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## The World of Tan Dun: The Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1

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THE WORLD OF TAN DUN: THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF  
EIGHT MEMORIES IN WATERCOLOR, OP. 1

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts

in

The School of Music

By

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## ABSTRACT

Tan Dun is a mysterious figure in both eastern and western classical music. His rich music interests, innovative approach, and culturally eclectic writing style have gained him an international reputation. His piano suite, *Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1*, while conceived as a simple diary of longing for his hometown, is an essential composition in his oeuvre. Although this piece is often overlooked because of its simplicity, I contend that this Op. 1 is a pivotal piano work containing many of the compositional devices used throughout his career. This piece compellingly combines traditional Chinese music and philosophy with western compositional techniques and lays a solid foundation for his creative style and ideology later.

To uncover the artistic values of this work, this dissertation aims to take the reader into the world of Tan Dun in order to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of this Op. 1. By diving into Tan Dun's world and thoroughly analyzing this work, I discovered what I believe to be the essence of Tan Dun. This essence is a philosophy that affects his compositional style both directly and indirectly. Tan Dun's hometown complex, the philosophy from Taoism, and eastern mysticism have played a vital role in shaping his compositions.



## CHAPTER 1: THE WORLD OF TAN DUN

The most important thing for any composer is to have his or her own distinct musical voice. What a daunting feeling it must be to write one's Op. 1 which serves as a launching point for all of the other compositions to follow. Even though it is a difficult task, it is fascinating to see how composers have tackled this challenge. Composers like Schumann navigated this challenge with aplomb. His Op. 1, *Variations on the name Abegg*, which was composed between 1829 and 1830, is unmistakably Schumann and already contains many of the compositional devices that he would use in his later works. Brahms's Piano Sonata in C major, Op. 1 also makes a huge statement. This piece was composed after the second sonata, however Brahms decided to publish it first because he felt it to be of higher quality. For the composer Tan Dun, his Op. 1, *Eight Memories in Watercolor* is a deeply personal composition that would set the tone for the rest of his works. Even though it was composed when he was only twenty, it already showed a composer who had developed a unique and personal style.

In this paper, I hope to transport the reader to the world of Tan Dun. I will show where Tan Dun lived, elements of his fascinating culture, and how this shaped his life. I will show the rituals, unique instruments, and sounds that were a part of his everyday life. In the end, I will explain why this Op. 1 is such an important byproduct of his childhood and how and why it impacted the rest of his compositional career.

## Xiang-Chu Culture

Tan Dun was born on August 18, 1957 in Changsha, Hunan Province, China.

Changsha is located in Hunan Province, and this geographical location would have major implications for his compositional style. Hunan is known for its distinct Xiang-Chu culture.<sup>1</sup>

Xiang is the nickname for Hunan province and Chu is the name of the kingdom that was located at Hunan. In 700-800 BCE, China was divided into different kingdoms and Chu was one the biggest ones. In order to maintain a separate identity, each kingdom kept its own cultural independence in as many ways as possible. Each kingdom had its own dialect, eating habit, currency, philosophy, and music. The Chu Kingdom has a rich and long history and at one point or another it has governed the provinces of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, Henan, Shanghai, and parts of Jiangsu.<sup>2</sup> The following graphic emphasizes the dominance of the Chu Kingdom circa 260 BCE:



Figure1-1. The map of China circa 260 BCE<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wanju Xiong and Ting Li, "A Discussion on the True Meaning of Xiang-Chu Culture," *New West*, no. 2 (February 28, 2009): 95.

<sup>2</sup> Hua Sun, "Three Topics on the Capital of Chu Kingdom," *Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, no. 4 (August 27, 2005): 60.

<sup>3</sup> "Chu (state)," *Enacademic*, accessed May 14, 2014, <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/480052>.

The Xiang-Chu culture influenced Tan Dun in a variety of ways. The most important influence was the rituals seen in his everyday life. The Xiang-Chu culture is known for its belief in ghosts and spirits, for example.<sup>4</sup> The society contained Shamans who were purported to move between the physical and spiritual realm.<sup>5</sup> These beliefs started as early as 770 B.C. and many of the traditions and rituals are alive and well today.<sup>6</sup> The impact of these rituals on Tan Dun is evidenced by his belief that he himself is a Shaman who moves between the spiritual and real world for inspiration for his compositions.<sup>7</sup>

Tan Dun's tie to the ancient Xiang-Chu culture is even more pronounced due to his rural upbringing in a small village outside the city. Rural locations in China are often cut-off from the main city so they are more likely to be able to maintain their ancient traditions. During his childhood, Tan Dun absorbed the folk music of the peasants whose music was integrated into the fabric of daily life. Folk music was played for all occasions including births, marriages, funerals, traveling, during work in the fields, and even in the nighttime.<sup>8</sup> Folk songs from Hunan are known for their wide variety of free singing style. For example, the Shan Ge style is sung mostly outdoors and the Xiao Diao style is mostly sung between young people as a courtship device. We can find Tan Dun's adoption of both these two styles in two pieces from this Op. 1, *Eight Memories in Watercolor*. The melody of No. 3, *Herdboy's Song* is similar to a folk song in the Shan Ge style called *The Grass is Greener on the Other Hill*. The melody

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<sup>4</sup> Constance A. Cook and John S. Major, *Defining Chu: Image and Reality in Ancient China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Lipsyte and Lois B. Morris, "Tan Dun's Opera: A Special Delivery from the Spirit World," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Kouwenhoven, "Composer Tan Dun: The Ritual Fire Dancer of Mainland China's New Music," *China Information* 6, no. 3 (December 1991): 1, doi: 10.1177/0920203X9100600301.

of No. 4 *Blue Nun* is adopted from a Hunan folk song in the Xiao Diao style called *A Girl from the Country is coming into Town*.<sup>9</sup>

In the Xiang-Chu culture, instrumental music is known for its heavy use of percussion instruments. The pairing of gongs and drums epitomizes Chinese folk music. In the Xiang-Chu culture, percussion instruments are also used for religious purposes, as people believe their sounds can help open the doorway to commune with gods, ghosts, and ancestors. Religious music with percussion instruments also accompanied shamanistic funeral ceremonies. This ritual is definitely in Tan Dun's blood as he was able to witness this ceremony nearly twenty times a day because he lived across the street from the cemetery.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Tan Dun had a picture of these ceremonies in his mind when he composed No. 6 *Ancient Burial* from this Op. 1. Later on he would explain that these young childhood experiences profoundly influenced his compositional style on a subconscious level.<sup>11</sup>

## **Taoism**

Other than folk music, Tan Dun was influenced by the philosophy and religion of Taoism, which was strongly supported by the Xiang-Chu culture. There are two beliefs at the core of Taoism. One is called Tian Ren He Yi (天人合一), which means: the harmony between man and nature.<sup>12</sup> Taoism believes that everything is part of nature and that relationships only exist between nature and everything else. Humans are seen as secondary

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<sup>9</sup> Yang Yu, "Compositional Analysis on Piano Suite Eight Memories in Watercolor of Tan Dun" (PhD diss., Northeastern Normal University, 2013), Adoption of Hunan Folk Songs, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://www.cnki.net/KCMS>.

<sup>10</sup> Zhengrong Shi, "The Harmony between Man and Nature in Tan Dun's Works," *Art*, no. 6 (December 30, 2005): 36.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 37.

whereas nature is seen as primary. Human beings can not have authentic relationships because they are both a part of nature. Taoists deeply respect the nature and they can be seen as the earliest environmentalists. Tan Dun applied this idea into his works. For example, in 1997, he composed a symphony called *Heaven Earth Mankind (Symphony 1997)* to celebrate the reunification of Hong Kong with China. This piece has three movements and this is how Tan Dun described the three movements: "Heaven explores the traditional past of the Chinese people; Earth explores the equilibrium between nature and the elements; Mankind commemorates those who fought and suffered in wars."<sup>13</sup> By using the cello solo as a link, Tan Dun juxtaposes ancient Chinese Chime Bells, which represent the sounds from the past, with a children's chorus, which represents the future. This piece represents the Taoist philosophy of the harmony between man and nature and Tan Dun's creed that "everything is a circle."<sup>14</sup>

Tan Dun always tries to capture the sounds from nature too. Already in this Op.1, we have eight watercolor paintings depicting scenes from nature. In Tan Dun's later works, using traditional instruments to conjure the image of nature was not a clear enough representation so he had to resort to composing music using materials from nature. He referred to this genre of compositions as organic music. The use of organic materials like water, paper, and stones can be seen in the following pieces: *Water Concerto* (1998), *Paper Concerto* (2003), and *Earth Concerto* (2009). The following quote sums up his sentiments:

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<sup>13</sup> Tan Dun, "HEAVEN EARTH MANKIND (SYMPHONY 1997)," *Tan Dun Online*, synopsis, accessed June 12, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Heaven-Earth-Mankind.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Tan Dun, "HEAVEN EARTH MANKIND (SYMPHONY 1997)," *Tan Dun Online*, dialogues with Tan Dun, accessed June 12, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Heaven-Earth-Mankind.html>.

