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**Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor: Insights
into Performance**

A dissertation submitted in partial
fulfillment of the degree of BPA (Hons.)

Zhen Zeng

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Introduction

“Shostakovich, as a composer also living under a dictatorship, taught me to express deep humanity. From Takemitsu, I learned that Western and Eastern instruments can be part of the same color palette. John Cage led me to discover structures and sounds as yet unknown, by always keeping an open mind. I owe deepest thanks to these three composers, whose contributions to music have also helped me develop myself---as a composer from a traditional culture, growing up in a high-pressure society, living in a now international world.” (Tan Dun)

The global reach of Tan Dun’s music reached its zenith recently at the 2001 Academy Awards where he received an Oscar for the music to the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. He is as equally lauded in China - where, in fact, he is their most prominent cultural export - as he is in the West: where he enjoys commissions from the world’s finest ensembles including the Metropolitan Opera and many international symphony orchestras.

Though particularly known for his long epic-scale music, this dissertation’s subject matter centres round Tan Dun as a young 21-year-old, before his successes in the West. In particular, the dissertation is a study of performance practices in Tan’s opus one, *Eight Memories in Watercolor*. Being of similar cultural background to Tan Dun - I was born in the same province as him in China, and educated as a young adult in the West - I am able to offer *from the inside* a reading of *Eight Memories in Watercolor* that draws on the performance sensibilities of both Chinese music and western classical music. The dissertation is part exegesis - i.e. it documents how I arrived at an interpretation, and part pedagogical/practical, i.e. it offers a performance practice guide to those pianists seeking to probe some of the Chinese ‘meanings’ latent in the music.

Chapter one sets the scene, and offers both a background to the place of music in the Cultural Revolution, and a historical sketch of the significance of the Beijing conservatory to the development of Tan Dun's music.

Chapter two opens by setting out some parameters of performance practice theory, and in particular how these theories can be used to illuminate Tan's piano music.

Chapter three traces the myriad of styles in *Eight Memories in Watercolor*. Through analysis, I show the work's close relationship to traditional Chinese music and also illustrate aesthetic elements that are drawn from both western and Chinese cultures. This chapter is to be read as a guide to performing this work, and, by dint of sharing the same culturally diverse background as Tan Dun, it is my hope that my reading of his music and that my guide to performance will offer to western pianists a richer starting point from which to craft their performances.

I put this theory to the test in chapter four, where I conduct an experiment illustrating how my performance directions can assist non-Chinese pianists in capturing the "spirit" of Tan Dun's music. The results of this experiment are offered through a transcript and analysis of three interviews, one by each of the pianists undertaking the experiment. The dissertation concludes with an evaluation of the success of my research and offers some areas for further study.

Chapter One

Music Education in China during the Cultural Revolution

China's Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, when the chairman of the time Mao Zedong and his wife Jiang Qing strove to "prevent the return of capitalism to China" (Melvin & Cai, 2004, p. 230). They used radical students, issued them red arm bands and named them the Red Guards. The mission of the Red Guards was soon envisioned: to destroy the "four olds" of the exploiting classes... old customs, old habits, old culture and old thinking. They fired the arrows towards intellectuals, or anyone that had a specialization. Ruled out also were people with an interest or affliction with China's traditional culture, Western education and "bourgeois thinking". Millions of educated Chinese were accused, arrested, abused and murdered as the definition of "four olds" became broadened.

Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and a former Peking Opera actress, used the Cultural Revolution to further her own political artistic agenda. Before her marriage to Mao, an agreement was made between the Chairman and some of his former comrades that this future young wife of his would not have a voice in the country's politics. Soon Jiang fought back: in order to play her roll well as the wife of China's most powerful man, Jiang found it useful or even necessary to assist her husband to clear out of the "anti-socialist poisonous weeds" hidden in China's culture gardens." (Melvin & Cai, 2004, p. 248)

Jiang concentrated on getting rid of the "Four Olds" to create new art forms based on revolutionary contemporary themes which "reflect real life in the fifteen years

since the founding of our Chinese People's Republic." As a result of her radical attempts to create and transform the nation's traditional Beijing Operas to propaganda weapons, she embedded the study of Beijing Opera and Chinese musical instruments and accidentally nurtured an entire generation of musicians that were equipped with some fundamental knowledge in both Chinese and Western instruments, and were longing to pursue a music education formally.

As a result, the country's education system suffered a deep impact. There had been no standard non-political school teaching activities, entrance exams, or formal graduation. The radical Red Guards "had destroyed school records, burnt text-books, and beaten, abused and murdered teachers at schools throughout the country. Conservatories had been shuttered, the professors were locked up in cow sheds, and the entire Western classical canon banned for the better part of a decade." (Melvin & Cai, 2004, p. 292) Consequently, when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, it took a long time for music institutions to recover from the aftermath.

The Central Conservatory after the Revolution

In 1978, the Central Conservatoire was the first to announce its re-opening and called for enrolment in one of the nation's biggest governmental newspaper *People's Daily*. The very fact that the country's most prestigious conservatoire was recruiting students based on merits rather than political background attracted more than 18,000 applications. Due to limited teaching resources and a limited pool of teachers, only 100 lucky applicants were accepted into the conservatoire. These hand-picked youngsters came from different regions of the country and diverse

family backgrounds; there were farmers, factory workers, shop assistants, fire fighters and forest rangers.

Tan Dun was amongst those who were accepted into the first post-Cultural-Revolution class. During the Cultural Revolution, he had managed to continue developing his musical interest even when he was sent to plant rice in the countryside. He worked as a violinist and an arranger for the Beijing Opera troupe, a traditional Chinese art form used by the Cultural Revolution initiators as a means of propaganda. He also started an orchestra with “largely homemade instruments that included tree branches and farming tools” (Melvin & Cai, 2004, p. 293)

Tan spent eight years in the Central Conservatoire studying composition with Li Yinghai and Zhao Xingdao. In his composition class, were Chen Yi, Zhou Long and Qu Xiaosong, and during his time there numerous foreign artists came to work with the students and to give masterclasses and concerts. As Wu Zuqiang, the conservatoire director of the time described, it was “the good time, easy to connect with the outside world.” Some of the most prominent musical icons from the “outside world” came to the conservatory, including Alexander Goehr, Zhou Wenzhong, Gyorgy Ligeti, Isang Yun, Toru Takemitsu and George Crumb.

