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Summary of lecture recital: Bright Sheng's selected chamber music for strings: two violin solos, and two string quartets

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SUMMARY OF LECTURE RECITAL: BRIGHT SHENG'S SELECTED CHAMBER
MUSIC FOR STRINGS: TWO VIOLIN SOLOS, AND TWO STRING QUARTETS

Written Document

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in

The School of Music

by

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ABSTRACT

Bright Sheng was born in Shanghai, China, in 1955, and became one of America's leading composers in the twentieth-century. Bright Sheng's orchestral music, opera, and chamber music is frequently performed throughout the world. His musical language combines Chinese folk music and Western techniques--the meeting of East and West.

This essay will discuss Bright Sheng's *The Stream Flows* for solo violin (1990), *Three Fantasies* for Violin and Piano (2006), String Quartet No.3 (1993), and String Quartet No.4 *Silent Tempo* (2000). These works represent Sheng's chamber music for strings. This essay will be organized as follows: Chapter 1 will provide Bright Sheng's biography and compositional style. Chapter 2 will discuss an overview of Chinese folk music. Chapter 3 is an analysis of Sheng's *The Stream Flows* for solo violin. Chapter 4 will introduce Sheng's *Three Fantasies* for Violin and Piano. Chapters 5 and 6 will present Sheng's String Quartets No.3 and No.4.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of meeting of East and West, fusing non-Western compositional elements in twentieth-century work is not new. From its beginning in Europe, it came to America in the mid-twentieth century. Many of the American avant-garde composers, such as John Cage and T. S. Eliot, have tried to use Eastern elements in their works either by direct borrowing of melodic material or spiritual thoughts.

Since the mid-1980s, Chou Wen-Chung,¹ a champion of East-West musical fusion, has recruited a group of outstanding young Chinese composers to study at Columbia University. Most of these composers, such as Bright Sheng, Tan Dun, Chen Yi, and Zhou long, had conservatory training before coming to the United States. They shared similar biographical backgrounds and moved to the west in search for artistic freedom and embraced Western musical culture with fresh ears. Within the past twenty years, the uniqueness of their compositions has attracted the attention of the music world. In their compositions, Chinese music not only often becomes their primary inspiration, but also, like Western compositional techniques, supplies profound tools in their process of creating new works. They are now in their late 40s and early 50s; they are successful in their individual careers and are contributing a great deal to musical life in America. Bright Sheng has received the McArthur Genius Award, and Tan Dun was given a Grammy Award and an Oscar. Furthermore, the works of these composers have been performed regularly by some of the best orchestras around the world. These composers,

1 Francisco F. Feliciano. *Four Asian Contemporary Composers: The Influence of Tradition in Their Works*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1983.

called the “Chinese wave,” which began in China, spread to America, and have now caught the attention of the world.²

² James, Oestreich. “The Sound Of New Music Is Often Chinese; A New Contingent Of American Composer.” *New York Times*, April 1, 2001.

CHAPTER 1

BIOGRAPHY AND COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

Bright Sheng (Chinese name: Sheng, Zong-Liang) was born in Shanghai, China, December 6, 1955. He began taking piano lessons from his mother at the age of four. His earliest encounter with Western music came through listening to his father's record collection. When Sheng was eleven years old, like many people of his generation in China, the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution marked a change in his life. During this time, Western instruments and records were considered capitalistic products. The performance of Western music was prohibited. A huge number of cultural and artistic documents were destroyed as the Chinese people were forced to abandon their traditional customs. Sheng's family background caused him more suffering during this harsh period. Sheng was from a well educated family, his parents were a medical doctor and an engineer, and his grandfather was educated in the United States. Due to their upper-class status, the family was politically blacklisted and tortured.

In 1971, after graduating from middle school in Shanghai, Sheng was sent and forced to serve in labor camps in Qinghai Province. Sheng later recalled this experience, "the most tragic time in recent Chinese history, ...I was one of the millions of Chinese who were the witnesses, victims, and survivors of the Cultural Revolution."³ It is true that so many Chinese, and especially those artistic and intellectual people, suffered during the Cultural Revolution, thousands died and millions were imprisoned or exiled.

Fortunately, because of his piano skills, he gained a position in a folk and dance

3 Sheng, Bright. "Hun (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966-1976 for Orchestra." *Perspectives of New Music*, 33, 1995.

troupe in Qinghai which freed him from heavy labor. This experience gave Sheng an interest in composing music and collecting folk songs. Sheng recalled that he benefited tremendously from this experience in Qinghai.

Following the Cultural Revolution, colleges were reopened for everyone. Sheng passed entrance examination and was one of the first students accepted by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, one of the country's most prestigious music schools. His hard work at school provided him with a solid foundation for future studies in the United States. After graduating from the conservatory, he moved to New York in 1982, attending Queens College where he continued his studies in music composition with George Perle and Hugo Weisgall. The beginning years in the United States were very difficult for the young composer; he had no money, no friends, and very little knowledge of English. Also, his Western musical knowledge did not give him a sufficient background for his studies at Queens College. However, this deficiency was made up by his hard work, determination, and extraordinary musical talent. He pursued his doctoral degree at Columbia University, studying with Chou Wen-Chung, who had a strong influence on his Chinese musical thought. He participated in several summer festivals such as the Fountainebleau American School in France, Aspen Music Festival, and Tanglewood Music Festival. During this time, he met Gerard Schwarz and Leonard Bernstein, two important people who later became Sheng's friends and mentors.