Growing up in rural China, I received my early musical training in such an organic way, mounting paper for instruments, singing a song in the village to the accompaniment of water, using ceramics to bang out the beat. I was surrounded by ritual music and ghost opera, not Bach, not Beethoven, not Brahms. These early memories have become so important as inspirations.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 1-2. Yin-Yang from Taoism: The harmony between man and nature<sup>16</sup>

The other crucial belief in Taoism is called Wan Wu Jie You Ling (万物皆有灵), which means: everything is a spirit.<sup>17</sup> Taoists believe everything in nature is a spirit and all spirits are equal. Spirits can travel through time and space to commune with each other and they should be worshiped in order to keep nature in a yin-yang balance. Figure 1-2 shows the Chinese character for Taoism (道) that is written with a yin-yang circle in it. This belief makes Taoists worship more things through rituals than the other religions in China and this is also the origin of the reverence for gods, ghosts and ancestors in the Xiang-Chu culture. Tan Dun said in an interview that he was very much influenced by Taoism growing up and he is still grappling with the essence of Taoism, a religion that many believe can only truly be

<sup>15</sup> Tan Dun, "PAPER CONCERTO FOR PAPER PERCUSSION AND ORCHESTRA," *Tan Dun Online*, dialogues with Tan Dun, accessed June 12, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Paper-Concerto.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Bifeng Lin, "The Environmentalism in Taoism," *Chinese Taoism*, no. 1 (January 28, 2013): 1, accessed June 14, 2014, <http://longquanzs.org/articledetail.php?id=29923>.

<sup>17</sup> Yingjie Wang, "Religion behind Dances," *Sichuan Drama*, no. 5 (October 15, 2010): 129.

understood by the subconscious.<sup>18</sup> In 1985, Tan Dun wrote the piece *On Taoism* after his grandmother's death. This following quote tells how deeply Taoism has influenced him:

This piece was written on the death of my grandmother, after I went back to Hunan to take part in her funeral in the village where I grew up. This Taoist ritual brought back to me the sounds, the movement, the spiritual vibrations from my childhood, forgotten in the many years I was dedicated to learning western music.<sup>19</sup>

## Nuo Drama

Nuo Drama was one of the most important rituals in the Xiang-Chu culture and Taoism. It is performed to worship spirits. It was also the most common music form that Tan Dun grew up with. The Nuo Drama has a long history and has its origins in sorcery. The Chinese character of Nuo is 傩, which means: human struggles. In ancient China, it was believed that everyone could use sorcery to control nature and to help rid the body of disease and bad spirits, while at the same time bringing happiness and good fortune. Over time, these rituals became more organized, ritualized, and integrated into daily life. With this change, sorcery became a gift endowed upon a select few, usually the tribal leaders.<sup>20</sup> Often times, singing and dancing accompanied these rituals. The Nuo Drama emerged from these beginnings.<sup>21</sup> Over many years, Nuo Drama became less religious and spiritual and turned more into an art form intended for enjoyment. It even included popular songs and a much wider variety of musical instruments.<sup>22</sup> It eventually lost all of its original meaning and was treated more like

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<sup>18</sup> Eline Flipse, "Chinese Classical Composers - Creating Music through Tao," *YouTube*, April 4, 2011, accessed June 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPhDBLmrwxw>.

<sup>19</sup> Dun Tan, "On Taoism," *Tan Dun Online*, synopsis, accessed June 15, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/On-Taoism.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Chen Rui-Lin, "Chinese Nuo and Nuo Mask," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 2 (1993): 1, doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.1993.00025.x.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

entertainment to accompany festivals like New Year's Celebrations.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 1-3. Nuo Drama performed by Dong people in Xinhuang, China<sup>24</sup>

The purpose of the Nuo Drama was to remove ghosts and it was performed at many ceremonies. The ancient Nuo Drama was a very large ritualistic dance where the people would bear weapons and shout in order to get rid of evil spirits. Another very important ancient Nuo ritual was performed at funerals. In this type of ritual, a sorcerer would knock open all four corners of a tomb in order to release demons.<sup>25</sup> This ritual contains many similarities to the ritual Tan Dun witnessed as a child. It was also the ritual that Tan Dun had in his mind when composing *On Taoism*. Due to the fantastical nature of these ceremonies, it is very natural that Tan Dun's whole life was influenced by these events. Already, in this Op.1, No. 6 *Ancient Burial* is clearly related to the Nuo Drama. In his later work *Ghost Opera*, Tan Dun uses a string quartet to represent the spirits of Bach, Shakespeare and the Chinese folk song *Little Cabbage*. He has Bach talking to Shakespeare, who then in turn, talks to the

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<sup>23</sup> Chen Rui-Lin, "Chinese Nuo and Nuo Mask," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 2 (1993): 4, doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.1993.00025.x

<sup>24</sup> "Nuo Drama Performed by Dong People at Xinhuang, China," *Hudong Baike*, accessed June 1, 2014, [http://tupian.baik.com/a2\\_57\\_14\\_01300000171561121450140222740\\_jpg.html](http://tupian.baik.com/a2_57_14_01300000171561121450140222740_jpg.html).

<sup>25</sup> Chen Rui-Lin, "Chinese Nuo and Nuo Mask," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 2 (1993): 2, doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.1993.00025.x.



Chinese folk song, *Little Cabbage*.<sup>26</sup> This juxtaposition seems peculiar when approached from a western sensibility, but when one begins to understand that Tan Dun is emulating Nuo Drama, the obstacles to understanding *Ghost Opera* and many of his other works are removed.<sup>27</sup> In *The Map*, by showing a video of Nuo Drama playing that he recorded at Hunan, Tan Dun has the orchestra travel through time to speak to Nuo directly, which is another presentation to the spirit of Nuo and Taoism.

Tan Dun's music is a return to the true spirit of Nuo with its beginnings in sorcery. His music is more associated with the beginnings of Nuo because he grew up in a rural part of south China where the culture was relatively closed and isolated. Tan Dun does not believe that one must be endowed with special gifts in order to be a Shaman, but rather believes that we are all Shamans capable of going between the physical and spiritual realm. His philosophy also stems from Taoism and its belief that all beings are one.

### **Chinese Cultural Revolution: From Obscurity to Fame**

As a young boy, Tan Dun first became interested in composing during his middle school years. The first instruments he learned to play were the Di Zi (笛子), the traditional bamboo flute, and the Er Hu (二胡), a two-stringed knee-fiddle. Later on, he learned to play the violin, an instrument that he would later try to compose with the Er Hu in mind.<sup>28</sup> His love and passion for Chinese instruments is also illustrated by the fact that he composed works like

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<sup>26</sup> Michelle Chen, "Tan Dun's Ghost Opera," *YouTube*, January 31, 2012, accessed June 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zpljner7mIw>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Kouwenhoven, "Composer Tan Dun: The Ritual Fire Dancer of Mainland China's New Music," *China Information* 6, no. 3 (December 1991): 3, doi: 10.1177/0920203X9100600301.

*Concerto for String Orchestra and Zheng* (1999), *Concerto for String Orchestra and Pipa* (1999) and *Crouching Tiger Concerto for Erhu* (2000).