The British composer Alexander Goehr played a significant role in the establishment of Chinese Modern Music. Melvin and Cai described Goehr’s contribution:

“Goehr introduced New Music from the Second Viennese School to the avant-garde. His subject was not without controversy... some people still opposed the teaching of

20th century music, especially atonality...and at the last minute he was almost asked to give a general discussion of classical music history instead, but those who thought students should be exposed to the new prevailed.” (2004, p.293)

Zhou Wen-chung was another influential figure in Tan’s professional life. Zhou was a Chinese-born composer and a professor at Columbia University. He was one of the first musicians from the outside world to enter the country after the Cultural Revolution. On his trip to China in 1977, Zhou took scores and recordings of many Western contemporary composers such as Bartok, Hindemith, Varèse, Babbitt, Davidovsky, Hovhaness, Shapey, Luening, Ussachevsky, Crumb, Takemitsu and his own works. He gave lectures to Tan’s class and informed the young composers about the contemporary musical developments in the West and shared his personal experience in cross-cultural approaches of composition.

Evidently, Tan savoured the freedom and wealth of knowledge that was brought into the conservatory. He, in his own words, was “immersed in studying Western classical and modern music.” (Tan, 2004; Preface)

Zhou also founded the US-China Arts Exchange Centre which became instrumental to bringing prominent American musicians, artists and citizens to China and sending young Chinese composers such as Tan Dun to study in the States. Zhou later became Tan’s teacher at Columbia University.

Tan’s new experience with Western Classical Music and his solid background in Chinese traditional music provided a base for a style which took the best from both worlds.

Eight Memories in Watercolor was composed at this historic time. The composer was inspired by his vivid memories of his birthplace in the HuNan Province in southern China, a place where he learnt many local folk tunes and traditional Chinese instruments when he was a little boy living in the country with his grandmother.

In contrast to the conclusion drawn in an article published in *Ethnomusicology*, when author Yang Mu refers to the majority of folk arts circulated in China as “a rich source of propaganda” (p.317), Tan chose to base his *Eight Memories in Watercolor* on eight “apolitical” folk tunes from his home region Hunan, and named them with pastoral and nostalgic titles. The titles are *Missing Moon*, *Staccato Beans*, *Herdboy’s Song*, *Blue Nun*, *Red Wildness*, *Ancient Burial*, *Floating Clouds and Sunrain*. As Tan describes it, the *Eight Memories in Watercolor* was a direct result of his homesickness, a diary of his longing for folksongs and memories of his childhood.

Eight Memories in Watercolor was premiered by pianist Lang Lang at the Kennedy Centre in Washington in 2001, and recorded live at his recital Carnegie Hall later that year. The work was not published until 2004 in United States.

Chapter Two

A *sine qua non* of the modern performing edition is the obligatory “directions for performance” given in the edition’s introductory matter. Up until fairly recently these directions were found in editions of so-called “early music”, which, in the 1970s, really applied to the Baroque and Classical music of the 18th Century.

Recently these performance directions are found in the music of the Romantics (eg. Schubert Klaviersonaten, G. Henle Verlag, 2000, Urtext Edition) and also of music in the 20th century (eg. Rachmaninoff Etudes-Tableux, 2007, Urtext Edition)

Underpinning these directions is the assumption that the musical notation does not, and cannot, transmit all the necessary information about how a work might be realised in performance. For example, in baroque music, editors provide guidance on matters of touch, style, phrasing, ornamentation, tempo, etc – all of which are not notated in the score but are nevertheless issues which must be stylistically addressed through recourse to the stylistic norms of the baroque period. A recent *Urtext* edition of Chopin gives directions on the use of appropriate fingering, ornamentation, dynamics, accents and etc.

Similarly, the music of John Cage, Karlheinz Stauckhausen and Roy Agnew have their own extra notational directions which must be observed in order to accurately represent both the “letter” and the “spirit” of the music. For example: the Keys Press edition (2000) of Agnew’s *Six Sonatas for Piano* provides appendixes that

clearly outline the composer's background and his compositional intentions for the music.

This chapter approaches *Eight Memories in Watercolor* (hereafter *EMW*) from the same vantage point, namely, the notation itself transmits the *letter* of the music but not necessarily the *spirit* of the music. In this context, the “spirit” of *EMW* rests in the multiple ways in which the music is representative of both traditional Chinese music and also – in particular – how the music captures Chinese sensibilities.

Through my own cultural and musical background I am able to offer a set of performance/editorial directions/suggestions that should be seen in the same light as an editor of, say, a Handel sonata offering insight on how to play a particular ornament.

This particular kind of editorial intervention on a work such as *EMW* – i.e. a work whose musical expression is tied between two cultures – is, as far as I'm aware, novel and unique.

To test the usefulness of my performance directions I approached three professional pianists and invited them to spend a week or so with the score, learning the work from the vantage point of the music itself i.e. the *letter*. A week later I gave each of the pianists a copy of my performance directions, and left them for a further week in order to see how these directions affected their insight into the music. The change in their interpretation was ascertained through their answers to a series of six questions (see chapter 4)

Chapter Three

Aspects of the influence of Traditional Chinese Music:

“It is clear in the music of Tan Dun that sounds are central to the nature in which we live but to which we have too long not listened. His music is one we need as the East and West come together as our one home.” (John Cage)

Eight Memories in Watercolor was Tan’s Opus one. After living his childhood and young adult life in provincial China, studying only “Eastern music, ritual music and local Chinese operas” (China View Website), Tan composed this piece which was, in fact, one of the first pieces to be composed by a student composer in the post revolution class at central conservatory. His rich cultural heritage and experience in Chinese traditional music left obvious traces throughout this work--- which should be seen in the light of being composed by a student of ‘Western Classical composition’,

The remainder of this chapter offers a ‘reading’ of *EMW* that could only be written by someone with the same cross-cultural background as the composer. As I stated above, I have a similar background to Tan Dun, being born in the Hunan province and receiving further tertiary education in the West.