1988 was an important year for Bright Sheng. His first orchestral work "*Hun (Laceration): In Memoriam 1966-76 of Chinese Culture Revolution*," was premiered by the New York Chamber Symphony, and it was big success. Shortly thereafter it was

performed by the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and many other orchestras around the world. This work was awarded first runner-up for the 1989 Pulitzer Prize.⁴

He has served as composer-in-residence for the Lyric Opera of Chicago (1989-92) and the Seattle Symphony Orchestra (1992-95), and as artistic director for the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra's Wet Ink Festival (1993). In 1995 he joined the composition department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he serves as Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Music. His many honours include Guggenheim (1990), Naumberg (1990), Rockefeller (1991), a Kennedy Center award (1995) and an ASCAP Concert Music Award (2002), and MacArthur (2001) foundation fellowships, with a cash price of \$500,000.⁵ In 1996 Sheng returned to China for the first time after a 14-year absence to compose the cello concerto *Spring Dreams*, commissioned by Yo-Yo Ma for cello and Chinese traditional orchestra.

For a young musician who came to this country penniless, Sheng's rapid rise in the music world within the past twenty years is considered an extraordinary achievement. His name has been listed among the leading contemporary composers in the United States.⁶

The Meeting of East and West--Influence on Chinese Folk Music

Most of Bright Sheng's compositions are cross-cultural. Sheng has developed a

⁴ Sadie, Stanley. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians*, 2nd ed., S. v. "Sheng, Bright." v. 23, 2001.

⁵ Internet Source: http://www.schirmer.com/composers/sheng_bio.html.

⁶ Sadie, Stanley. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians*, 2nd ed., S.v. "USA, Art Music, 20 century." 2001.

distinct personal style and has a deep understanding of both Chinese and Western musical cultures. In many of Sheng's compositions, inspiration are mainly from his earlier life experiences in China. Sheng's young age experience of working and performing in Qinghai province provided him with a rich resource of authentic Chinese folksongs. Sheng said, "Although I was born and raised in Shanghai, Qinghai always felt like a second homeland."⁷ Sheng's compositional style is strongly influenced by Chinese folk song styles, he based thematic material on these folk tunes, and varies these pre-existing materials by changing tempo, rhythm, timbre, and dynamic. His style also incorporates Western compositional techniques. For example, his style clearly demonstrates his study of Bach's fugues, Beethoven's variations, Bartók's folklores, and Stravinsky's dramatic dissonances. In Sheng's music one also hears influences of Hindemith for the use of modal harmony. Although he studied with George Perle, a well-known theorist and composer of serial music, he did not limit himself to serial techniques. Rather, he has been able to use the concept of pitch-class sets to serve his needs. This can be seen in his String Quartet No.3 in which he used a [0, 2, 5, 7] pentatonic tetrachord as a modal motive for building thematic and harmonic structures.

Making East meet West has been one of the central themes of the composer's life. After growing up in China and moving to United States in his mid-20s, Sheng refers to China as his motherland and to the United States as his fatherland, combining his 'mother- tongue' and 'father-tongue.'⁸

7 Grotenhuis, Elizabeth. *Along the Silk Road*. Smithsonian Institution: University of Washington Press, 1999.

8 Cameron, Lindsley. "At Home in Two Worlds: Bright Sheng re-examines his Chinese roots in an instrumental work even as he continues to write operas in a Westernized style." *New York Times*, 1997.

CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW OF CHINESE FOLK MUSIC

China has a long history, a vast territory, and a large population. The nation, the folk history, and all localities have collected folk songs. Chinese folk music originated in primitive hunting, ritual, mating and herding activities and has the longest history, simplest structure, richest numbers, and widest spreading musical genre within Chinese traditional culture.

The Han people account for above 90% of China's population. In the course of their folk song tradition, being sung over a long period of time, they adapted themselves to the special requirements of a variety of functions and environments. Chinese folksongs gradually formed themselves into a series of artistic categories. This music falls into nine categories according to music genres as Hao Zi (work songs), Shan Ge (mountain songs), Tian Ge (field songs), Xiao Diao (small tunes), Wu Ge (dance songs), Yu Ge (fisherman's songs), ritual songs, children's songs and vendor's cries.

China has many ethnic groups besides the Han. Reflecting even greater cultural diversity than the Han Chinese are China's ethnic minorities. They form 56 ethnic groups, and they live in various autonomous regions, prefectures and counties.⁹ Their music is outlined here in three geographic categories. Music in the north region of Mongolia Plateau, music in the far-west region of Xinjiang Plateau, and music in the south-west region of Tibetan Plateau, whose homeland is in the high-mountainous. The majority of various Chinese ethnic groups inhabit these three main areas. And these

⁹ Wang, Ke-Wen. *Modern China: An Encyclopedia of History, Culture, and Nationalism*. S. v. "China," v. 3, New York: Garland Publishing, 1998.

different ethnic minorities in China all have their own work songs, mountain songs, dance songs, ritual songs and children' s songs. In addition, their love songs, narrative songs and religions songs are all of high importance.

In the vast territory of China, with its varied geography and land forms, and among its different ethnic groups, folk song has different modes of production. For example, Chinese folk songs especially those from the high mountain regions of the Tibetan are sung predominantly by high voices, often with long trills that can carry over great distances.

CHAPTER 3

BRIGHT SHENG'S *THE STREAM FLOWS FOR SOLO VIOLIN*

The Stream Flows for violin solo is based on the vocal version of *The Stream Flows*, one of the most beautiful and well-known Chinese folk songs: Shan Ge (mountain song) from the Yunnan province, which is inhabited by many minorities and which has an environment that develops folk songs from its diverse cultural inheritance. The song describes a young girl's longing for her love. When looking at the shining moon in the sky, the person thinks of her loved one who is far away over the mountain.

