Takemitsu at the Yale School of Music in 1975, and we became friends. When he left the United States he invited me to write a work for the Music Today-Japan Festival in Tokyo in 1976, and I wrote *Tenzone*, for two flutes and piano, a composition that combines influences from his work with musical ideas generated from my love of Italian literature. A *tenzone*, by the way, was a lyric interchange between two poets in medieval Italy concerning timely poetic techniques and themes. For instance, I send you a poem about love, and you respond about love from a slightly different perspective.

In 1990 I had a fellowship from The Japan Foundation that allowed me to spend a lot of time in Tokyo studying traditional and contemporary Japanese music. When I returned home I wrote about this experience in an article entitled *Juxtaposed Landscapes: An American Composer Journeys into Japan*. Before I went to Japan my response to Eastern aesthetics was intuitive – they already resonated within me and in my music naturally. But my formal studies in Tokyo clearly identified these aesthetics and the formalized way in which I use them in my work: they include transparent textures and delicate nuances; sounds frozen in space; circular musical forms, a kind of mobile fixity where tensions expand and contrast against a background of stillness.

I also confirmed that some of the underlying ideas in the traditional musics of the East deeply influenced some of the basic concepts of Western 20th Century music. In other words, what has been "discovered" and used in Western art music in modern times was already developed to some extent in China, India, Korea, and then in Japan hundreds of years ago. For instance, in the late 1940s the American composer, John Cage, turned to Zen aesthetics to express his work with the simplest possible means – any sounds may become music. In *Silence*, his 1961 musical manifesto, his connection with Zen becomes clear. He wrote:

nothing is accomplished by writing a piece of music  
nothing is accomplished by hearing a piece of music  
nothing is accomplished by playing a piece of music

With all due respect to Mr. Cage, however, we are here today to talk about how everything is accomplished by writing, playing, hearing, and sharing a piece of music across both national and cultural borders.

An entry from my personal journal during my time in Japan summarizes my experiences there:

Friday, April 27, 1990: Suddenly I realize that my calling here to Japan was not so much to experience, understand all about Japanese culture, but to see it in contrast to myself – putting myself in relief. My "transparencies" are not those of the Japanese – they are simply a lighter hue of American culture. My "mystical" is not connected to Zen or Buddhism, Eastern values or preoccupations. Our natures are different – but we *share* things. How to connect . . . I want to experiment in my teaching. Do I start in the present or the past? Does the perspective make a difference?

The China part of my Eastern journey began on March 11, 1981 when I met Chen Gang who was then the Director of Composition and Pedagogy at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the first conservatory in mainland China originally established in 1927 as the National College of Music. Chen Gang heard my 1976 piano trio at a concert at New York University. He loved it, but why? What resonated in him from having heard my work? A week later he was at my door of my humble apartment in Greenwich Village in New York City.

Again from my journal – March 18, 1981:

Chen Gang and his interpreter just left after a five-hour visit. He is in the United States for four months wanting to bring back contemporary music and new ways of teaching. The Chinese Cultural Institute called me yesterday to ask if he could visit. They said: “Chen Gang has been talking about meeting you since he heard your *Trio* last week! He said ‘how wonderful an evening it was’ to meet the composers! Chen Gang wants to be known as a teacher and a composer, wants to change things.”

Chen Gang would later write about his experiences in America during that time:

This was an unforgettable musical tour, it was also a verification of my view of western music through direct contact with life in the western world. As I was speeding along the highways and walking languidly on Broadway in the United States, I felt as if I was rushed into the "age of speed" and "era of color." In the midst of modern society, one would naturally want music to correspondingly have the same kind of dynamic rate of change and multi-colored shifts; the operas at the Metropolitan Opera and Broadway's musicals, as well as the experimental music in the music conservatories, all have a reason for their existence. When I immersed myself in the birthplace of jazz – New Orleans – and listened to jazz . . . it . . . transcended the United States to reach the entire globe.