This ‘reading’ is to be understood on three fronts:

1. A legitimate analysis of *EMW*
2. A set of performance practices for *EMW*.
3. A brief discussion on performance practice issues for Chinese piano music.

1. Themes:

Tan Dun's selection of the eight themes is to be associated with the Chinese traditional concept of the universe. As opposed to the Western culture, when Man is seen to be in control of nature, Chinese philosophies interpret Nature as the dictator of all. Thus, as a general trend, the essence of universe, history, life and Nature is captured through interpretations of the senses. Artists are encouraged to keep clear from attempting to "portray individual concrete objects in a precise manner", but rather "express the flavour and charm of the object." (Jiang, 1991, p. 95)

Tan's teacher *Zhou Wen-chung* studied the difference between the Western and Chinese arts and music, and formulated the following chart in his student time in the 50s.

<u>Western</u>	<u>Chinese</u>
Straight tones preferred	Bent or embellished tones preferred
Aural impressions emphasized	Process of creation, not end result
Clarity of meaning	Suggestive, unexplained is desirable
Man controls nature	Nature dictates (Chang, 2001, P.101)

It is unknown if Tan's selection of the eight naturalistic themes was directly under the influence of his teacher Zhou, or instinctively driven by his Chinese heritage and values. Nevertheless, it reflects Tan's deep understanding and attachment to Chinese culture and artistic values.

It's also worth noting that until the end of Cultural Revolution in 1979, composers were only allowed to write piano works arranged from *Model Opera*, a propaganda music form worshiped by *Mao* and *Jiang* (Zhao, 1991, p.300). Using non-political themes in his first work is Tan's fast break with the previous political taboo; it reflects a composer's yearning for his artistic freedom and his artistic ideals.

2. Melody: Folk elements

Piano works arranged from folk songs or folklores consist of a significant part of Chinese piano repertoire. (Zhao, 1991)

Echoing Zhao's characterisation of modern Chinese piano works, Tan Dun uses a variety of Chinese folk songs in *EMW*, and these folk songs range across a variety of styles. Some are angular and jumpy, and some are melismatic and flowing as an illustration of these different styles. Here follows six examples of Hunan style folk songs found in *EMW*. (Figure 1-6)



Figure 1. *Staccato Beans*



Figure 2. *Herdboy's Song*

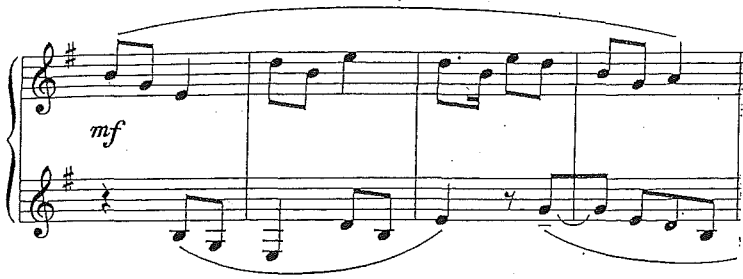


Figure 3. *Blue Nun*

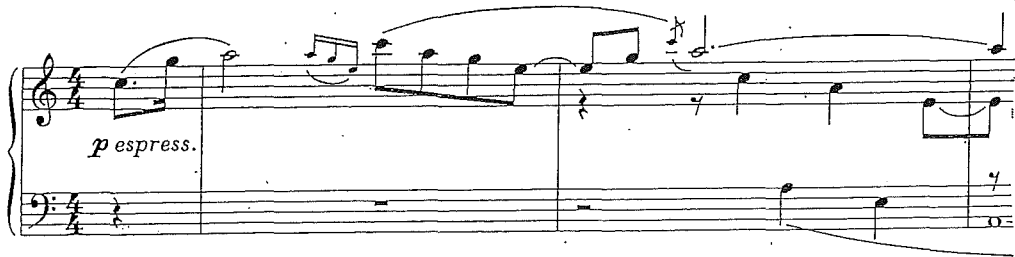


Figure 4. *Red Wilderness*

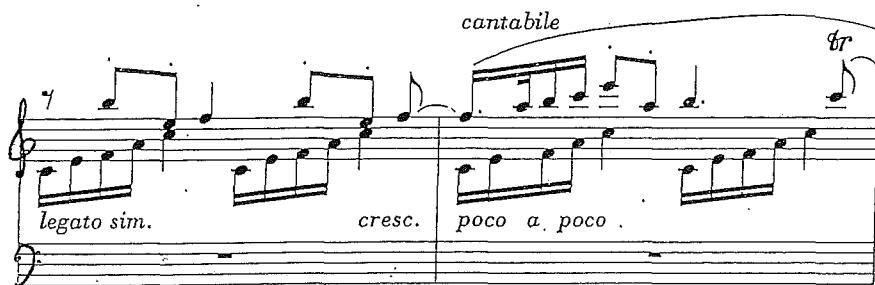


Figure 5. *Floating Clouds*



Figure 6. *Sunrain*

3. Ornamentation:

- ❖ **Accelerando trills:** A characteristic practice of many Chinese wooden instruments. (See Figure 7)