(Ai) Yue Liang Chu Lai	The rising moon
噯! 月 亮 出 来	
Liang Wang Wang;	shines brightly;
亮 汪 汪;	
Xiang Qi Wo DE A Ge Zai Sheng Shan,	It reminds me of my love in the mountains.
想 起 我 的 阿 哥 在 深 山,	
Ge Xiang Yue Liang Tian Shang Zou,	Like the moon, you walk in the sky,
哥 像 月 亮 天 上 走,	
Shan Xia Xiao He Tang Shui Qing Yo Yo,	As the crystal stream flows down the
山 下 小 河 淌 水 清 悠 悠.	mountain.
(Ai) Yue Liang Chu Lai	The rising moon
噯! 月 亮 出 来	
Zhao Ban Po,	shines brightly,
照 半 坡,	
Wang Jian Yue Liang Xiang Qi Wo Di A Ge,	It reminds me of my love in the mountains,
望 见 月 亮 想 起 我 的 阿 哥.	
Yi Zhen Qing Feng Chui Shang PO,	A clear breeze blows up the hill,
一 阵 轻 风 吹 山 坡,	
Ge A, Ni Ke Ting Jian A Mei Jiao A Ge?	My love, do you hear me calling you? ¹⁰
哥 阿! 你 可 听 见 阿 妹 叫 阿 哥	

Figure 1. Chinese text and English translation

¹⁰ The English translation of this song is by Bight Sheng.

Example 1. The score of the original folk song *The Stream Flows--Xiao He Tang Shui*¹¹

Ai Yue Lian chu Lai Liang Wang Wang Liang Wang Wang
 Ai Yue Lian chu Lai Liang Wang Wang Liang Wang Wang
 Xiang Qi Wo De A Ge Zai Shen Shan Ge Xiang Yue Liang
 Xiang Qi Wo De A Ge Zai Shen Shan Y Zhen Qing Feng
 Tian Shang Zou Tian Shang Zou Ge A Ge A
 Chuei Shang Po Chuei Shang Po Ge A Ge A
 Ge A Shan Xia Xiao He Tang Shuei Qieng Yiou Yiou
 Ge A Ni Ke Xing Jian A Mei Jiao A Ge

11 The example is from [A Collection of Chinese Folk Songs] (Beijing: Ren-Min Yin Yue Chu Ban She), 1980.

Yunnan Province is a continuation of the Tibetan plateau in the south-west mountain regions. As I mentioned earlier, Chinese folk songs from the mountain regions are sung primarily by high voices and in the open air. The character of folk verses often have no end rhyme or fixed number of characters in a line; and singers add nonsense syllables to create musical climaxes. For example, (Ai) in the beginning of the song and “Ge A, Ge A” in end of the verses are added nonsense syllables.

Sheng recalled “The freshness and richness of the tune deeply touched me when I first heard it...hope that the tone quality of a female folk singer is evoked by the timbre of the solo violin.”¹² In the years of collecting and studying Chinese folk songs during Sheng’s exile in Qinghai Province, these love songs became his inspiration.

The Stream Flows, for solo violin, was dedicated to his teacher Hugo Weisgall. It is in two parts: the first part which was derived from the melody of the folk song, is more lyrical. He borrowed the folk melody, and worked on thematic and rhythmic development, modal harmony, and the Chinese singing style of modulation.

In the first part, he used the first two phrases from the folk song to develop the whole work of his solo violin piece. The original folk song of *The Stream Flows* is composed in Chinese Yu Mode.¹³ There are five modes in Chinese pentatonic scale system, and each mode has five notes. The name of the five notes are Gong, Shang, Jiao, Zhi, and Yu.

If the first note begins with “Gong,” the result is the Gong mode.

12 Bright Sheng, *The Stream Flows*. G. Schirmer, Inc, 1999.

13 Su Sun Wong. *An Analysis of Five Vocal Works by Bright Sheng*. DMA diss., The University of Texas, 1995.

Example 2. Five modes of the Five-Note or pentatonic scale

1. Gong
gong shang jiao zhi yu gong

2. Shang
shang jiao zhi yu gong shang

3. Jiao
jiao zhi yu gong shang jiao

4. Zhi
zhi yu gong shang jiao zhi

5. Yu
yu gong shang jiao zhi yu

Example 3. As the folk song starts C note with Yu mode because it consists C E-flat F-G

Example 4. The first theme of the Solo Violin, mm. 1-4

mf cantabile

The first theme is from the first phrase of the original song. The opening long nonsense syllable note is the sign note often used in folk music for tuning purpose. Sheng adds a slide to the long note to emphasize of the human voice, and he transposes the melody to the key of A.

Example 5. The second phrase of the Yunnan Folk song, mm. 5-8



Sheng transfers the second phrase to the key of B-flat and then B-natural with modulation to C-sharp for the Solo Violin.

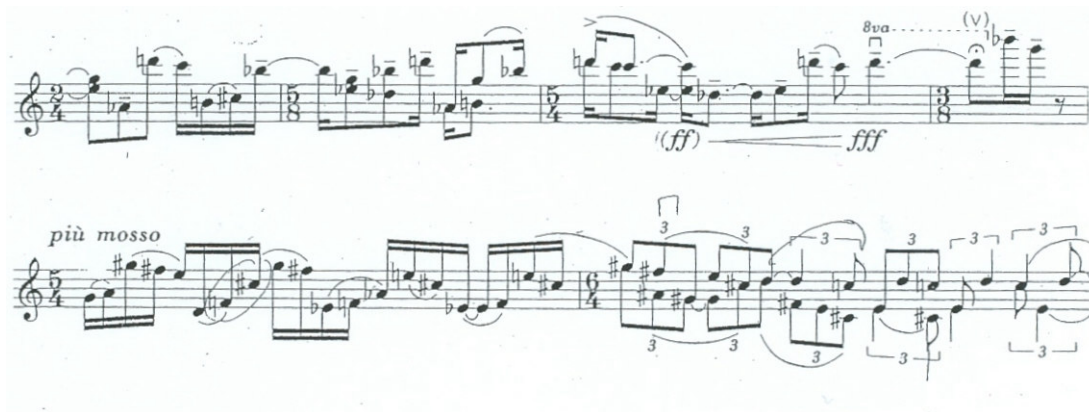
Example 6. The second theme of the Solo Violin, mm. 5-8