Another major impact on Tan Dun's compositional style was the fact that he grew up during the tumultuous Chinese Cultural Revolution. The erroneously named Cultural Revolution was a decade long political movement under Chairman Mao lasting between 1966-1976. During this time, many of the nation's young were sent to the countryside in order to work in the fields alongside the peasants and learn the importance of the working class. Tan Dun was one of them. In these fields, music became for Tan Dun an escape from the labor. During the Cultural Revolution, there were eight Model Operas that were the only shows allowed to be played in theaters.<sup>29</sup> The orchestration of these model operas used both Chinese traditional instruments and western instruments, particularly the violin and cello. At the young age of eighteen, because his ability to play the violin, Tan Dun was recruited as a director at the Huangjin commune in which he was working. He would make arrangements of the native songs and during this period he spent a significant amount of time collecting and studying folk songs around the Hunan area. Already in his Op. 1, Tan Dun adopted four Hunan folk songs into the piece. Tan Dun frequently returns to these collected folk songs, but each time he goes back, he does it in a more emphatic way. In *The Map*, Tan Dun had a country girl from Hunan singing a folk song on the video and the orchestra accompanying her during the performance. This piece represents both Tan Dun's respect towards Nuo Drama and his love of Hunan folk songs.

After two years, Tan Dun was able to escape the work in the fields through sheer fate. In

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<sup>29</sup> Yutong Shao, *A Study on Chinese Modal Operas*, PhD diss., Northeast Normal University, 2007 (Changchun: Northeast Normal University Press, 2007), 12.

1976, a boat carrying a Peking Opera Troupe capsized killing twenty musicians onboard.<sup>30</sup>

Because of Tan Dun's ability to play the violin, rather than his merits as a composer, he was recruited by the opera troupe as a violinist and arranger. This event alone introduced Tan Dun to a much wider audience. Tan Dun stayed with this troupe until he was granted the prestigious opportunity to study at the Beijing Central Music Conservatory in 1978. More than ten thousand people applied and only fifty were accepted.

### **Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing: Introduction to the Western Classical Music**

Before the age of twenty, Tan Dun had never heard western classical music. After entering the conservatory, he was introduced to the world of classical music and he said that he immediately became "a slave for western classical music by Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, or Liszt."<sup>31</sup> After two years of writing piano and chamber works in this style, Tan Dun set his sights on writing his first symphony.

Tan Dun completed his first symphony *Li Sao* in 1980. By western classical music standards, the piece was considered outdated and imitating the style of 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism.<sup>32</sup> However, in the much more conservative musical atmosphere of China, this piece was considered revolutionary. One must consider that just few years earlier the Chinese people were in the midst of a Culture Revolution that deeply censored the musical scene and the remnants of this time were still freshly engrained. Tan Dun's absorption of western

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<sup>30</sup> Frank J. Oteri, "Tradition and Innovation: The Alchemy of Tan Dun," *Tan Dun Online*, October 15, 2007, accessed May 31, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/>.

<sup>31</sup> Eline Flipse, "Chinese Classical Composers: Interview Tan Dun," *YouTube*, April 3, 2011, accessed June 17, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9WBfn1DgDo>.

<sup>32</sup> Frank Kouwenhoven, "Composer Tan Dun: The Ritual Fire Dancer of Mainland China's New Music," *China Information* 6, no. 3 (December 1991): 4, doi: 10.1177/0920203X9100600301.

classical music coincided with a gradual opening-up of Chinese culture and acceptance of newer, more avant-grade musical styles. Tan Dun was on the cutting edge and often times even the driving force of these rapid changes. The perceived rebellious nature of this piece can be summed up by the following quote from a fellow student at the Beijing Central Music Conservatory:

In 1980, we heard of a competition that was to be organized in Beijing for writing symphonies. None of us young students had had any decent training in orchestration. Tan Dun, very much against the wishes of his teachers and colleagues, wrote a symphony. He was a rather rebellious and non-conformist pupil, but his example did inspire others. Teachers ostentatiously stayed away during the premiere of *Li Sao*, but the piece was successful, Tan Dun was awarded an incentive prize, and this encouraged him to go on.<sup>33</sup>

After composing *Li Sao*, Tan Dun and several of his other classmates were introduced to more avant-grade western classical music through the British composer Alexander Goehr.<sup>34</sup> The students at the Beijing Central Conservatory became a slave of what they perceived as new music from composers such as Bartók, Messiaen, Boulez, and Stockhausen.<sup>35</sup> Tan Dun continued to compose music that would push the boundaries, with mixed reviews. Some audiences loved it, and others complained about the use of atonality. Due to his fame, Tan Dun was soon scrutinized by the Chinese Government and for six months in the year 1983, his music was banned in China under the “spiritual pollution” campaign.<sup>36</sup>

Regardless of the general reaction to his music, Tan Dun continued to be a rebel. In 1982, he composed a piece for chamber ensemble called *Fu, Fu, Fu*, the first piece he wrote using

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<sup>33</sup> Frank Kouwenhoven, "Composer Tan Dun: The Ritual Fire Dancer of Mainland China's New Music," *China Information* 6, no. 3 (December 1991): 4, doi: 10.1177/0920203X9100600301.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 9.

western serialism.<sup>37</sup> Soon, Tan Dun and other composers realized that the best way to move forward was to go to the source of much of this new music: the United States.

### **Coming to the United States: Davidovsky and John Cage**

Tan Dun's first invitation to the United States came in 1982. However, due to the strict nature of the government, he was not granted permission until 1986.<sup>38</sup> While at the time, he was eager to come to the United States, he later explained how he was lucky to spend more time in his home country absorbing Chinese folk music. In his own words: "If I had left China in 1982, I would perhaps not have become the Tan Dun whom I am today."<sup>39</sup> Tan Dun arrived in the U.S. on January 4, 1986 in order to study composition with Mario Davidovsky and Chou Wen-chung at Columbia University.<sup>40</sup> Much like his first experience at the Beijing Central Music Conservatory, Tan Dun was introduced to many new types of music at Columbia University.

In addition to being introduced to new styles of composition, Tan Dun had the opportunity to meet many of the most influential classical composers while in New York City. One of the most important friendships that he made was with John Cage. This relationship was so crucial that later on, after Cage's passing, Tan Dun wrote an elegy entitled *C-A-G-E*. This piece has only four pitches: C, A, G, E in all the registers of the piano. *C-A-G-E* is played entirely on the inside of the piano and applies the fingering techniques from the Chinese

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<sup>37</sup> Frank Kouwenhoven, "Composer Tan Dun: The Ritual Fire Dancer of Mainland China's New Music," *China Information* 6, no. 3 (December 1991): 10, doi: 10.1177/0920203X9100600301.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 15.

plucked instrument, the Pipa. *C-A-G-E* explores nearly all possible resonances that can be produced on the piano.<sup>41</sup> This piece is reminiscent of the many pieces for prepared piano that Cage composed during his lifetime. Much of the influence he received from John Cage reminded him directly of his childhood experiences in Hunan Province. Their friendship flourished because Tan Dun felt intuitively what John Cage believed was the future of music. John Cage was interested in new timbres, new instruments, and organic sounds. His respect for Tan Dun's music can be summed up by the following quote:

What is very little heard in European or western music is the presence of sounds as the voice of nature. So that we are led to hear in our music human beings talking only to themselves. 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. Tan Dun's music is one we need as the east and the west come together as our one home.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Peggy Monastra, "C A G E - Tan Dun Online," *Tan Dun Online*, synopsis, accessed May 21, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/C-A-G-E.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Marguerite Ladd, "John Cage Quote," *Tan Dun Online*, accessed May 21, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/images/johncagequote.pdf>.

## CHAPTER 2: EIGHT MEMORIES IN WATERCOLOR, OP. 1

*Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1* was composed in 1978, when Tan Dun was a freshman at the Beijing Central Music Conservatory. The following quote from the U.S. edition of *Eight Memories in Watercolor* sums up Tan Dun's sentiments towards this pivotal work:

*Eight Memories in Watercolor* was written when I left Hunan to study at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. It was my Opus One. The Cultural Revolution had just ended, China just opened its doors, I was immersed in studying Western classical and modern music, but I was also homesick. I longed for the folksongs and savored the memories of my childhood. Therefore, I wrote my first piano work as a diary of longing.<sup>43</sup>

On one hand, Tan Dun was suffering and longing for his hometown, and on the other hand, he was overwhelmed by his introduction to western classical music and was eager to try many of the new skills he had learned. It was very natural for him to go back to the sounds from his hometown and fit them into a modern composing technique. This Op.1 is very important because it set up the foundation for his style in the future, and one can find elements from this piece that Tan Dun has used constantly throughout his composing career until today.