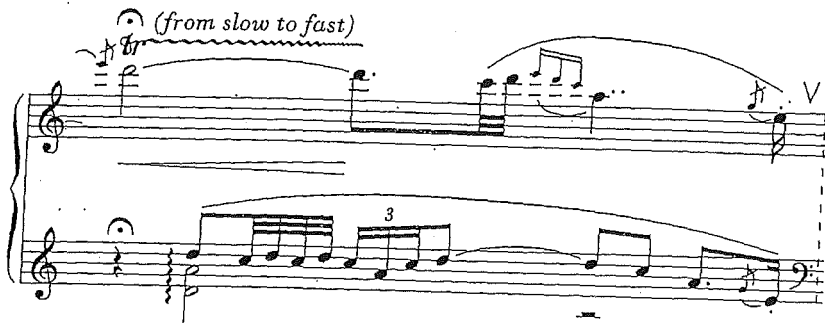


Figure 7. Herdboy's Song:

- ❖ **Downward-rolled chords:** Imitation of one of the *Pipa* techniques, when the chords are played by the player slapping certain strings. (Figure 8 & 9)

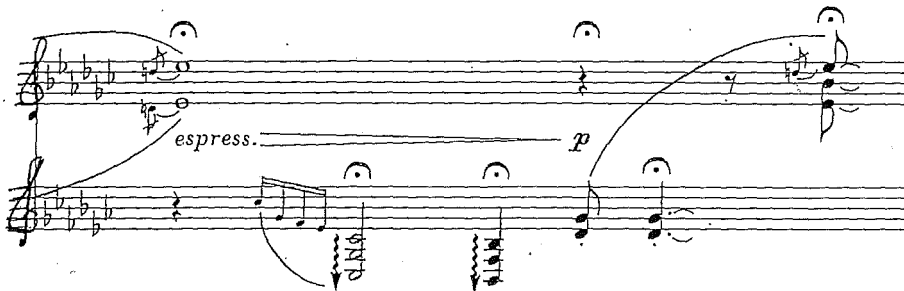


Figure 8. Missing Moon

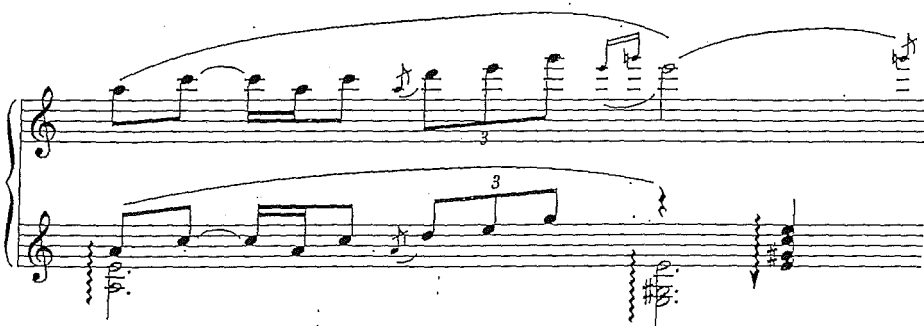


Figure 9. Herdboy's Song

The *Pipa* (琵琶) is a four-stringed Chinese lute instrument in the shape of a half-pear. It sits on the player's lap upright when played. The name *Pipa* originated from

Chinese characters *Pi* and *Pa*, literally refers to the techniques of the instrument: plucking the strings inwards and outwards respectively.

- ❖ **Descending Pentatonic Scales** (*G_b*, *E_b*, *D_b*, *B_b*, *A_b*): These evoke a sense of a cascading waterfall, is a transposed adoption of the *Zheng* pentatonic scale. (Figure10)

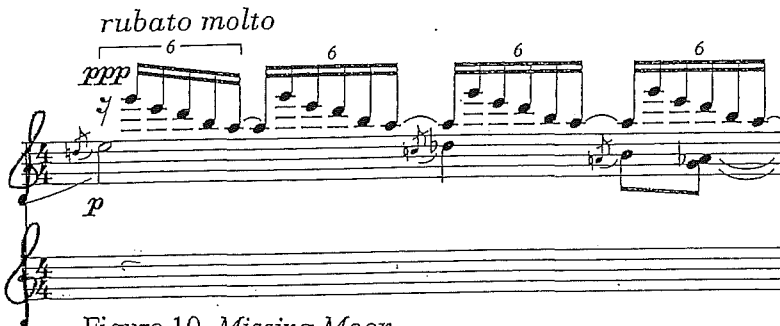


Figure 10. *Missing Moon*

Generally, the Chinese instrumental ornaments can be distinguished by performance techniques, and divided into two categories: Real ornaments and superficial ornaments.

Real ornaments are ornaments in which notes are individual played. For example, plucked ornaments on the *Zheng*, struck scales on the *Pipa* and *Yangqin* are all Real ornaments.

Superficial ornaments refer to ornaments that are not individually played--- such as some *Xiao* ornaments, when the notes are produced through a slight shift of the finger on the finger hole, and *Huayin* on the *Zheng*, when several pitches are produced through plucking of one string on the right portion and vibrato the corresponding left one on the instrument. The nature of the ornaments should be the ultimate guideline for determining the touch and techniques to be used on the piano.

In the following example of the *Herdboy's Song* from *EMW*, the last ornament is a short embellishment which requires a rapid, almost metallic touch of the two fingers and is distinguished from the long embellishment (the first one) with a *staccato*.

(Figure 11)



Figure 11. *Herdboy's Song* (Bar 4)

Zheng (箏): is a string instrument that resembles Western harp. The most common techniques of the instrument are plucking, stroking and slapping.