Sheng skillfully uses the first two phrases to build the whole of the Part I. He varies these pre-existing material by changing the keys, rhythm, harmonic, dynamics, timbres and texture. The piece begins the key of A (mm.15), and modulates to B-flat (mm.5-7), and then to B with modulation to C-sharp (mm. 7-8), C (mm.9-10), A (mm.11-17), E-flat (mm.18-20). No key signature is indicated. Here the restlessness of the non-tonic

modulation and overflowing emotion of the melodic line express the type of folk singing. According to Sheng, “since it was vocally improvised by nomads and farmers who had no musical training whatsoever, therefore the tune is often inflection and no justness of intonation.”¹⁴ In following section, from m. 45-50, the use of bitonality is very distinctively characteristic to the whole piece, and both voices contain harmonic dissonant intervals such as minor second, augment fourths, fifths, sevenths and diminished fourth and fifth to intensify the emotional expression. Generally, Chinese folk song is based upon a single melody line and is very different from Western music, and there is no harmonic support for the horizontal line. In this section, Sheng successfully merged Eastern and Western compositional styles in a highly creative and effective way, one perceives two parts playing simultaneously in different keys.

Example 7. Bitonal passages in Sheng’s *The Stream Flow*, mm. 45-50



¹⁴ Telephone interview by author, 6 July, 2006.

Sheng also uses a variety of timbres on the violin to reflect vocal effects. At the end of the piece, he uses both natural and artificial harmonic.

The second part, in contrast with the first part, is characterized by a fast tempo and an exciting country dance rhythm. It based on a three-note motive with a strong syncopated rhythm that drives the music in a forward direction.

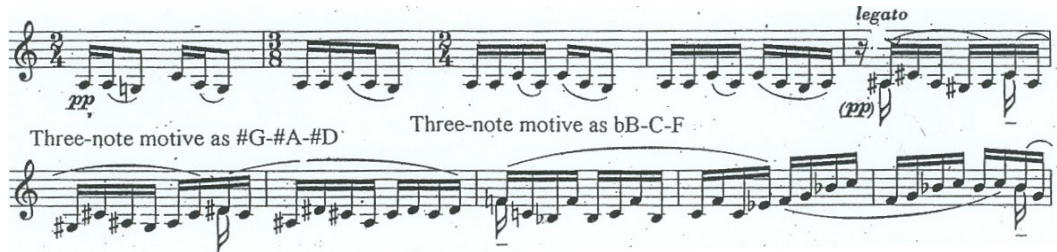
Example 8. Three-note motive in Sheng's *The Stream Flows*, second part, mm.5-30

Three-note motive as B-#G-#C

The musical score consists of five staves of music. The first staff begins with the three-note motive (B-#G-#C) and includes various articulations and dynamics. The second staff continues the motive with 'on the string' and 'pizz. arco' markings. The third staff features 'pizz. arco' and 'sim.' markings. The fourth staff has 'pizz. arco' and 'ff' markings. The fifth staff shows the motive in a different rhythmic context with 'ff' and 'V' markings.

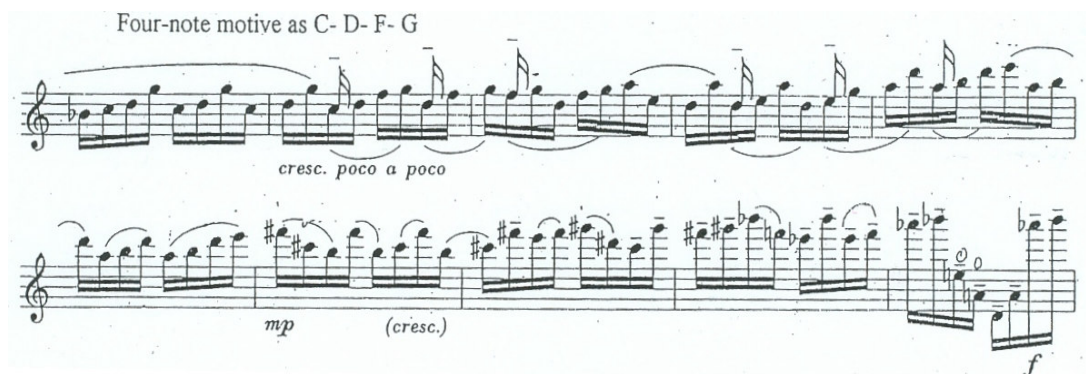
The three-note motive is derived from a pentatonic scale. Sheng transposes the three-note motive to different keys and registers throughout the whole piece.

Example 9. The transposition of the three-note motive in Sheng's *The Stream Flows*, second part, mm. 111-120



As the three-note motive develops in the movement, Sheng adds another interval from the pentatonic scale to become a four-note motive in some passages.

Example 10. The four-note motive in Sheng's *The Stream Flows*, second part, mm. 121-130¹⁵



15 Yu-Chi Wang. *A survey of the unaccompanied violin repertoire, centering on works by J. S. Bach and Eugene Ysaye*. DMA diss., University of Maryland, 2005.

In this movement, there are two alternating contrasting sections: section A is loud, fast and festive; and section B is soft and tender, with the tune merely hinted.

One gets a glimpse of the ways in which Sheng works his material out. He uses Chinese tunes in both movements only as points of departure. He has further used many Western compositional techniques, such as the development of themes, contrasting dynamics, bitonal structure, and irregular temporal structure. He writes variations for the motives of the tune, as he considers that: “anything repeated will be less interesting.” As for violin techniques, besides Sheng’s use of both natural and artificial harmonics, he also employs *ponticello* bowing and left and right hand *pizzicato* for the open strings to give a picture of a festive atmosphere or a revelry dance.