As the title suggests, each individual movement is like a watercolor painting intending to transport the listener to Tan Dun's memory of his hometown and colorful childhood life. As one of the oldest artistic traditions in the world, Chinese painting is known mostly for two techniques: Meticulous (Gong Bi, 工笔) and Watercolor (Shui Mo, 水墨). Chinese

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<sup>43</sup> Tan Dun, "Eight Memories in Watercolor - Tan Dun Online," *Tan Dun Online*, dialogues with Tan Dun, accessed May 29, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Eight-Memories-in-Watercolor.html>.

watercolor is especially known for its freehand style, which is called Xie Yi(写意) in Chinese.

It is not about how much the painting looks like the subject, but about the artistic conception behind the painting. Tan Dun's Op. 1 epitomizes the watercolor style and in each piece one can find a deeper conception behind the notes. By looking at the title, one may think these pieces are images, but in reality, each of these movements tells a story if one looks closer.

The ability of Tan Dun to paint a picture through composition is a testament to his genius.

The titles are as follows:

1. Missing Moon
2. Staccato Beans
3. Herdboy's Song
4. Blue Nun
5. Red Wilderness
6. Ancient Burial
7. Floating Clouds
8. Sunrain.

Generally speaking, there is some cohesion between all of the movements. The formal design helps to make all of the individual character pieces feel more unified and a part of a larger formal design. First, all the eight movements are mostly in binary or ternary forms; second, the second part of each movement tends to present contrasting material or recaps material from the exposition; third, the main thematic material seen in the (A) section is transformed in the (B) section either through the process of development or variation.

The first four movements are all in the tonality of the Yu pentatonic mode, which is a very typical tonality of Hunan folk songs.<sup>44</sup> These four movements are mostly lyrical with singing melody and in a steady tonality (see fig. 2-1). We can see these four movements as

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<sup>44</sup> Dongxu Liu, "The Characteristics of Chinese Piano Music That Are Based on Hunan Folk Songs," *Art*, no. 4 (April 15, 2013): 33.



the first big section of the entire work. In contrast to the first four movements, the fifth, sixth, and seventh movements have an unsteady tonal center adding intensity to the music until the climax of the entire work. These three movements can be understood as the development of the piece, seen as a whole. The last movement *Sunrain*, is in the very bright and major key feeling of the G Hui mode, which leads the piece to a typical Chinese happy ending.

No. 1	No. 2	No. 3	No. 4	No. 5	No. 6	No. 7	No. 8
Eb Yu	D Yu	A Yu	E Yu	A Yu&~~~~	~~~~	~~~~	G Hui

(~~~~: more than one tonal center and key is not settled)

Figure 2-1. Tonal center of *Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1*

In this piano suite, four of the eight movements are directly adapted from Hunan folk songs. They are: *Staccato Beans* (No. 2), *Herdboy's Song* (No. 3), *Blue Nun* (No. 4) and *Sunrain* (No. 8)<sup>45</sup>. Both the pentatonic scale harmonies that are used everywhere and some defining intervals that imitate Chinese instruments give these pieces a Chinese sound. However, in spite of the overt Chinese style, it must be emphasized that in this Op. 1 Tan Dun was very eager to try all the devices of the western music system that he had recently learned. Polyphonic writing was one such device.

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<sup>45</sup> Tan Dun, "Eight Memories in Watercolor - Tan Dun Online," *Tan Dun Online*, dialogues with Tan Dun, accessed May 29, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Eight-Memories-in-Watercolor.html>.

## No. 1 Missing Moon

It is quite fitting that Tan Dun would begin this “Diary of Longing” with a piece called Missing Moon. It represents the typical freehand style in watercolor, implying that there is a hidden meaning behind the music. The moon is a metaphor here. In Chinese culture, the moon has always been related to one’s longing for family and home. Since ancient times, Chinese poets have used the moon as a metaphor for the longing for hometown and the full moon as a representation of family unity. These poetic images even permeated popular culture and there is a festival on August 15<sup>th</sup> in the lunar year calendar called the Mid-Autumn Festival. On this day, families gather together under the full moon and eat moon cakes, another round shape representing family unity. In order to gain an understanding of how important the moon is in Chinese culture, the following is a translation of a poem by the famous poet Bai Li (701-762).<sup>46</sup>

Nighttime Thoughts  
So bright a gleam on the foot of my bed.  
Could there have been a frost already?  
Lifting myself to look, I found that it was moonlight.  
Sinking back again, I thought suddenly of home.

In Tan Dun’s first year at the Beijing Central Conservatory the moon festival fell on September 17th, and it is likely that this would have been his first time celebrating this holiday alone.

Here is the structure of the piece:

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<sup>46</sup> Witter Bynner, "Translations to Nighttime Thoughts by Bai Li," *Translations to Nighttime Thoughts by Bai Li*, January 18, 2012, accessed May 12, 2014, <http://prosp.fydz.cn/b/498100>.

		A		B		
	Introduction	a	b	a1	b1	Coda
Mm.	1	2-5	6-7	8-9	10-13	14-15
Tonality	Eb Yu	Eb Yu		F# Yu		Eb Yu

Figure 2-2. The formal structure of *Missing Moon*

There are two passages in this movement. It starts with a one-measure introduction played freely as evidenced by the lack of bar lines. This first passage is built on the E-flat Yu mode of the pentatonic scale (see fig. 2-3).<sup>47</sup>

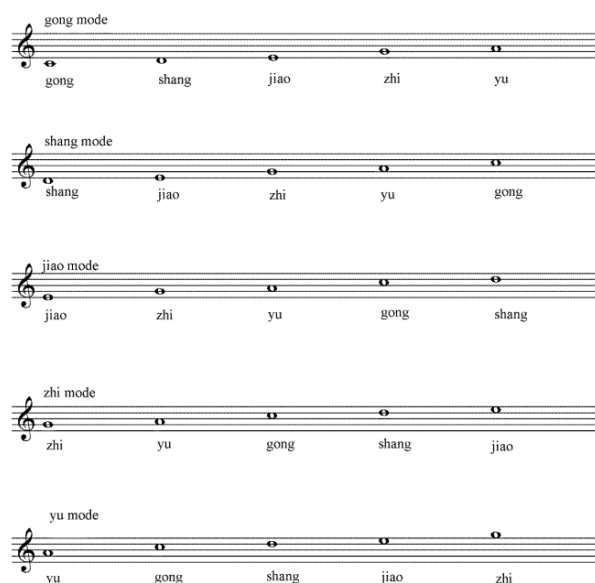


Figure 2-3. Chinese pentatonic scale modes

<sup>47</sup> Ho Lu-Ting and Han Kuo -huang, "On Chinese Scales and National Modes," *Asian Music* 14, no. 1 (1982): 133.

Passage A is also built on the E-flat Yu mode of the pentatonic scale and contains two phrases. The second phrase can be seen as a development of the first one. Passage B is built on F# Yu mode of the pentatonic scale with two phrases. The first phrase contains two measures (mm. 8-9) and the thematic material is similar to the first sentence in passage (A) simply transposed. The second phrase reiterates the thematic material in a different key and corresponds with the heightened intensity seen in the piece. For example, the melodic material in mm. 10 is simply transposed up a whole step from mm. 6. This heightened intensity could represent Tan Dun's intensified longing for his hometown. The two-measure coda (mm. 14-15) is also built on the E-flat Yu mode of the pentatonic scale and is very similar to the introduction of the piece.