- ❖ **Chromatic ornamentation:** imitates the vibrato technique of the *Zheng*.
(See example above)
- ❖ **Pentatonic ornamentation:** A *Zheng* technique. The added fermatas facilitate the piano imitation of the lingering sound on the *Zheng*. (Figure 12)



Figure 12. *Herdboy's Song*

4. Timbre/Instrumental Colours:

In his article published by Asian Music, Beijing Central Conservatory Scholar *Jiang Jing* summed up the means used by many contemporary Chinese composers to introduce new timbres: they are to create the timbre of string instruments on wind instruments, or of wind instruments on String instruments; of Chinese instruments on Western instruments or Western instruments on Chinese instruments (p. 93). Tan Dun obviously is an active practitioner of such exercises: In his recent interview with *Beijing Youth News*, the composer reveals the “big questions” in which his compositional philosophy lays foundation: “Why should the Harp only limit itself to harp sound, and the *Zheng* only to *Zheng* sound?”, “Are there means to marry the two?” (*Guiren Net*, 2006). Tan’s “rebellious” approach was noticed and credited back in his student years when he was approved by the same scholar as “successful in exploiting [sic] various timbres” (Jiang, 1991, p. 93),

❖ Continuous descending pentatonic scales: (Figure 13)

The scales create a waterfall-like instrumental colour. It is a common practice of the *Zheng* when the player strokes certain strings with both hands in a repetitive manner. As discussed above, the common techniques of the *Zheng* are plucking, stroking and slapping: while stroking provokes a crystalline water-like charm, slapping produces a turbulent and urging effect. The former character can be portrayed by using finger pads to “wipe” the keys with light elbows, and rocking the wrists gently clockwise. In other words, it should be a forearm movement. In contrast, the slapping sound is a finger exercise on the piano, requiring firm, bent fingers with a rapid touch. The wrists should remain almost static.

To play the following passage (Figure 13), the player should commence it in a slower tempo and imitate the stroking sound of the *Zheng*, and then through adding an *accelerando*, the effect gradually shifts into a slapping sound.

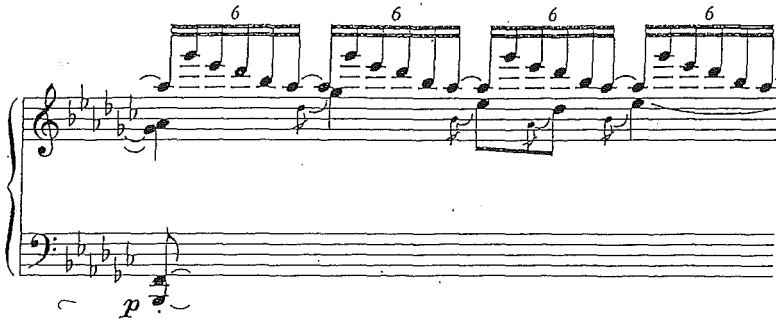


Figure 13. *Missing Moon*:

- ❖ **Accelerando throughout a repeated pentatonic scale accompanied by a large crescendo (Figure 14)**

The stroking technique of the *Zheng*, again paints an effect of a cascading waterfall. This passage should be commenced with a light touch and repetitively rolling wrists. As the passage starts to accelerate, the “touch point” should gradually be shifted from the finger pads to the tips. The wrists movement should be gradually reduced and ceased by the end of the passage. This interpretation will enable the pianist to create a vivid image of a cascading water stream which forms broader and eventually tumbles into the riverbed.

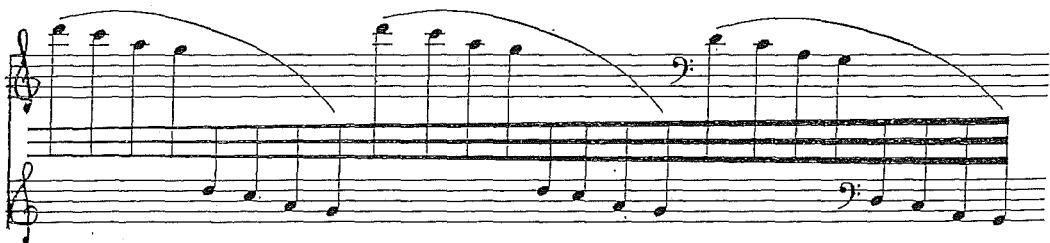


Figure 14. *Herdboy's Song*

❖ **Fast pentatonic octaves played in the high register:** (Figure 15)

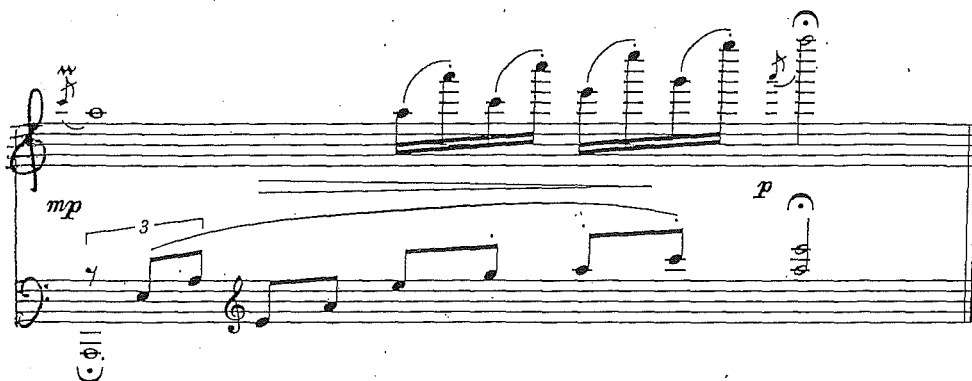


Figure 15. *Herdboy's Song*

These octaves resemble the sound of the Chinese percussion music instrument *Yangqin*.

Yangqin (扬琴) is a Chinese dulcimer. It has a trapezoidal sound box, 200 metal strings, and is struck with two bamboo mallets which are half covered with rubber. *Yangqin* players use the rubber tips to play soft, mellow sound and the bamboo tips to play bright, percussive sound. To achieve *Yangqin*'s brilliant and resonant sound, the pianist needs to approach the keys with firm fingers and play the second note of each octave with a staccato.