CHAPTER 4

THREE FANTASIES FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO

The Three Fantasies for Violin and Piano were premiered by violinist Cho-Liang Lin and pianist Andre-Michael Schub on May 19, 2006, at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The three movements compiled here come from three seemingly very different inspirations.

The first fantasy, *Dream Song*, is a short memory from what Sheng had heard in a dream. In this movement, a violin and piano played a very simple tune, which has pentatonic fragments that suggest the flavor of Chinese melodies.

The second fantasy, *Tibetan Air*, is mostly inspired by Tibetan La'i singing,¹⁶ a kind of Tibetan love song. Having spent seven years in Qinghai, Sheng's melodic writing is strongly influence by the ethnic music from that region. He said, "As I spent time and lived with the local folk musicians, I did not realize what a great influence this folk music would eventually have on me. To this day, Qinghai folk music is a strong inspiration in my writing."¹⁷

Qinghai province is in the north-west part of China, in the high mountains. This very remote area used to be part of Tibet and is the home of many different ethnic groups, such as the Tibetans, Mongolians, and Chinese Muslims. Because of the rough lifestyle, folk music is their only form of entertainment, its development is significant. Folk songs from Qinghai are a special and beautiful type of music-- simultaneously savage and

16 Information is directly provided by Bright Sheng in his email, 08/21/ 2006.

17 Bright Sheng, "How I Came to be a Composer," Internet source, http://www.Schirmer.com/composers/sheng_essay1.html.

sensual. In this movement, Sheng grasps the raw and primitive character of Tibetan La' i love song singing. He chooses thematic materials and develops them through variations in dynamics and texture, and other modern Western music compositional techniques. Vertically, the meter and rhythm seem to appear randomly. For example, one can find that violin and piano carries an independent melodic line and do not suggest clear harmonic. But horizontally the singing is presented in a very straightforward, long-breath motion. It might give the listener an unwieldy 'wild' feeling.¹⁸

Sheng stated that Bartók is one of his compositional models, especially the way in which he fuses East European folk music with classical traditions. But what makes Bartók's music great is that he managed to keep the primitiveness and savageness of the folk elements, as well as the refined quality of the classical tradition.¹⁹ In this movement, *Tibetan Air*, one can hear Bartók's chromatic melodic, percussive dissonant timbre, contrasting dynamics, and rhythmic energy, but with Sheng's mixture of the savageness or rudeness of folk melody.

The third fantasy; *Kazakstan Love Song* follows without pause. This movement is based on a folk song he heard while traveling in the Chinese part of Kazakhstan during the summer of 2000, of which time he was researching ethnic music along the ancient Silk Road. Sheng recalled, "I was immediately drawn by the sheer beauty and tingle of sadness in the melody."²⁰

18 Bright Sheng, *The Three Fantasies for Violin and Piano* (G. Schirmer, Inc, 1999).

19 McCutchan, Ann *The Muse That Sings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

20 Bright Sheng, *The Three Fantasies for violin and Piano* (G. Schirmer, Inc, 2006).

Example 11. Vertically, the meter and rhythm seem to appear randomly

The musical score consists of three systems, each featuring a piano (piano) and organ (organo) part. The notation is complex, with many accidentals and dynamic markings.

- System 1:** The piano part (top staff) has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It features a series of chords and melodic lines with dynamic markings like *ff* and *ff*. The organ part (bottom staff) has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat, with a *ff* dynamic marking. A *Sost. sempre* instruction is present.
- System 2:** The piano part (top staff) has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It features a series of chords and melodic lines with dynamic markings like *f* and *f*. The organ part (bottom staff) has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat, with a *f* dynamic marking. A *(Sost.)* instruction is present.
- System 3:** The piano part (top staff) has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It features a series of chords and melodic lines with dynamic markings like *ff* and *ff*. The organ part (bottom staff) has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat, with a *ff* dynamic marking. A *(Sost.)* instruction is present.

Other markings include *al tallono, sul G*, *inside*, *normale*, *on keys*, and *ferma e pesante*.

Kazakh has a small population in Xinjiang Province in the far-west part of China, it has borders with Russia. It seems that almost all Kazakh people can sing, dance, or play an instrument. Vocal music is an important part of its life. Kazakh oral and professional song is declamatory and narrative, at the same time it is refined in its lyric perception. Their music is generally improvised and typically meter-less, and performers have some space for personal embellishments. The expressive mode ranges from sentimental to primitive. Kazakhstan's folk music has been influenced by ethnic Russian music and Western European music.

In Sheng's instrumental writing, one also finds the integration of use of vocal effects such as whispering, sighing, weeping, and vocally explosive sounds to add aural conceptualization to the text. These features can be heard throughout the entire third fantasy.

CHAPTER 5

STRING QUARTET NO. 3

String Quartet No. 3 was written for the Takacs Quartet and premiered in November 1993, in Boulder, Colorado. It was inspired by the memories of a Tibetan folk melody *Hua'er*. The melody is followed with very rhythmic dance. The slow elegy in the final *Larghetto* section is in memory of his friend who died during the time he composed this work.²¹

In Qinghai, where everyone loves to sing mountain songs, *Hua'er* is the most popular type of mountain and love songs, which are prevalent throughout northwest China. This informal music is often competitive in nature, with singers interacting and improvising topical and love lyrics, usually unaccompanied. *Hua'er*, which is translated as “flower,” is the nickname of beloved young women by young men in this region. The singing style of *Hua'er* is in a mixture of natural voice and falsetto; singers tend to sing in a loud and high register, so that their voices can carry over a long distance. *Hua'er* songs are sung in solo, antiphonal duets and small a cappella groups. *Hua'er* melodic style has been used in some of Sheng's other compositions as well, for instance, his opera *Song of Majnun*, *The Seven Tunes in China* for cello, and the first movement from his *China Dreams* for orchestra are all based on the folk melody *Hua'er*. As Sheng remembers, the character of the free *Hua'er* singing takes the character of rhythmic dance figures which are common to the style of Tibetan folk dance.

