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**THE ERHU AND ITS ROLE AS A VEHICLE FOR
SYNCRETIC MUSIC PERFORMANCE
IN SINGAPORE**

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Lok Lay Hong

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the *erhu*, a bowed lute from China and its development as a vehicle for syncretic music-making in Singapore. Chapter One considers the *erhu*'s status in Chinese culture and focuses on the differences between how the *erhu* was perceived by the "proletariat" of the early twentieth century contrasted with the imperialists of that time.

A central assumption in this study is that *erhu* music-making in Singapore is inextricably bound with the traditions of both Western and Chinese culture. This concept is introduced in Chapter Two, with a discussion on musical syncretism. The *erhu* is a member of the *huqin* string family and is one instrument in the new ensemble idiom of the Singapore Huqin Quartet. This ensemble is the first to have *huqin* set up together in the manner of a Western string quartet. This ensemble has been influential on and contributes to a broad range of musical happenings in Singapore. It also represents one development of *erhu* as "world music". Phoon Yew Tien, who writes for the Singapore Huqin Quartet, is introduced.

Chapter Three encompasses the different instruments that make up the *huqin* family, as played by the Singapore Huqin Quartet (which will be referred to as the SHQ in abbreviation). It also looks at the development of the modern Chinese orchestra. Chapter Four provides the descriptions and characteristics of the *erhu* and its performance techniques. In Chapter Five, eminent musical figures such as Liu Tian Hua and Hua Yan Jun (also known as Abing) will be discussed. Their music composed for the *erhu* has become an important part of the repertoire of the SHQ.

The concluding chapter outlines differences between Western and Chinese music and looks at the merging of the two. A product of this merger is the compositions of distinguished Singapore composer, Phoon Yew Tien. His works are a fine example of the *erhu*'s musical qualities and demonstrate the compositional potential of the SHQ's syncretic idiom with the merging of the Chinese and Western art-music forces. A musical composition by Phoon viewed in a compositional perspective summarizes the possibilities of further development of this style.

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In ever loving memory of my mother, Ong Chai Hoi

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INTRODUCTION

The *erhu* as a musical instrument has fascinated me since I was introduced to it at primary school in Malaysia. The hauntingly beautiful and soulful music of the *erhu* and other traditional Chinese instruments encouraged me to learn the *guzheng* (bridged zither) as well. However, my early music training began primarily on Western instruments such as the piano, violin, flute and later the electronic organ, mainly because of my parents' interest and encouragement. This mix of Chinese and Western musical learning is usual for Malaysian and Singaporean people of Chinese descent.

After completing secondary school, I pursued a three-year programme for a Diploma in Music at the Malaysian Institute of Art in Kuala Lumpur, located in the heart of the cosmopolitan capital of Malaysia. My exposure to Western elements of music began with an in-depth study of Western music theory and composition as well as piano performance which became my principal subject. Operatic voice was my second study. The need to enhance my understanding of my own cultural heritage, outside of Western conservatoire traditions of learning and teaching, spurred me to learn more about traditional Chinese music.

Since its rise in popularity, from street music to that of the concert hall, the *erhu* has been well suited to Chinese musical experimentation with the blending of Chinese and Western art music. From one of the *erhu*'s early twentieth century proponents, Liu Tian Hua, to the Singapore Huqin Quartet and present day Singaporean composer Phoon Yew Tien, the fascination of Han Chinese with the fusing of Chinese and Western musical elements has been largely played out on the *erhu*. It is a vehicle for conscious syncretic musical change, both in China and Singapore. Recognizing the importance of Eastern or Chinese music, its interrelationship with Western music and other world music and the rise in popularity at the Malaysian Institute of Art, the Department of Music began offering Chinese instruments as a principal or second study. These traditional Chinese instruments are the first to be introduced in the country for a Diploma course. This course became an integral part of the framework in the music curriculum as well as in its concerts. This peripheral music, however, plays a minor role in other music establishments in Malaysia. As Head of the Music Department and lecturer since graduating from Columbia College in United States of America in 1990, I considered undertaking a conventional musicological study on Chinese instruments and especially on the *erhu*. This study of the *erhu* is germane due to its growing enthusiasm and its influence on the Singapore Huqin Quartet's professional development. The motivating force lies in my desire to understand and investigate the merger of musical styles which embodies the application of Western music techniques to the traditional East.