Figure 2-4. The Chinese instrument Zheng<sup>48</sup>

The introduction of piece is in a tempo rubato. It sounds like a breathless melody and is an imitation of a Chinese traditional instrument, the Zheng (see fig. 2-4). The Zheng, also called the Gu Zheng, is a Chinese string instrument whose origins can be traced back to 475

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<sup>48</sup> Ruzu Cha, "Introducing the Guzheng - 古筝 - Chinese Zither," *The Blog of Charles*, November 3, 2012, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://charuzu.wordpress.com/2012/11/03/guzheng/>.

to 221 BCE.<sup>49</sup> It had 18 strings (the modern Zheng mostly has 21 strings) and movable bridges. Performers use picks that are often made out of hawk's bill shells. The right hand usually plays the melody with picks on each fingertip except the pinky while the left hand adds ornamentation or vibrato to the melody. There are a number of ways to play the Zheng. A variety of sounds can be created on the Zheng by either flicking, tapping, shaking, pulling, strumming, lifting, stroking, sliding, wiggling, or chopping the strings. All of these playing techniques can conjure up sounds including: thunder, water, running, ancient times, etc.<sup>50</sup>

The imitation of the Zheng can be found right at the beginning of the piece, where the grace notes in the low voice emulate the sound of ancient strumming (see fig. 2-5).



Figure 2-5. *Missing Moon*, mm. 1

Following the grace note is a double fourth and fifth chord, which is a fourth or fifth interval with the addition of the root on top. It is also an imitation to the Zheng. An example of this chord can also be seen in the right hand at the ending of the introduction (see fig. 2-6).

<sup>49</sup> Hong Yang, "Some Thoughts on the Development of the Art of Zheng" (PhD diss., Tianjin Conservatory of Music, 2002), 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 14.



Figure 2-6. *Missing Moon*, mm. 1



Figure 2-7. Johannes Brahms *Ballade ("Edward") Op.10, No.1*, mm. 1-mm. 5

This chord is also often seen in western music. Brahms's "*Edward*" *Ballade* (see fig. 2-7) is a prime example.

Another harmony frequently employed in Tan Dun's music is the second chord. A second chord is based on either major or minor seconds. In *Missing Moon*, the second chords always appear in groups to create a uniquely pleasant dissonance (see fig. 2-8). In the introduction, by starting from a higher register then going down to a lower register, Tan Dun paints a picture of moonlight as it is described in China: The moonlight shines down upon the earth and spreads all over the ground, just like pouring water.



Figure 2-8. *Missing Moon*, mm. 1

At the end of the *Missing Moon*, the grace note followed by the arpeggiated chord in the left hand is also an imitation of the Zheng (see fig. 2-9). In order to emulate the sound of the Zheng, one must play this passage with two hands so that the final result is a seamless seven-note arpeggio.

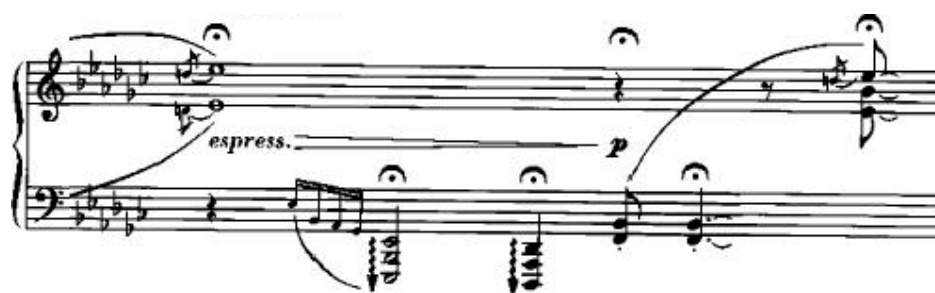


Figure 2-9. *Missing Moon*, mm. 1

This seven-note arpeggio is very similar to the beginning measure of Rachmaninoff's *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36* (see fig. 2-10).



Figure 2-10. Rachmaninoff *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, mm. 1-mm. 2

## No. 2 Staccato Beans

In this piece, the staccato bean is clearly a metaphor for children. The hidden meaning shows us that this piece is another example of Chinese watercolor freehand style. Beans are small, yet have the potential to grow and the staccato nature of the piece refers to the seemingly endless energy of children. It is interesting to note that in Chinese the word “bean” has the same pronunciation as “tease” or “play” further emphasizing the childlike nature of this work.

Bean      豆      dou (Chinese pronunciation)

Tease      逗      dou

This movement is in an ABA ternary form.

	A		Re	B			A1		
Intro	a	a1		a2	b	b1	a3	a4	Coda
1-2	3-12	13-22	23-25	26-34	35-39	40-43	44-52	53-61	62-65
D Yu	D Yu	G Yu	G Yu		D Yu		D Yu	G Yu	G Yu

Figure 2-11. The formal structure of *Staccato Beans*

The theme of this movement comes from a Hunan folk song called *My New Sister-in-Law*, which originated in the town of JieHe (see fig. 2-12).<sup>51</sup> JiaHe is located in the southwest part of Hunan. In 1993, it was given the title “*Township of Folksongs*.”<sup>52</sup> This story takes place at a wedding and in this particular song, the younger sister of the groom is

<sup>51</sup> Yang Yu, "Compositional Analysis on Piano Suite Eight Memories in Watercolor of Tan Dun" (PhD diss., Northeastern Normal University, 2013), Chapter Two, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://www.cnki.net/KCMS>.

<sup>52</sup> "Township of Folksongs-Jia He," *The Government of JiaHe*, June 13, 2010, accessed May 24, 2014, <http://3A%2F%2Fjhnews.rednet.cn%2FInfo.aspx%3FModelId%3D1%26Id%3D26969>.



admiring the beauty of her new sister-in-law. The folk song is in the same key as the *Staccato Beans*, the D Yu pentatonic mode. After a two-measure introduction, Tan Dun uses the melody of the song directly in this movement then repeats it one octave higher later in the piece. Tan Dun keeps the piece interesting by changing the accompaniment pattern, thickening the texture, playing in a different register, and through diminution of the melody. All of these subtle changes help to match the style of the movement, which is supposed to be lively and full of joy. Tan Dun also plays with our expectation of square phrasing in this piece. The phrase grouping of 3+3+4 in both the folk song and this movement make the listener feel off-kilter (see fig. 2-13).



Figure 2-12. Melody from Hunan folk song *My New Sister-in-Law*<sup>53</sup>



Figure 2-13. *Staccato Beans*, mm. 1-mm. 8

<sup>53</sup> Yang Yu, "Compositional Analysis on Piano Suite Eight Memories in Watercolor of Tan Dun" (PhD diss., Northeastern Normal University, 2013), accessed May 3, 2014, <http://www.cnki.net/KCMS>.

### No. 3 Herdboy's Song

When reminiscing about home, the folk melodies are the things that we can never forget. This movement has a very smooth singing melody, and with chromatic polyphonic writing in the background. It paints a beautiful picture of Tan Dun's hometown. We can almost hear birds flying, the sounds of a waterfall, or even the breeze in the mountain. It is a lyrical, visual, and romantic work.

Here is the structure:

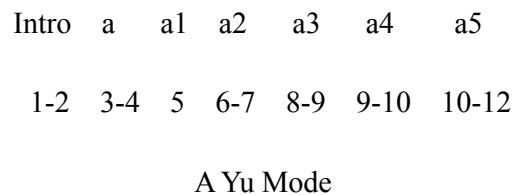


Figure 2-14. The formal structure of *Herdboy's Song*

This piece is in one big section without bar lines. Since it is in a tempo rubato, it cannot be divided by measure numbers. Tan Dun instead intends to separate the various musical gestures with dotted-bar lines. It is also in Yu mode that we have seen after the first two movements.

A strumming gesture, which is also an imitation of Chinese instrument the Zheng, can be found at the introduction (see fig. 2-15).



Figure 2-15. *Herdboy's Song*, mm. 1

This movement is very melodic with a singing melody and is similar to the folk song *The Grass is Greener on the Other Hill* (see fig. 2-16).<sup>54</sup> It is a love song from HengDong, Hunan. It tells the love story a guy telling a girl he admires that he would do anything to win her love. Although this folk song is not directly quoted in *Herdboy's Song*, they do share similarities in the melodic line, rhythm, and key center. Most importantly, both of the melodies are based on a few reoccurring pitches that act as central notes to each song's main theme. In the folk song, the main notes are A-C-E; while in the *Herdboy's Song*, the main pitches are A-C-E-G, which outlines the Yu Pentatonic Scale that is frequently used in Hunan folk songs (see fig. 2-17).<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Xianwei Cheng, "A Performer's Analysis to Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor," *The New Voice of Yue-Fu (The Academic Periodical of Shenyang Conservatory of Music)*, 2009th ser., no. 4 (December 15, 2009): 159.