The opening motive of the quartet was influenced by the style of *Hua'er*. The

21 Bright Sheng, *String Quartet No. 3* (G. Schirmer, Inc, 1993).

violin and viola start in a with responsorial style. This motive is based on a continuing development with variation in rhythmic and melodic expansion. Mm. 122-147 show the characteristic aspects of a folk song singer's style, which is in a loud falsetto voice in high register, played by first violin. From m.149 to end of the movement, this free folk singing style gradually introduces very rhythmic dance figures with which the song continues. The string quartet is based on two compositional processes. The first is the use of a modal motive; the second is the idea of counterpoint. Both techniques are skillfully used in the movement and are further developed by variation of pitch, rhythm, articulation, timbre, texture, dynamics, and tempo. The use of the modal motive in the first movement consists of a four-note [0, 2, 5, 7] pitch-class set from the pentatonic scale (the pentatonic tetrachord).²² Sheng used this collection as a basis for building the thematic and harmonic structures for the whole movement. From beginning of the first movement, the pitch-classes of violin II are (D, E, G, A)=(2, 4, 7, 9), a member of [0, 2, 5, 7]. After two measures, viola plays (G, A, C, D)=(7, 9, 0, 2), a member of [0, 2, 5, 7]. When the first violin joins in at m.11, the transposed four-note pitch-class set (G#, A#, C#, D#)=[8, 10, 1, 3], a member of [0, 2, 5, 7]. The cello uses another transposed four-note pitch-class set (C#, D#, F#, G#)=(1, 3, 6, 8), a member of [0, 2, 5, 7]. One finds that each of these pitch-class sets is a transposition or a transposed subset of the pentatonic collection and these collections not only permeates the movement but are also used in variety of ways as the piece unfolds. For example, from mm. 32-34, all of the melodic fragments can be traced back to the set [0, 2, 5, 7] or a transposed subset.

²² Telephone interview by author, 6 July, 2006.

Example 12. Model motive of the pentatonic collection

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

mp molto legato

pizz.

mp molto legato

at the frog

ff *mp* *p* *pp*

at the frog
sul G

pp

arco sul D
at the frog

ff

sul G

Example 13. Melodic fragments from transposed pentatonic subset

32

ff *E #F A B*

mp *#F #G B #C*

p *bE F bA B*

pizz. *poco* *p* *bE F bA bB*

ff *f* *mf* *mp*

Sheng further changes and develops this motivic material into other musical aspects, which include rhythm, articulation, dynamic, timbre and texture. This set is also used vertically to create harmony. At mm. 255 and 256, viola and cello together play chords from the set-class, while violin I and II together play chords from another member of the set-class.

Example 14. Chords from the pentatonic tetrachord set-class

pp sub. *arco* *ppp* *ppp*

E #F A B *pp sub.* *ppp* *ppp*

pp sub. *ppp*

Thus, the modal motive of this pentatonic tetrachord stands significantly as the basis for the work.

The contrapuntal thinking used in this movement appears, for example, at the beginning of Example 13, the motive of violin II is based on larger intervals which are a perfect 5th down and a major 9th up in natural harmonics. It is imitated in the viola. This imitation recalls a mountain echo. The other motive is played by violin I, using tremolo, and follows with heavy down-bow playing at the frog. The motive is answered by the cello.²³ From these two motives materials, contrapuntal aspects are found in interval, timbre, and pitch collections. Later the contrapuntal idea is also seen in dynamic and character. Following the development of thematic ideas, the different sections are recognized easily. The concepts of a tonal center, major and minor modes, and modulation are foundations of development in this work. In fact, Sheng harmonizes the folk melodies with techniques from Western tonality.

23 Lai, Ting-Ju. *Volume I, A perspective on ethnic synthesis in twentieth century art music with a focus on an analysis of String quartet no. 3 by Bright Sheng; Volume II, Fly to the moon*. Ph.D diss., University of California, 2001.

CHAPTER 6

STRING QUARTET NO. 4 *SILENT TEMPO*

Silent Tempo was written for the Shanghai Quartet and premiered in March, 2000 at the University of Richmond, Virginia. Unlike the 3rd Quartet, the fourth is less structured, nevertheless it does depict the character of the Cultural Revolution. In this quartet, Sheng evokes the atmosphere and historical echoes of an abandoned Buddhist monastery that Sheng visited during the Cultural Revolution. He used the same inspiration in his best-known orchestral work, *H'un (laceration) In memoriam 1966-1976*, a symphonic sound portrait of the Cultural Revolution, written in 1988. As Sheng recalled, “the most striking and powerful memory I have from the visit is that, in spite of the appalling condition of the temple, it was still grandiose and magnificent in its structure. The fact that it was located in the snowy mountainous ranges added to its dignity and glory. Standing in the middle of the courtyard I could almost hear the praying and the chanting of the monks, as well as the violence committed to the temple and the monks by the Red Guards.”²⁵ During the Cultural Revolution, communist leader Mao organized China's urban youths into groups called the Red Guards and shut down China's schools, and encouraged the Red Guards to attack all traditional values. Thousands of monasteries and religious buildings were destroyed, as well as the people's spiritual, cultural, and religious identity. The string quartet No. 4, “*Silent Tempo*” is both angry and a cry for the tragic historical experience of the Chinese Culture Revolution. This compact and extraordinarily intense four- movement work can be heard as

24 Bright Sheng, String Quartet No. 4 (G. Schirmer, Inc, 2006).

representational music. To this day, the memories of Sheng's visit remain vivid, and he used them almost randomly as the basic images in this composition. The work has four short and seemingly unrelated ideas.