In 1993 whilst at Kwangsi in Nanning, mainland China, at the invitation of the Chinese Embassy and as a participant in the International Folk Song Festival, I was thrilled by the enormous musical potpourri and "mosaic music" of the various ethnic communities. It was incredible observing what was coming from the peasantry and tribes-people who may be considered as the non-literate cultures, whom one might expect to be lacking in musical experience or artistic thoughts. The level of performance by these ethnic groups was commendable both in folk song singing as

well as Chinese ensemble and orchestral playing. A concert tour to Beijing and Tianjin in China, together with a goodwill exchange performance with the National University of Inner Mongolia in 1997, strengthened my interest and aim to work on a detailed study of Chinese musical instruments, of which my favourite was the *erhu*.

LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION AND DRAWINGS

Throughout the thesis I have written in italics all the Chinese words or terms using the *pinyin* system. I have sourced information predominantly in English but also in Chinese. Translations from Chinese books are kept to a minimum and only used for illustrations and diagrams as well as Chinese music dictionaries for historical facts.

Explanations on the use of certain words in Chinese musical terminology are included in the text and also found in the glossary. The spelling used to indicate dynasties, for example “Song Dynasty”, is based on the research materials in the bibliography. I do not use ‘s’ on words like the *erhu*, *huqin* and other Chinese musical instruments because the addition of ‘s’ after a Chinese word is not the usual practice of the Chinese language.

I have drawn images, pictures and diagrams with the assistance of my music student Lee Eng Fei who drew the portrait of Liu Tian Hua. In addition, I also depended on my camera and tape recorder for documenting purposes.

RESEARCH APPROACHES, METHODOLOGY AND INTERVIEWS

I have been influenced by works such as ‘Music of the Billion, An Introduction into Chinese Musical Culture’ by Liang Ming Yue, who has extensively covered Chinese musical culture. My main purpose has been to understand current trends of interest and issues associated with the *erhu* as an instrument of syncretic music. Isabel Wong’s ‘From Reaction to Synthesis: Chinese Musicology in the Twentieth Century’ provides an in-depth and concise approach to the study of cultural interpolation, tracing the stylistic characterization of Chinese music and historical survey of mainland China. In addition, Chow Wen Chung’s insightful writing on ‘Asian Aesthetics and World Music’ assisted my study of the *erhu*. Chow’s bi-musical approaches further deepened my understanding of the comparison and synthesis of Western and Chinese music.

Other writing I have drawn upon is ethnomusicologist Jonathan Stock’s “Musical Creativity in Twentieth-Century China: Abing, His Music and Its Changing Meanings.” Stock is an authority on Abing, an eminent *erhu* player from the early twentieth century. Stock’s experience in Western music and historical ethnomusicological background on the *erhu* and its music helped me comprehend the heuristic value of my study. Stock questions the value of historical musicologist Yang Yin Liu’s writing about Abing’s biography which was inconsistent in its contents.

My colleague, Don Tew, the conductor of the PCCO (Professional Cultural Chinese Orchestra), has answered many questions from conversations I had with him

about Chinese music theory and Chinese instruments. Some of my students who major in the *erhu* and also *erhu* instructors at Malaysian Institute of Arts have assisted me in my enquiries about the technique of performances and details about the *erhu*'s current repertoire.