❖ **Melodies in Perfect Fourths:** (Figure 16)

The melodies in perfect fourths are traces of the *Sheng* (笙), a Chinese bamboo mouth organ. The instrument is often played with progressive parallel fourths



Figure 16. *Sunrain*

❖ **Drumming effect:** (Figure 17 & 18)



Figure 17. *Sunrain* (Bar 28 & 29)



Figure 18. *Sunrain* (the end)

Tan's favouritism of the *Zheng* and *Xiao* is not only evident in his frequent exploration of the two instruments timbres in his piano music. The composer even completed a work called "*Nan Xiang Zi*", a piece for *Zheng* and *Xiao* four years after the completion of *EMW*. The technical and timbral possibilities of the two instruments are boldly explored in *Nan Xiang Zi*.

Xiao (箫): is a bamboo recorder. It has the most melancholic, mellow and lyrical sound of all other Chinese instruments. In traditional Chinese music, *Xiao* is often used to play love songs and nostalgic melodies. To imitate the colour of *Xiao* on the piano, players need to stroke the keys with their finger pads (the fleshy part of the finger, rather than finger tips) in a slow movement. It allows the hammer inside of the piano to strike the strings in a relatively slow motion, therefore, to produce a prolonged and mellow sound with a graceful touch.

5. Tonality

Pentatonicity is largely used.

6. Pedalling

Due to the nature of Chinese pentatonic scales and the common use of functional harmony in Chinese piano music, pedalling is indeed a complex and profound subject. Frequently, large sections are based on the same sonority. In this case, players could technically pedal by the big phrases or subdivided phrases, pedal on significant harmony or change the pedal to midway, or simply play the entire section with one pedal or no pedal at all. An analysis of Tan Dun's *Blue Nun* from *EMW* may result in six distinguished interpretations of pedalling:

Interpretation I: No Pedal



Interpretation II:



Interpretation III:

Musical score for Interpretation III. The score is written for piano in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of two staves. The right staff has a melodic line with a slur over the first four measures. The left staff has a bass line with a slur over the first four measures. The first measure is marked *mp*. The second measure is marked *cresc.*. The piece ends with a fermata over the final note.

Interpretation IV:

Musical score for Interpretation IV. The score is written for piano in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of two staves. The right staff has a melodic line with a slur over the first four measures. The left staff has a bass line with a slur over the first four measures. The first measure is marked *mp*. The second measure is marked *cresc.*. The piece ends with a fermata over the final note.

Interpretation V:

Musical score for Interpretation V. The score is written for piano in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of two staves. The right staff has a melodic line with a slur over the first four measures. The left staff has a bass line with a slur over the first four measures. The first measure is marked *mp*. The second measure is marked *cresc.*. The piece ends with a fermata over the final note.

Interpretation VI: Pedal throughout

Musical score for Interpretation VI. The score is written for piano in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of two staves. The right staff has a melodic line with a slur over the first four measures. The left staff has a bass line with a slur over the first four measures. The first measure is marked *mp*. The second measure is marked *cresc.*. The piece ends with a fermata over the final note.

Employment of the Western Classical Traditions:

As many musical concepts and approaches of the East flowed into Tan's compositions naturally and effortlessly, this then twenty-one year old young composer, who hardly had any exposure to Western music had to learn the Western compositional traditions from the beginning. Tan savoured his studies of Western Classical compositions in his student time in the Central Conservatory.

Now widely regarded as the "fusion of the East and the West" (Smith, 2006), Tan effortlessly demonstrates his fast learning pace in his assimilation of Western music traditions in *EMW*, which again, was one of his early attempts to write for the piano.

1. Choice of music instrument:

Piano: It may seem natural for many contemporary young composers to write for the Piano, an instrument that has such a significant and varied repertoire. However, at the time when Tan started writing *EMW*, he had just officially become a composition student at the Central Conservatory, and had little exposure to any Western music or music instruments. By dint of choosing the piano for his opus one, Tan was consciously placing this instrument as a significant medium for his first attempt in Western Classical composition.

2. forms:

Tan uses two Western Classical forms in the *EMW*. They are ABA and Rondo.

❖ **ABA:**

Missing Moon

Red Wilderness

Ancient Burial

Blue Nun

❖ **Rondo:**

Staccato Beans

Sunrain

3. Texture

❖ **Extreme dynamics and registers:**

As a result of Tan's study of Debussy's many masterful compositional techniques, a wide range of dynamics is explored in EMW. Frequently, extreme dynamics such as *fff* and *pppp* are used. (Figure 19& 20)

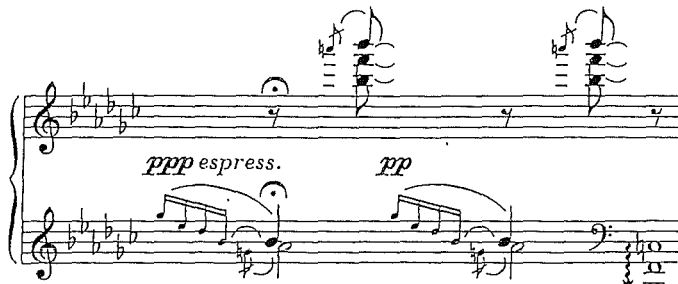


Figure 19. *Missing Moon*



Figure 20. *Sunrain*

❖ **Polyphonic texture:**

It is worthy noting that Tan's teacher Zhou Weng-Chung studied with Czech composer Bohuslav Martinu, who was greatly influenced by French composer Claude Debussy back in his student time at the Harvard University. Later in his life, Zhou spent a significant amount of time on encouraging young Chinese composers including Tan to study Debussy's work when he was at the Central Conservatory as a visiting artist. The impact of these is evident in EMW, where Tan applied a distinctive Romantic composition technique into his own composition: (Figure 21 & 22)



Figure 21. *The Sunken Cathedral*

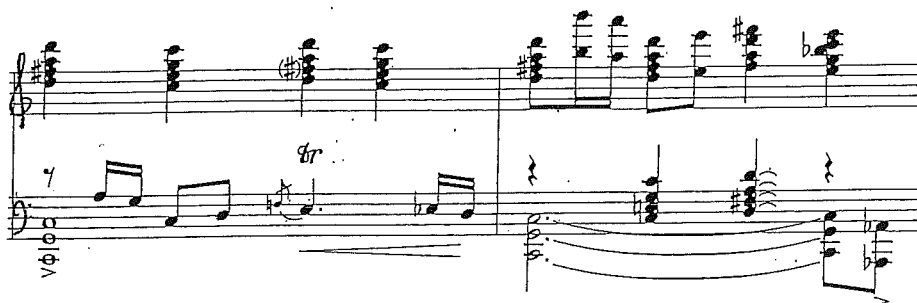


Figure 22. *Ancient Burial*

4. **Notation systems:**

❖ **Tempo Marks**

Eg. Adagio funebre, Andante Simplice

❖ **English Titles**

Eight Memories in Watercolor, Floating Clouds; Missing Moon.