In 1981 the Shanghai Conservatory taught traditional Western music as well as the music of Schoenberg, Hindemith, and Russians who were influential in China during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. But Chinese musicians wanted to go beyond that. They wanted to know what was happening in the West in recent years. What were the new trends? Who were the new composers? For many years early music in the West – from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance – was the most similar to traditional Chinese music. For example, performances of Western masques that involved music and dancing, singing and acting, extreme facial expressions and highly stylized gestures, and elaborate stage designs and costumes, were comparable to what happened on the stage of the Beijing Opera. But times had changed. The rhythms and textures and structures of life had become more complicated.

Chen Gang played me his famous and exquisitely beautiful *The Butterfly Lovers* violin concerto. It was co-written in 1959 with his classmate and friend, He Zhanhao, when Chen Gang was only 24 years old and still a student at the Conservatory. I'm sure you all know the music and the ancient, folkloric Chinese legend about star-crossed lovers on

which the story is based. Chen Gang gave me a score of his music, signed it, and sent me a recording of it a few months later.

That day, however, in order to understand each other better, we continued to share music and stories. I played him a work I had just finished – a symphony for 100 percussion instruments inspired by Dante's *Paradise*, and Chen Gang played me a work that he had just finished for 64 different-sized gongs that were 2,400 years old and had recently been excavated from the burial ground of a regional king. I was amazed: you hit them with boards! Each bell has two tones, and the resultant low notes mixed powerfully with the upper overtones – the sound was almost and startlingly electronic. I played him my orchestra piece, *At the Still Point*, based on T. S. Eliot's poem, "Burnt Norton". The "still point" is where past and future meet. There is also a famous line in Eliot's poem where the formulaic West meets the mystical East: "*Only by the form, the pattern,/Can words or music reach/The stillness, as a Chinese jar still/Moves perpetually in its stillness.*" Chen Gang then talked about the life of an ancient and beloved Chinese poet that he used as inspiration for his new symphony, spreading out pages of sketches with great excitement. This "back and forth" sharing created a lively and honest musical interconnection between us that still reverberates for me almost thirty years later. And then there was talk of food.

Since I'm Italian, I decided to make a lunch of tortellini, salad, bread, cannoli, and tea. Chen Gang said: "First of all, I have enjoyed your scores and music. I will have these played in Shanghai. And, secondly, this is the first Western lunch I have had in the United States! They always serve me Chinese-American food!" I told him a similar story about the time when Leonard Bernstein first met Takemitsu in New York City: Bernstein greeted Takemitsu at the door of his apartment in a kimono! After the meal, Chen Gang graciously made this offer: "I want to invite you to China and to my home."

He also left me with this statement: "This connection and China, this experience will cause an explosion in your music!" Soon after his visit, Chen Gang sent Ge Gan-ru, a young Chinese composer, to meet with me before he started his studies at Columbia University with Chou Wen-chung. Ge Gan-Ru actually was at the beginning of what has become an enormous influx of Chinese composers coming to study in the United States. I was also invited to visit and present some seminars at the Shanghai Conservatory a few months later, which, at the time, I, unfortunately, was not able to do.

In recent years I have become close friends with a number of important Chinese composers, including Chen Yi and Zhou Long, who currently live and work in the United States, and now my new friends in Beijing – especially Professor Ye Xiaogang who invited me to participate in this Forum and the Beijing Modern Music Festival. So this trip to China – my first – is particularly exciting for me in bringing together a number of previous collaborative experiences with Eastern artists in America as well as in Asia – including having recently been guest composer and lecturer at the Thailand Composition Festival in Bangkok in 2006. Just before coming to Beijing, I was finally able to realize Cheng Gang's invitation to visit Shanghai. Last week Jia Daqun, the current Dean of the Graduate Study Programs at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, invited me to give a lecture on influences and resonances in new music. I also met with young, bright and

talented Chinese composers in a master class where I listened to their works, their hopes, and their dreams.

We live in a time when artists are moving everywhere – crossing borders, exchanging ideas, and making genuine connections. Certainly, technology and the Internet have brought all of us into closer contact. The arts help to engage cultures in new conversations. The role of music in particular – the making and sharing of music – allows us to create a “space” – more precisely a “sound-space” – where we are receptive and open to everything around us and where we feel connected to the larger world. It is in this “sound-space” that different cultures can meet and share their wide varieties of human experience and their hopes for genuine happiness.

Thank you.

– Chester Biscardi  
May 2010