In Part I, the simple and transparent texture turned into repeated sixteen notes, which portrays the peaceful surrounding of the temple with water streams in snowy mountains. Although, Sheng was unaware of the theoretical aspects, it is a result of many intuitive and logical conclusions of the composition in this movement.²⁶

In Part II, Sheng evokes monk's chants inspired by the Chinese instrument guqin, literally "ancient stringed-instrument," which is the modern name for a plucked seven-string of the zither family. The guqin is a very quiet instrument, and the sounds are produced by plucking open strings, stopped strings, and harmonics. Here the entire movement is played by string pizzicato and use of glissando, sliding tones; it gives a sound reminiscent of a guqin. Perhaps the most challenging aspect for analyzing this composition is that there is no melody or tune. Instead, it is built upon a two-note motive. However, Sheng incorporated fugal writing to develop throughout the movement. Sheng explains, "A work without a melody therefore must take full advantage of other musical elements in order for the listener to perceive the structure."²⁷

In Part III, the peaceful monk's chanting and the snowy mountains's scenery was interrupted by repeated rigorous chords, representing the invading Red Guards. This harsh sound resembles particularly that of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* through its building

25 Telephone interview by author, 6 July, 2006.

26 Bright Sheng, *A Self-Analysis of 'H'un (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966-1976 for Orchestra*. DMA diss., Columbia University, 1993.

Example 15. Two-note motive in Sheng's String Quartet No. 4 *Silent Tempo*, Part II

The musical score is presented in four systems, each containing three staves. The first system (measures 1-3) features a two-note motive in the first and third staves, marked with *pizz., senza sord.*, *gl.*, and *poco cresc.* dynamics. The second system (measures 4-6) features the motive in the second and fourth staves, marked with *p*, *poco cresc.*, and *mp* dynamics. The third system (measures 7-9) features the motive in the first and third staves, marked with *p*, *poco cresc.*, and *mp* dynamics. The fourth system (measures 10-12) features the motive in the second and fourth staves, marked with *p*, *poco cresc.*, and *mp* dynamics. The score includes various performance instructions such as *pizz., senza sord.*, *gl.*, *poco cresc.*, *mp*, *sempre sim.*, and *ff sub.*.

Example 16. Dynamic contrast and use of ostinato

30

In Part IV, the melody was inspired of Shanxi folk song; “yi bo tan tan yang liu Shu”--*Rolls of Willow Trees*.²⁸ Shanxi and its capital, Xi'an, is a north-central region, along the border with inner-Mongolia. Loess plateau and its dusty soil covers almost all of Shanxi, where a large number of people have lived below the poverty line. Many Shanxi folk songs reveal their inner world and are composed mainly to the story of their bitterness of life. Here one can hear a tragic cry, deep and sad, but full of the purity of humanity and longing for happiness. In the *Rolls of Willow Tree*, the music consists of little-ups and straight-on-the-way downs in a direct reflection of a sigh-tone, as if to speak out of the backlog in their hearts. In this manner, the little ups and downs melodies are used to construct the first half of Part IV. Sheng further develops the structure in this section through frequent transposition of the Keys, and he uses a variety of timbres in the texture. The folk song is interrupted by the music that characterizes the Red Guards.

Sheng's complex textures and juxtapositions of tone and resonant silence in *Silent Tempo* sound on first hearing to be a potent sequel to his first orchestral work, “*Hun (Laceration): In Memoriam 1966-76 of Chinese Culture Revolution*.”

27 This information is directly provided by Bright Sheng in his email, 09/22/ 2006.

Example 17. Little-up and straight-on-the-way down melodies. Part IV.

The musical score for Example 17, Part IV, is written for four string instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The score is organized into three systems of four staves each.

- System 1 (Measures 1-4):**
 - Violin I:** Starts with *con sord., sul G* and *ff espr.*. A *gl.* (glissando) is marked at the end of the first measure.
 - Violin II:** Starts with *con sord.* and *ff espr.*.
 - Viola:** Starts with *con sord.* and *ff espr.*.
 - Violoncello:** Starts with *con sord.* and *ff espr.*.
- System 2 (Measures 5-8):**
 - Violin I:** Measure 5 is marked *(sul G)*. A *gl.* is marked at the end of measure 6. The system ends with a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic.
 - Violin II:** Continues the melodic line.
 - Viola:** Continues the melodic line. A *pizz.* (pizzicato) marking appears in measure 8.
 - Violoncello:** Continues the melodic line.
- System 3 (Measures 9-12):**
 - Violin I:** Measure 9 is marked *50*. The system ends with a *p* (piano) dynamic.
 - Violin II:** Continues the melodic line.
 - Viola:** Continues the melodic line. A *arco* (arco) marking appears in measure 10.
 - Violoncello:** Continues the melodic line. A *gl.* is marked at the end of measure 11.

CONCLUSION

The four compositions that I have discussed about are among Sheng's many examples that demonstrate his profound understanding of both Eastern and Western elements. Through an examination of Bright Sheng's compositional techniques, and the drastic changes in his life, to the East, Sheng's unique musical language represents the inspiration of the new generation in China; to the West, his musical style is a successful inter-marriage of the music of East and West.

In an interview, Sheng said, "All of my compositions somehow deal with Chinese culture, yet they synthesize Chinese and Western musical forms, and they reflect in my appreciation and understanding of both cultures. Now I actually enjoy the fact that I can live in, and enjoy and appreciate two different cultures. Because I have lived in both, I cherish them so much more."²⁹

In the end, Sheng believes that throughout music history, the expression of human emotions has been a way to empower a musical work. Composing is not technique for technique's sake, but to move the listeners with an affective experience. Sheng stated: "Music is both a product of humanity and a treasure for humanity to share."³⁰ Appealing to human emotions is the important ingredient in his music. He hopes to write immortal works that can stand the test of time.