<sup>55</sup> Meiyue Zeng, "Hunan Folk Tone in TanDun's Memories of Eight Watercolor Paintings," *Journal of Art College of Inner Mongolia University*, 32nd ser., 9, no. 2 (June 15, 2012): 108.



Figure 2-16. Hunan folk song *The Grass is Greener on the Other Hill*<sup>56</sup>



Figure 2-17. *Herdboy's Song*, mm. 2-mm. 3

In No. 3 *Herdboy's Song*, the absence of the bar line emulates the free singing style of the herdboy. It is similar to a typical Hunan folk song style called Shan Ge (山歌), which is known for its free and high pitch singing. It is mostly sung outdoors and is another outlet for young people to show their admiration for each other.<sup>57</sup> The left hand can be seen as the echo of the singing throughout the whole piece. Most of the melody is in a high register in order to

<sup>56</sup> Xianwei Cheng, "A Performer's Analysis to Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor," (*The Academic Periodical of Shenyang Conservatory of Music*), 2009th ser., no. 4 (December 15, 2009): 159.

<sup>57</sup> Yang Yu, "Compositional Analysis on Piano Suite Eight Memories in Watercolor of Tan Dun" (PhD diss., Northeastern Normal University, 2013), Adoption of Hunan Folk Songs, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://www.cnki.net/KCMS>.

imitate a young boy's singing. The grace notes throughout the piece can be seen as a waterfall or emulating chirping birds. At the end of every phrase there is a scoop up to a high note which emulates the Chinese traditional way of singing the ends of phrase, called Tuo Qiang (拖腔). This style of singing is mostly heard in Hunan folk songs.<sup>58</sup> This unique scoop at the ends of phrases can also be seen as an imitation of the echo that runs around the mountains (see fig. 2-18).



Figure 2-18. *Herdboy's Song*, mm. 5

#### No. 4 Blue Nun

The original Chinese title of this movement is *Story Time with Mom*.<sup>59</sup> The melody is similar to the folk song called *A Nun Desires Normal Human Life* from Tan Dun's hometown. The title was changed to *Blue Nun* when the piece was published again in 2003.<sup>60</sup> This movement draws a picture of family life. The texture of this movement mimics the slow soothing rhythm of a mother's voice. This movement can be considered as somewhat autobiographical in nature and perhaps represents the absence of Tan Dun's own mother in

<sup>58</sup> Jin Wang, "A Performer's Analysis on Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor" (PhD diss., Northeast Normal University, 2012), accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.cnki.net/KCMS>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

his early life. Until age 7, Tan Dun was raised by his grandmother.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this movement represents something that was missing from his childhood that he longed for.

This movement is also in ABA ternary form.

A				B				Re	A'	
a	b	a1	b1	a2	b2	a3	b3		a4	b4
1-4	5-8	9-12	13-16	17-20	21-24	25-28	29-32	33	34-37	38-44
E Yu				A Yu					E Yu	

Figure 2-19. The formal structure of *Blue Nun*

Same as the first three movements, this piece is also built on the Yu mode pentatonic scale. In the (B) section, Tan Dun shortens the rhythmic pattern and writes the material an octave higher. This makes the (B) section sound like a variation of the (A) section. The beginning theme comes back in the (A') section, but it is varied in several ways. First, the theme is played in a lower register, and second, the right hand canonically imitates the left hand at the octave.

Imitative polyphonic writing can be found in m. 9 (see fig. 2-20). This melody first shows up in the high voice, then after one beat, it shows up again in the low voice. This imitation is used again in mm. 34-41 at the end of the movement, but the register is switched (see fig. 2-20).

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<sup>61</sup> Frank Kouwenhoven, "Composer Tan Dun: The Ritual Fire Dancer of Mainland China's New Music," *China Information* 6, no. 3 (December 1991): 1, doi:10.1177/0920203X9100600301.



Figure 2-20. *Blue Nun*, mm. 9-mm. 16 and mm. 34-mm. 44

In much of Tan Dun's music, multiple melody lines are combined together through contrasting key, rhythm, melodic direction, phrasing, and character to make the melody more vivid. A prime example of this kind of contrasting thematic polyphony is seen in mm. 17-32 (see fig. 2-21). There are two melody lines in this passage. They are contrasting with each other in several ways. First, they each use a different rhythm pattern to make the overall texture long-short-long-short. Second, these two melodies are either going in opposite or oblique motion to each other in order to make each melody more distinct and to constantly pull the listener's ear in a different direction. Third, these two melodies are offset by one beat creating a breathless melody that never ceases. In addition to these compositional devices, the melody in the low voice seems to ornament the higher voice.



Figure 2-21. *Blue Nun*, mm. 17-mm. 33

The melody is similar to a folk song from ShaoDong, Hunan called *A Girl from the Country is coming into Town*.<sup>62</sup> This song, originally sung as duet, tells the comical story of a man from the town wants to marry a country girl. Tan Dun simplified the rhythm of the folk song but kept the melody line and the basic harmony intact (see fig. 2-22 and fig. 2-23).



Figure 2-22. Hunan folk song *A Girl from the Country is coming into Town*<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Jin Wang, "A Performer's Analysis on Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor" (PhD diss., Northeast Normal University, 2012), accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.cnki.net/KCMS>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.





Figure 2-23. *Blue Nun*, mm. 1-mm. 8

## No. 5 Red Wilderness

Even after the Cultural Revolution, working in the fields continued to be the main way to make a living and support one's family for most Chinese. Laboring in the fields was an insecure job because one's income was directly proportional to how many crops existed. This piece represents the exploration of fields in order to find fertile ground. The workers believe they can eventually find a better future. The constantly changing tonal center represents the people's angst over their uncertain future.

This movement is in a rounded binary form.

A		B	
a	a1	b	a2
1-7	8-12	13-19	20-27
A Yu		E Gong	~~~~~

Figure 2-24. The formal structure of *Red Wilderness*

Written in a polyphonic style, this movement starts with the theme emphasizing the notes C, G, A. Tan Dun then expands and develops this theme until the (B) section where the tonality switches from the A Yu pentatonic to the E Gong mode. It provides big contrast to the

(A) section with frequent key changes, a thicker texture, and a much more dramatic writing style. This piece ends on a B7 chord with added chromatic dissonances giving the piece an ambiguous ending.

The use of parallel second chords can also be found in this movement in the middle voice in a very steady tempo on offbeats (see fig. 2-25). They add melodic intensity to the harmony and create a feeling of metric instability.



Figure 2-25. *Red Wilderness*, mm. 8-mm. 10

In this movement, Tan Dun takes the typical monophonic style of Chinese folk music and surrounds it with a thick texture. There is a repeating pattern in one or more voices that accompanies and complements the melody. Often times these accompanying voices help to evoke the overall character of the work and add to the story that each melody is telling. For example, the quarter note A throughout the whole piece imitates heavy walking steps (see fig. 2-26). It also shows Tan Dun's interest in juxtaposing eastern and western music styles from the beginning of his composing career, which has always been considered to be one of the hallmarks of his music.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Jing Li, "How Tan Dun Combines Western and Eastern Music Elements in Missing Moon," *Journal of Tonghua Normal University*, 2008th ser., 29, no. 11 (September 11, 2008): 84.



Figure 2-26. *Red Wilderness*, mm. 17-mm. 19

## No. 6 Ancient Burial

This piece paints a watercolor of an ancient ceremony for the listener. Certainly there was a clear picture in Tan Dun's mind of the Nuo Drama that he had experienced as a child when writing this piece. We can almost hear the low voice and repeated singing of sorcerers. *Ancient Burial* also represents the watercolor freehand style implying the existence of a hidden meaning. The hidden meaning behind *Ancient Burial* is the long history of the Xiang-Chu culture.

This movement is also in an ABA form.