To understand the *erhu* as a vehicle for syncretic music-making in Singapore, the themes of this study include historical processes documented with iconographic works; the role of the communist party in the popularization of the *erhu*; current and past performing repertoire; external and internal influences on the Singapore Huqin Quartet (which will be referred to as the SHQ in abbreviation) and the compositions of renowned Singaporean composer Phoon Yew Tien; the changes in the interpretation of musical creation in the discourse of music history in Singapore; Western and Chinese influences on the social and cultural development of the *erhu* and the *huqin* family. Musical analysis is also used and deemed crucial in concepts that are applied in the epistemology of music where musical structures and other parameters of music arise in this study. I have chosen to examine and analyse a piece of composition written for the Singapore Huqin Quartet by Phoon Yew Tien. My approach is based on a mixture of Western and Eastern theoretical understanding of music. I see Phoon's work as an example of the incorporation of syncretic forms and the acceptance or 'domesticating' of musical ethnicity in Singapore.

I also interviewed Cheng Chung Hsien, Chiang Kum Mun, Ling Hock Siang, Poh Yee Luh and Terence Ho, members of the Singapore Huqin Quartet, together with their manager. I met them on three occasions. I visited them in Singapore and during their New Zealand tour to Wellington for the New Zealand International Arts Festival in 2004. Their performance was intriguing and of a high calibre. In one of the three concerts performed by the SHQ, the use of the piano, guitar and saxophone was introduced with both Western classical and jazz colours at different times, collaborating with the Eastern timbres for the *huqin* in diatonic tonalities. This performance led to an interview with collaborative musician, Associate Professor Matthew Marshall at Massey University in Wellington.

The following statement by Bell Jung, (2002) reiterates the musical background and influences experienced by Phoon and the SHQ and signals the role of musical borrowing in the shaping of the true understanding of non-western music.

For some who identify nearly completely with China [and] to those who identify hardly at all, how such a sense of identity develops depends to a considerable degree, of course, on one's ethnicity, cultural heritage, and upbringing; on where one grew up; on where one has been or is living and working; and on other factors that might be very personal. The fact that scholars are trained in the West or being taught the Western music also influences their position along the spectrum (Jung, 2002, p.25).

Bruno Nettl has also pointed out the introduction of the Western form of music to other facets of society from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is reciprocated in a different way by the non-Western world and also by the Europeans and North Americans to its Eastern form of music. Nettl further noted:

By the middle of the twentieth century, the most prominent kind of music in the world's cultures, [where] Western and non-Western elements [are]

combined, [is also the period where] musical practices and concepts from the West [are] used in various ways to modify [the] non-Western traditions (Nettl, 1985, p.14).

This is reiterated by musicologist Leonard B. Meyer that the twentieth century spells “a steady-state in which an indefinite number of styles and idioms, techniques and movements, will coexist in each of the arts” (Meyer, 1967, p.172). China is one of many countries influenced by Western music in the early twentieth century; others include India, Indonesia and Brazil.

A FRAMEWORK OF MUSICAL SYNCRETISM

The music of the Singapore Huqin Quartet has been called syncretic. As part of Singapore’s musical heritage, the string quartet genre originated from British colonials whilst the *erhu* came from the Chinese immigrants of Guangdong and Fujian Provinces in China. The SHQ is the product of British and Chinese musical heritages in Singapore. To understand its repertoire we need to explore definitions of syncretism. Musical syncretism is one aspect of the process of musical change¹. It reconfigures musical performances of two ethnic groups and creates a new musical product. A definition by Alan P. Merriam is the “blending together of elements of two cultures, changing the original values and forms” (Merriam, 1964, p.313). Musical syncretism is built upon the observations of people experiencing and adopting other groups’ musics, countries’ cultures, forms, etc. As a result, new musical products emerge. For example, one genre typically thought of as syncretic is Dondang Sayang from Malaysia. It is the blending of European violins accompanying Malay “pantun” or poetry.

Merriam’s definition of syncretism is suitable for this thesis as this definition blurs cultural boundaries by combining personas and styles found in the works of Phoon Yew Tien. Phoon is an example of a Singaporean composer drawing on both his Western and Chinese heritage. By commissioning pieces from composers such as Phoon, the SHQ serves to exemplify the syncretic strand of current musical studies and interpretations in Singapore.