28 Harper, Michelle. "An interview with Bright Sheng." *The Journal of the International Institute*, 1999.

29 Bright Sheng, "H' un (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966-1967 for Orchestral" *Perspectives of New Music*, v. 33, 1995.

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APPENDIX A

SHENG'S LIST OF WORKS

(published exclusively by G. Schirmer, Inc. in New York City).

Stage

The Song of Majnun (1 act opera, libretto by Andrew Porter), soprano, 3 mezzo-sopranos, tenor, 2 baritones, bass-baritone, mixed chorus, orchestra, 1992 (a suite was arranged as *Fragments from 'The Song of Majnun'*)

may i feel, said he (mini-opera, libretto by E.E. Cummings), soprano, tenor, piano 4 hands, 1996

The Silver River (music theatre work, text by David Henry Hwang), male Chinese opera voice, baritone, actress, 3 dancers, flute (+ piccolo, alto flute), clarinet (+ bass clarinet, percussion), pipa, violin (+ percussion), cello (+ percussion), percussion, 1997, revised 2000

Madame Mao (2 act opera, libretto by Colin Graham), high lyric soprano, 2 sopranos, mezzo-soprano, 2 tenors, 3 baritones, 2 basses, mixed chorus, large orchestra, 2003

Orchestra

H'un–Lacerations: In Memoriam 1966-76, large orchestra, 1988

China Dreams, large orchestra, 1992-95 (two sections may be performed separately: *Fanfare*, 1992)

Prelude, 2(2pic)+pic.2+ca.3(Ebcl,bcl).2+cbn/43(pictpt)31/timp.3perc/pf.hp/st 1994

Postcards, 1(pic).2(ca).1(Ebcl,bcl).2/2100/2perc/pf(cel)/string 1997

Spring Dreams, cello, Chinese orchestra, 1997 (also version for violin, Chinese orchestra, 1999)

Two Poems, cello, orchestra, 1998

Flute Moon, flute (+ piccolo), small orchestra (harp, piano, 5 percussion, strings), 1999

Red Silk Dance, piano, orchestra, 1999

Nanking! Nanking!, pipa, large orchestra, 2000

Tibetan Swing, large orchestra, 2002

The Song and Dance of Tears (symphonic poem), sheng (Chinese mouth organ), pipa, cello, piano, large orchestra, 2003

Colors of Crimson (concerto), marimba, large orchestra, 2004

Concerto for Orchestra: Zodiac Tales 2005

La'i (Love Song), orchestra, 2005.

Chamber Music

Three Études, flute, 1982, revised 1988

Three Pieces, viola, piano, 1986

The Stream Flows, viola, 1988 (also longer version for violin, 1990)

Four Movements, violin, cello, piano, 1990

String Quartet No. 3, 1993

Seven Yadhtrib Variations, bassoon, 1994

Concertino, clarinet, string quartet, 1994

Seven Tunes Heard in China, cello, 1995

A Tune from Childhood, clarinet, 1996

Three Songs, pipa, cello, 1999

String Quartet No. 4, 'Silent Temple.' 2000

Tibetan Dance, clarinet, violin, piano, 2001

Wild Swan: Concertino for Clarinet and Orchestra, 2006

Three Fantasies for Violin and Piano, violin, piano, 2006

Choral

Two Folksongs from Qinghai, mixed chorus, orchestra, (also version for mixed chorus, 2 pianos, 2 percussion), 1989

Fragments from 'The Song of Majnun', soprano, tenor, mixed chorus, orchestra, (suite from opera), 1992

Two Chinese Folk Tunes, children's chorus, youth string orchestra, 1998

The Boatmen's Song, Children's treble choir (or Women's Chorus), percussion, harp 2004

Vocal

Three Chinese Poems (texts by Wang Wei, Du Fu, Lu Xun), mezzo-soprano, piano, 1982, revised 1992

Two Poems from the Sung Dynasty (texts by Lu Yu, Li Qing-zhao), soprano, small orchestra (13 players), 1985

Three Chinese Love Songs, soprano, viola, piano, 1988

The Phoenix (text by the composer, after Hans Christian Andersen), soprano, large orchestra, 2004

The Boatmen's Song, Children's treble choir (or Women's Chorus), perc, hp 2004

Piano

My Song, 1989

Distant Birthday Bells, 2001

Variation Fugato 2003

APPENDIX B

LETTERS OF PERMISSION

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Mei Mei Wei
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- Part I: Measures 1-12; Part III: measures 27-33; Part IV: measures 1-8

THREE FANTASIES

By Bright Sheng

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- Tibetan Air measures 1-10

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VITA

Born into a family of artist in Shanghai, China, Mei-Mei Wei began her violin studies at an early age from her father. She entered the Shanghai Conservatory of Music where she earned a bachelor's degree in violin performance. In 1985, she came to the United States with fellowship to study, first at Rice University and then University of Southern California where she received her master's degree in violin performance.

Upon her graduation at USC, Mei-Mei Wei joined the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra and was first violinist of the Arizona Philharmonic String Quartet. She has performed with the Shanghai Chamber Orchestra, the Vermeer Quartet, the National Repertoire Orchestra, and the Louisiana State University Symphony Orchestra. She has also served Concertmistress of the Arizona Chamber Orchestra, and Associate-Concertmistress of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra. She was on the faculty of the Idyllwild Music Festival and the R.D. Colburn School of Performing Arts in Los Angeles. Ms. Wei was a teaching assistant at the Louisiana State University. The degree of Doctor of Musical Arts will be conferred on Ms. Wei at the December of 2006 Commencement ceremony.