	A		Re		B		Re		A1	
Intro	a	a1			a2	a2			a	a
1	2-3	4-7	8	9-12	13-16	17	18-19	20-27		



Figure 2-27. The formal structure of *Ancient Burial*

It starts with a major second ostinato from D-C leading to the theme. This interval shows up in every single measure, mostly in inner voices throughout the entire movement imitating

the somber steps pushing the funeral procession forward. The theme first that comes in mm. 2 is transferred to the middle voice (mm. 8) as a transition to the (B) section. In the (B) section, the theme shows up both in the high and low voices in a much thicker texture, together with a thicker texture of the D-C interval too, which creates a big contrast from the (A) section. Especially in the (B) section, the second phrase (mm. 13-16) repeats the theme of the first phrase through fugal writing that is a sequenced up major second, creating a feeling of tension. At the end, there is another major second ostinato from A-G alluding to the beginning of the work. The constantly changing texture in this movement creates a sense of unease.

This piece offers another example of Tan Dun's copious use of the double fourth and fifth chord (see fig. 2-28). It is used in the bottom voice of mm. 9-14 as a way to imitate the sound of the Chimes Bells creating the mysterious, heavy, and depressing feeling of an ancient funeral.



Figure 2-28. *Ancient Burial*, mm. 9-mm. 14

Chime Bells are an ancient Chinese percussion instrument (see fig. 2-29). The instrument is made of bronze and has multiple bells ordered by the size. It can be played by multiple people to create harmonies. The Chime Bells were used mostly in the royal court in ancient China and rarely seen in folk music. Chime Bells represent status and the power of the ruling class.<sup>65</sup> It has a wide range of pitches and a thick, bright timbre.



Figure 2-29. Chinese ancient instruments Chime and Bells<sup>66</sup>

Tan Dun also sequences the melody in order to develop the main theme. An example of polyphonic sequence can be found in mm. 9-12 (see fig. 2-30). In this passage, both the high and low voices are sequenced by moving the interval of a major second. At the same time, in between the two voices, pitches and rhythm are kept in a good balance. By writing this way, Tan Dun is able to reiterate that particular motif and at the same time create more intensity in the music.

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<sup>65</sup> Zhengrong Shi, "The Harmony between Man and Nature in Tan Dun's Works," *Art*, no. 6 (December 30, 2005): 38.

<sup>66</sup> "The Sound of Spring--Chinese Chimes Bells Concert," *Mask9*, January 15, 2012, accessed May 15, 2014, <http://www.mask9.com/node/46146>.



Figure 2-30. *Ancient Burial*, mm. 7- mm. 12

## No. 7 Floating Clouds

This movement is another picture of nature and the beautiful view of Tan Dun's hometown. To me, this piece emulates the feeling of lying down on the grass, listening to the wind coming by the ears, together with the waterfall, singing of birds, and staring at the clouds that are changing shape during every second. The consistently moving line of the broken chords can be seen imitating the changing shape of the clouds.

This movement is in binary form with an introduction and a coda.

	A		B		
Intro	a	b	c	b1	Coda
1	2-7	8-13	14-18	19-24	25-30



Figure 2-31. The formal structure of *Floating Clouds*

Just like floating clouds that change shape every second, the tonal center of this piece is constantly changing. Another allusion to floating clouds is the broken chord pattern seen throughout the entire piece making the image of the floating clouds even more vivid to the listener.



Figure 2-32. *Floating Clouds*, mm. 19-mm. 24

## No. 8 Sunrain



Figure 2-33. Water Splashing Festival of Dai People<sup>67</sup>

The Chinese title of this piece is simply “*Happiness*”, but the English title “*Sunrain*” paints a better picture of what this piece is about. “*Sunrain*” is the nickname for a festival celebrated in Hunan province every April called the Water Splashing Festival (see fig. 2-33).

<sup>67</sup> Bianyong Zhu, "Water Splashing Festival of Dai People at Yunnan," *Chinesenews*, accessed June 02, 2014, <http://www.chinanews.com/tp/hd/2011/04-11/31972.shtml>.

On this day, people flock to the streets with buckets that are full of water. They pour water on each other because they believe that this activity brings good luck. Children are overjoyed on this day and they spend all day dancing, running and singing. The title of Sunrain is a metaphor for this festival. In this case, the buckets of water represents the rain and one always hopes for sun on this happy holiday.

This movement is also in a binary form.

	A				Re	B			
Intro	a	Re	a1			b	Re	a2	Coda
1-2 + 3-6	7-14	15-16	17-24	25-29		30-37	37-47	48-55	56-60
G Hui		G Hui				G Gong		G Hui	

Figure 2-34. The formal structure of *Sunrain*

From the very beginning, the introduction sets up a fun, energetic, and engaging atmosphere. It starts with four big chords imitating Chinese Gongs followed by a light staccato pattern imitating Chinese Drums. This lively rhythmic vamp sets up the mood of the piece. This pattern also leads to the main theme of the movement. In the (A) section, the second phrase (a1) repeats the material in the (a) section one octave higher and the accompaniment pattern becomes more syncopated adding even more intensity to the piece and giving it a dance-like feeling. Next, a transition of three descending sequences lessening in intensity upon each reiteration set up the mood for the (B) section. In the (B) section, the melody moves between higher and lower registers canonically with a tonal center that is constantly oscillating between the G Hui, the G Gong, and the A Gong mode. This section



continues to grow in intensity with a crescendo and various sforzando markings, and comes to a climax in mm. 47-48. The coda recaps the thematic material seen in mm. 3-6. The piece finishes with the exact gong-like chord seen in the beginning but this time it is rhythmically shortened in order to heighten the intensity and end the piece with bang. It not only represents the happy ending of the festival, but also the happy ending of the entire suite.



Figure 2-35. Chinese instrument Pipa<sup>68</sup>

A prominent feature of this work is the prominence of the Pipa chord. The pipa chord is built with two perfect fourths a whole step apart.<sup>69</sup> It is called the “pipa chord” because it is the exact sound that one would hear striking the open strings of a Pipa. (see fig. 2-35). The strings on the Pipa are A, D, E, and A. We can find pipa chords in the first two measures of *Sunrain* with notes that are a whole step lower than the pipa strings: G, C, D, G. In the pipa chord, the consonance of the octave offsets the dissonance of the major second in the middle of the chord. In the beginning of this movement, the use of the pipa chord played *fff* four

<sup>68</sup> "Pipa," Photos: Hudong Baike, March 19, 2010, accessed May 7, 2014, [http://tupian.baike.com/a1\\_82\\_64\\_01300000654408126896647296561\\_jpg.html](http://tupian.baike.com/a1_82_64_01300000654408126896647296561_jpg.html).

<sup>69</sup> Yang Yu, "Compositional Analysis on Piano Suite Eight Memories in Watercolor of Tan Dun" (PhD diss., Northeastern Normal University, 2013), accessed May 3, 2014, <http://www.cnki.net/KCMS>.

times to imitate Chinese instruments Gongs and Drums creates a very joyous sound that sets up the mood of the entire movement (see fig. 2-36).



Figure 2-36. *Sunrain*, mm. 1-mm. 2

In China, Gongs and Drums are always used as a combination (see fig. 2-37). This combination is one of the most important elements of Chinese folk music, particularly on special occasions, like festivals, weddings, banquets, and funerals. In this movement, by playing the right hand chord in a high register, the interval of a major second is brought out and creates a unique dissonance very similar to the timbre of Gongs.



Figure 2-37. Chinese Gongs and Drums<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> "Listening to Chinese Gongs and Drums," *Confucius Institute Online*, March 11, 2010, accessed May 3, 2014, [http://3A%2F%2Fmusic.chinese.cn%2Farticle%2F2010-03%2F11%2Fcontent\\_115768.htm](http://3A%2F%2Fmusic.chinese.cn%2Farticle%2F2010-03%2F11%2Fcontent_115768.htm).

Immediately following this attention-grabbing introduction, the right hand continues to play major seconds on offbeats from mm. 3-6 (see fig. 2-38). The rhythmic pattern of these seconds keeps imitating the sound of the Gongs. The left hand accompanies the right hand with a broken fifth staccato pattern that imitates playing on different parts of the Drum. The whole texture together creates a very exciting sound making the listener want to dance or at the very least tap one's foot.