5. Timbre:

It is not difficult to spot the adaptation of several compositional techniques employed by Western composers such as Chopin and Mussorgsky. Similar to Chopin's writing in his Funeral March of the B flat minor sonata, Tan uses the repetition of a two-note based motif throughout the piece, canvassing the heaviness in the butlers' marching footsteps, stillness of the air at the burial ceremony. (Figure 22 & 23):



Figure 22. *Funeral March*

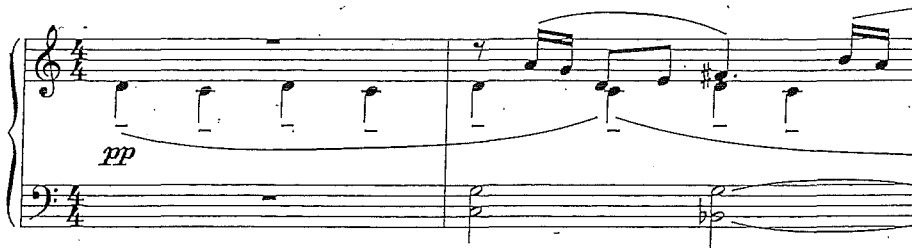


Figure 23. *Ancient Burial*

The Burial march's imaginable approach and departure is vividly captured through Tan's direct employment of Mussorgsky's writing in the *Bydlo* from Pictures at an

Exhibition: by thickening and thinning the texture through a series of contrasts in timber, voices, and sonority. (Figure 24 & 25)



Figure 24. *Byblo* from *Pictures at an Exhibition*

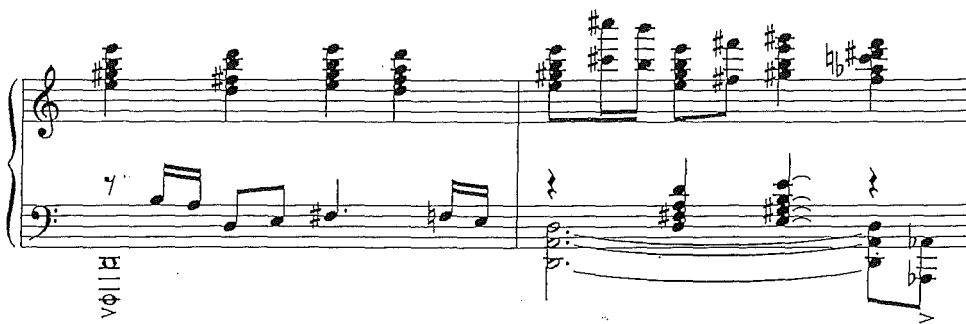


Figure 25. *Ancient Burial*

It is worth noting that these techniques of Tan's also echo with the idea of Varèse who was the teacher of Tan's teacher Zhou wen-chung and who interpreted sound as a moving mass (Chang, 2001, p. 101).

6: Counterpoint:

Tan was not the first Chinese composer to apply this technique. He Luding who belonged to an older generation was widely recognized for this writing in his piano solo *The Flute of a Buffalo Boy*. Compare the excerpts Tan's *Blue Nun* (Figure 26) from *EMW* to the theme from *The Flute of a Buffalo Boy* (Figure 27) by He:



Figure 26. *The Flute of a Buffalo Boy*

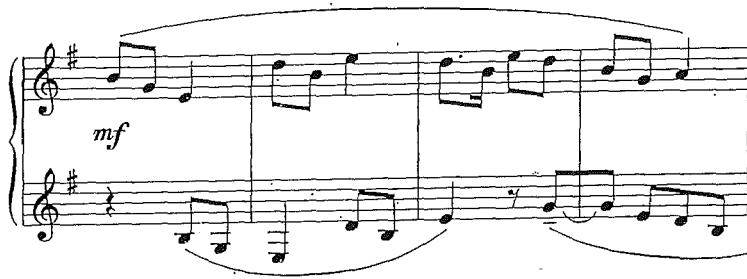


Figure 27. *Blue Nun*

Chapter Four

As a means to test the validity of my performance practice instructions, I conducted the experiment described below:

Three professional pianists were given score of *EMW* and formulated an interpretation of it in one week. After the first week of study, each received my performance practice instructions, and lived with the music for a further week. At the end of the second week, I interviewed each pianist, and the results are shown through the interview transcripts at the end of this chapter.

The interviews were conducted separately with the three pianists in order to preserve the originality of their answers. Despite the lack of communication, the three pianists provided a significant number of similar answers in the interviews: First of all, they all commented on the performance Practice notes positively and found the notes helpful and essential for crafting their performances of the *EMW*. They individually indicated that before *EMW*, they all had prior knowledge and experience in playing Eastern music and were confident about their initial understanding of Chinese music and perception of the *EMW* till receiving the performance practice notes, when they agreed that the notes led them to a more meaningful interpretation and “cleared up a lot of things” about the music.

The following is a transcript of the interviews I conducted with the three pianists. Due to the nature of the interviews, certain ambiguities in the answers were difficult to avoid, therefore they were noted or edited by the author.