In Singapore today, musical innovations and musical changes are becoming valued and applauded. Blacking had pointed out, “it is particularly important to distinguish changes in musical composition or performance that are not labelled or intended as such by musicians, from changes that are intentional and recognized” (Blacking, 1977, p.11). It is clear the SHQ’s attempt at syncretic music-making is intentional. Its repertoire of syncretic compositions, such as Concord (see page 83), is enjoyed by Singapore audiences. It is a systematic or conscious attempt to merge cultures. The nationalistic efforts of the SHQ urge it to attach meanings to the two genres of

¹ What is musical change? “The study of musical change must be concerned ultimately with significant innovations in music sound, but innovations in music sound are not necessarily evidence of musical change. If the concept of musical change is to have any heuristic value, it must denote significant changes that are peculiar to *musical* systems, and not simply the musical consequences of social, political, economic, or other changes” (Blacking, 1977, p.2).

Western and Chinese music².

Another issue to consider is that of “purists” as opposed to “syncretists”. “Purists” reveal the traditional sense of music history. They focus on preservation and authenticity and their attachments to the fine things of the past. This is through maintaining the “traditional” or folk elements of music whilst discounting the development of its musical happening *per se*. The so-called authenticity movement or “purists” see structural musical coherence and style as very important. The argument of the “purists” is that musical changes should be a “natural transformation”; a gradual change over time, which is not necessarily a conscious music-making process, as opposed to the SHQ’s idea of intentional syncretic music. A “purist’s” perspective does not acknowledge the cultural diversity of a nation such as Singapore.

Syncretic music generates an array of challenges, one of which is audience acceptance. Prospective innovators of music in Singapore such as the SHQ need to understand the impact of their reconceptualization of Western and Chinese music. Compositions by Singapore composer Phoon Yew Tien, for example, have been written with the knowledge and intention that the materials used are familiar to audiences. As such, the compositions have communicative value to Singapore audiences. It is thus legitimate to adopt and explore the SHQ’s rearrangement of two cultures’ musical parameters as an engaging representation of Singapore’s musical changes.

I have also followed Margaret Kartomi’s definitions of the term syncretism which relates to the merging and adopting of different cultures or artistic activities. This is found in Phoon Yew Tien’s composition for the SHQ. As stated by Kartomi and Blum, the “creative transformation normally occurs as a result of convergence which may result in an influx of new musical ideas, organizing principles and repertoires and the effects of contact range from the making of minor adjustments within existing musical styles” (Kartomi and Blum, 1994, p.ix). The musical sampling by Phoon Yew Tien in appendix A, as an example, is a departure from the conventional form of writing for the Chinese pentatonic scalar structure in this composition. The SHQ performed syncretic works based on the Western discordant melodic progression, musical textures and form or structures. The quartet generally kept to the traditional or local Chinese melodic line and rhythm with shared concepts on embellishments, sequential movements and fusion of scalar patterns.

Kartomi affirms the confusion involving the many different meanings for syncretism. In her article, Kartomi said: “Terms used for syncretism such as cross-fertilized, hybrid, creole, mestizo and mulatto have sometimes been confused in their meanings with negative attitudes to illicit breeding and interracial liaisons” (Kartomi, 1981, p.229). The ideas associated with these terms are the belief that the resultant product is subservient or less important. I have chosen to use the word “syncretic” strictly to avoid any confusion with other apparently similar terms.

² As John Blacking has pointed out “unchanging cultural tradition is dead and of no use to man except perhaps as an inspiration to do something else, and music without social situations, which by definition can never be identical, ceases to be music as a performing art” (Blacking, 1977, p.8).

I hope this study will play a modest role in bridging the conventionally accepted norms of a stylistic approach to traditional Chinese music and musical changes today. This point of view surfaced from the older generations of Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese audiences. As musicologists Mark Slobin and Jeff Todd Titon sum up: "A conglomeration of music-cultures is taking place all over the world, and this fact sometimes makes it difficult to isolate traditional styles of music" (Slobin and Titon, 1984, p.8). I will discuss further the division of my study as below.