INTERVIEWS

Question 1: Did you find the Notes helpful? (Yes/No, A little/a lot)

Pianist I: Yes, I found them very helpful, explaining a lot of things why it was written, and why he chose the piano, for example, it puzzled me for a quite some time: to me, I couldn't understand why he chose the piano. I knew some of the political background, and sort of cultural background. The notes were quite illuminating in that of sense. That was very helpful.

I never looked at any kind of music like that, you come cross a pentatonic piece in the western piece is not the same piece as picking up a whole set of composition like that. There were lots of surprises, the chromatics really surprised me. That (the performance practice instructions) cleared up a lot of things I had about that.

Pianist II: It was quite helpful.

Pianist III: Yes, very helpful.

Question 2: How did you perceive *Eight Memories in Watercolor* initially?

(How did you understand its genre, style and compositional techniques)

Pianist I: Firstly, I thought they were very simplistic. I pondered on them for a little while. I suppose I am familiar with Chinese art, I could understand the suggestiveness of it, then it crossed my mind at some point that what they were, what were the water colours, I imagined him

Pianist II: I found it programmatic, impressionist, just looking at this kind of notation, it is very impressionistic. The Chinese pentatonic scales, in a sense, I knew it should be treated in a Debussy kind of fashion, but on the other hand, I was

wondering what the Chinese characteristics were and different instruments he was trying to portray.

Pianist III: Straight away, I saw it was an Opus one, I expected to be a learning-in-progress piece. I expected it to be an evocative of Mussorgsky's Pictures. As I went through the pieces, I felt it was impart of Bartok, impart of Debussy but in a Chinese version, impressionistic, a lot of techniques taken from here and there. I found it very illuminating, the kind of scales he used and all kinds of techniques you could use

Question 3: Did you find the Notes on Performance Practice insightful? If yes, in what ways?

Pianist I: Yes they were

Pianist II: They were. They give a historical context overview behind the work. It was very insightful to see what was going through his head. I didn't know all the instruments before I read the performance directions. I just knew the pentatonic things, it sounds very eastern. But when I read the notes, I realized why and how they were written like this.

Pianist III: Yes. I did. In many ways. Before I read the notes, I felt I knew what to do them, but after reading the notes, I realized exactly how they should be played.

Question 4: After reading the Notes, did you adopt any changes in your performance approach to *EMW*?

Pianist I: The link between sunken cathedral and the EMW really provided me with some really good ideas. The RED WILDERNESS the climax of that really reminds me of Debussy, very sunken cathedral like.

Pianist II: Some things I didn't know what they were, once I read the notes, I could do them differently. And (after reading) the comparison to the Funeral March by Chopin and Mussorgsky, I realized you could bring out some voices... also adopting your playing style to what the Chinese instruments sound, I did not have any prior knowledge of Chinese instruments till I read the instructions.

Pianist III: At my initially reading, I felt I could do a good job in terms of what need to be done. I felt that he had a very skilful understanding of the techniques that had come before him. The folk melodies were a part of his heritage.

Question 5: Do you consider these changes significant/essential? What are the changes?

Pianist I: Yes, absolutely. It just made look it closer, in areas such as pedaling and ornamentation. I think some of the things in the notes one would not have figured it out without reading the notes. Because the music is so foreign. If you play Bach, every note has to be like a crystal, but if you play something like this, you would not do so! You would not play this in a Bach-like manner, it would be absolutely revolting.

Pianist II: The instructions helped me in the way how I approach the music and discovering instrumental colours. For example, the introduction of the Zheng, helped me to hear what the *Zheng* sounds like in my head. It made me want to know more details.

Pianist III: It helped me in every domain. It (the notes) helped me to understand the Eastern and Western aesthetic. I realized I would have to put into more thoughts into my interpretation.

My initially perception of this piece was aural, because I heard it at your concert. It really struck me seeing the work on the page brought back all the memories I had. What the most significant was the person I saw performed them had studied these pieces in great depth, and is a person of Chinese Heritage I can assume who knew some if not all the folk tunes. So there is instantly an affinity in the performance I heard. That obviously changed the way the way I looked at the score as well.

Question 6: In your opinion, how significant is the Notes for the performers of *EMW*, especially for those ones without a Chinese background?

Pianist I: I think they will be very significant, especially for someone who has absolutely no experience of any kind of Chinese arts and culture: They would need the notes, to be informed.

Pianist II: They are very significant. They are very informative. Pianists without or with a little Chinese background may be able to get a feel of the style initially, but they wouldn't understand as much without reading the notes, after reading the notes, everything will make sense. Reading the notes answered a lot of questions in my head.

Pianist III: I thought the notes are very significant and essential. We don't but we need to know about these instruments about these stylistic things the aesthetics the history and significance of the opus one. I now would like to see and hear the instruments I am supposed to imitate, hear the folk melodies that the pieces were taken from.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore a relatively unknown work by a major international composer. Being a Chinese-born and Western-education-system trained musician, I utilized my dual cultural background and linguistic skills in this study in order to come up with a reading of a set of piano pieces that sought to help western pianists to achieving a stylistically informed interpretation. To facilitate this process, I first set the scene for Tan Dun's early music education in China during the Cultural Revolution. The dissertation continued with a close reading of *EMW*, discussing performance practice issues in this music and other Chinese piano music in general. Finally, to examine the validity of this reading, I conducted an experiment with three professional pianists (I provide a transcript of their interviews - see Chapter four).

In the future I hope to take my research on Tan Dun's music into different directions. In particular, through my skills with Chinese languages, and the fact that I'm from the same province as Tan Dun, I feel I may be able to advance the secondary literature surrounding Tan Dun and his music in a meaningful way.

Tan Dun's music is a vital expression of independence from the weight of Chinese history, and of self-assurance amid contemporary turmoil. The vibrant presence of both East and West within him has created a unique sound world, always personal, always authentic. Every part of Tan Dun's music is violent as a burst of human blood, yet full of grace, a voice of the soul. I believe he is one of the most outstanding composers today. (Takemitsu)

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