THE DIVISION OF THE STUDY

This thesis seeks to examine the Chinese *erhu*'s contribution through the development of this instrument with its role as a vehicle for syncretic music-making in Singapore. It is divided into six separate chapters that cover most of the musical aspects of the *erhu* and its family. Chapter One contextualizes the *erhu*'s place in the Chinese socio-political scene from the early twentieth century. Its historical background prior to the twentieth century is also covered along with an introduction to the physical description and musical characteristics of the *erhu*.

Chapter Two explains the involvement of a new ensemble, the Singapore Huqin Quartet in creating a syncretic ensemble idiom. It comprises members of the *huqin* family of which the *erhu* is depicted as the 'soul' amongst the *huqin* instruments. To introduce this ensemble, each member's profile is included in this study as well as the history of the Singapore Huqin Quartet. Interviews have been conducted with the Singapore Huqin Quartet members, their manager, Terence Ho, Associate Professor Matthew Marshall of Massey University and composer Phoon Yew Tien in our discussions on Singapore's vision of 'unity in musical diversity'. The SHQ and Phoon are engaged in a relatively new approach of stylistic mannerisms, interpretation and other idiosyncrasies of music in a socio-cultural-political trinity. Thus is offered prima-facie grounds for new development in Singapore's music scene. Perhaps any recognizable interest closely related to ethnic music when carefully configured could translate to syncretization in a multi-cultural cosmopolitan nation like Singapore. Phoon Yew Tien is introduced in this chapter.

Chapter Three contains details of the family of *huqin*, describing concisely the individual instruments which are an all-embracing way of understanding the *erhu*'s relatives. The lack of literature dealing specifically with the modern Chinese orchestra further strengthens the need to examine the musical parameters of this genre which is becoming a recent research phenomenon. A brief look at the Chinese orchestra is necessary to understand the *erhu*'s solo and ensemble roles from which the ensemble instruments are derived. As such, new instruments had been developed such as the *gehu*. This instrument is found in the Singapore Huqin Quartet as earlier discussed in Chapter Two. The modern Chinese orchestra is introduced as the *erhu* and its *huqin* family are amongst the principal instruments to have maintained prominent positions in the modern Chinese orchestras.

Chapter Four examines the *erhu*'s performance technique and the performance signs and symbols are appropriately shown to indicate both the Western and Chinese musical symbols and terminology. Primary emphasis in Chapter Five draws upon the

erhu music of eminent scholar-musician Liu Tian Hua, and the *erhu* specialist Abing, who have contributed enormously to these compositional materials. Abing's close alliance with the *erhu* came from his Daoist background. He brought much credibility to *erhu* music despite his controversial and nebulous association in the socio-cultural and political norms of his time. Transcribed examples and cipher notations of their works as well as technical exercises are tabled which deal with the diachronic and synchronic variants of these pieces. Their music composed for the *erhu* has become an important part of the repertoire of the SHQ.

To understand the repertoire played by the Singapore Huqin Quartet and Phoon's compositions, the characteristic differences between Western and Chinese music aesthetics are analysed in Chapter Six. This chapter covers a comparative study of scalar structure or tonal inventory, rhythmic or melodic motifs, thematic development and other syncretic idioms of music. This analysis relates specifically to the current Singapore music scene. In this chapter, the notion of musical change and its expressive paradigm which have long since juxtaposed the elements of Western traits on non-western music will be presented as interactive. These musical changes would not primarily be constituted as dichotomies and continuums with other domains of musical culture. The suggestions on musical changes made by ethnomusicologist Margaret J. Kartomi's in her article "The Processes and Results of Musical Culture Contact" (1981) reflected on the need to understand the responses produced when confronted with different cultural strands that indicate the impact of syncretic and authentic forms.