Figure 2-38. *Sunrain*, mm. 3-mm. 6



Figure 2-39. Lu Sheng Dance by Miao People in China<sup>71</sup>

Another instrument imitated in this movement is the Lu Sheng. The Lu Sheng is a reed-pipe wind instrument made of bamboo and has five to six long pipes giving it the capability to be a polyphonic instrument (see fig. 2-39). The Lu Sheng has a bright, nasal

<sup>71</sup> "The Happy LuSheng Dance by Miao People in China," *Overseas Chinese Language and Chinese Education Online*, February 14, 2012, accessed May 02, 2014, <http://www.hwjyw.com/zhwh/content/2012/02/14/23557.shtml>.

timbre with a wide range of sounds. Since it is played polyphonically, it can be very expressive. It is often played during special occasions like festivals, weddings, or funerals. Particularly in the Miao culture, young males play the Lu Sheng in order to court women and show their admiration.

In addition to emulating Chinese instruments, this piece contains many chords and harmonies frequently seen in Chinese folk music. One of the most common chords seen in the pentatonic system is the open fifth chord. The open fifth chord simply means that the chord is made up of the root and fifth with the 3<sup>rd</sup> missing. An open fourth chord is an inversion of an open fifth chord.<sup>72</sup> The third is often missing because that tone may not be apart of the particular pentatonic scale used in a given piece. These chords are also shared by the western classical music system. For example, we can find the open fifth chord used everywhere in Debussy *Children's Corner, No. 3 Serenade of the Doll*, especially on the weak beats (see fig. 2-40). In Sunrain, these two chords are used to imitate the bright timbre of the Lu Sheng (see fig. 2-41). The higher voice is continuously playing open fourths while the lower voice is accompanying with open fifth chords.

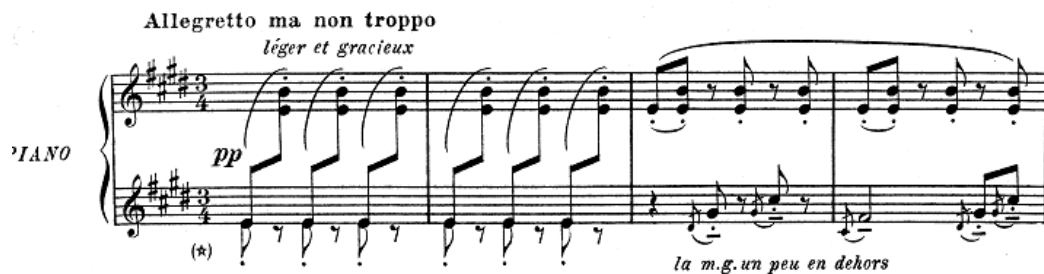


Figure 2-40. Debussy *Children's Corner, No. 3 Serenade of the Doll*, mm. 1-mm. 4

<sup>72</sup> Yang Yu, "Compositional Analysis on Piano Suite Eight Memories in Watercolor of Tan Dun" (PhD diss., Northeastern Normal University, 2013), accessed May 3, 2014, <http://www.cnki.net/KCMS>.



Figure 2-41. *Sunrain*, mm. 7-mm. 12

From measures 30-37, both voices contain parallel fourths, and by playing in canon they imitate the middle and high register of the Lu Sheng (see fig. 2-42).



Figure 2-42. *Sunrain*, mm. 30-mm. 41

A western technique used in this piece is Canonic writing. Canonic writing can be found from mm. 30-37 (see fig. 2-42). The melody in the high voice shows up again in the low voice after one measure one octave lower. This repetition also adds variety to the rhythmic pattern, long-short-long-short, which not only provides a rhythmic contrast but also makes a greater distinction between the voices. Also, in this passage, the melody goes up an interval of the fourth in two-measure units making the melody more active.

The theme of this movement comes from a Hunan folk song called *Shepherd's Song*.<sup>73</sup>

This song describes a scene of children playing and chasing each other on the field. The main theme in *Sunrain* is exactly the same as the first measures of *Shepherd's Song* (see fig. 2-43 and fig. 2-44).



Figure 2-43. *Sunrain*, mm. 7-mm. 12



Figure 2-44. Hunan folk song *Shepherd's Song*

From this Op. 1, we can definitely see the embryonic form of Tan Dun's compositional style. As a genius of sounds, he was already able to apply the idea of "visual music" from his Op. 1 in order to make people see pictures through sounds, especially the sound of nature, which he has kept exploring until the present day. This is what he said:

The medium of watercolor is vital to an appreciation of this music. It contains none of the extremes of gesture and attack ordinarily associated with virtuoso display. Rather, it is meditation and reverie. *Missing Moon* is a small statement of regret, and *Staccato*

<sup>73</sup> Jin Wang, "A Performer's Analysis on Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor" (PhD diss., Northeast Normal University, 2012), accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.cnki.net/KCMS>.

*Beans* a childhood game - simple, direct, bouncing with energy. The *Herdboy's Song* flies on dissonant ornamentation, and the *Blue Nun*, although centering on a traditional E minor, carries a folk melody in simplest expression. *Red Wilderness* opens and closes in stillness, but its center is a brief maelstrom of danger and uncertainty. *Ancient Burial* bears a suggestion of anger and loss, modified by the deft and rather French pictorialism of *Floating Clouds*. The set ends with *Sunrain*, a vigorous dance that apparently makes no promises as to its outcome.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Tan Dun, "Eight Memories in Watercolor - Tan Dun Online," *Tan Dun Online*, November 2003, accessed May 02, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/compositions/Eight-Memories-in-Watercolor.html>.

## CONCLUSION

Most of Tan Dun's pieces have titles, and he is very rarely a composer of absolute music. From this Op. 1, *Eight Memories in Watercolor*, we can already tell that he is a storyteller and a painter. He is obsessed with sounds; especially the sounds of nature which make his music come alive. After this first stop on his music journey, his Op. 1, Tan Dun has always stayed on the same track. The track is made up of his own music-making philosophy and he has since applied this approach to his music in a broader context and even a more intense way than seen in his Op. 1.

By diving into Tan Dun's world and thoroughly analyzing this work, I discovered what I believe to be the essence of Tan Dun. This essence is a philosophy that affects his compositional style both directly and indirectly. Tan Dun's hometown complex, the philosophy from Taoism, and eastern mysticism have played a vital role in shaping his compositions.

### **Hometown Complex**

As a "Diary of Longing," this Op. 1 imitates Chinese instruments and uses Chinese folk songs. Four of the eight movements of this Op. 1 are based on folksongs from Tan Dun's childhood in Hunan. Tan Dun showed his passion for Chinese folk music from the beginning of his musical journey. When composing this Op. 1 Tan Dun was a first-year student at the Beijing Central Music Conservatory, and it is not hard to imagine how overwhelmed he was from his first exposure to western classical music. In spite of this intimidating introduction,



Tan Dun stayed true to himself by beginning his Op. 1 intuitively with what was deeply in his blood. At the same time, he was remarkably able to assimilate the great compositional techniques he had recently learned from western music in order to achieve his desired sound. In Tan Dun's music there is always a search for balance. However, it is interesting to note that Tan Dun does not feel that he combines the two styles but rather exposes each one's unique capability. Tan Dun referred to this way of composing as  $1+1=1$ .<sup>75</sup>

In his later works, folk melodies continued to play a vital role in his compositions. It seems like the further away he got from home, the more he was enticed to go back to his roots. However, each time he revisited his roots, he did so with more vigor and on a larger scale. Tan Dun Spent two years collecting folk melodies from Hunan province for a piece called *The Map*, premiered by the Boston Symphony orchestra with Yo-Yo Ma. In this piece, a video of the Hunan folk songs is juxtaposed with the music coming from the orchestra.<sup>76</sup> Later on, Tan Dun reversed the process and took orchestra members to his native hometown in order to have a live performance.

### **The Harmony between Man and Nature**

The Harmony between man and nature is the essential philosophy from Taoism. Taoism is the most influential religion in the southeast part of China, especially in Hunan where Tan Dun is from. Taoism is also a fundamental part of classical Chinese philosophy. The most crucial aspect of this philosophy is the relationship between men and nature. In Taoism,

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<sup>75</sup> Pulin Tang, "A Study on Tan Dun's Chinese Music Has to Relay On Folk Music to Be International," *Chinese Music*, no. 3 (July 17, 2008): 28.

<sup>76</sup> David P. Stearns, "A Composer's Concerto with Hunan Peasants," *Philly.com*, November 10, 2004, [http://articles.philly.com/2004-11-10/news/25379314\\_1\\_tan-dun-philadelphia-orchestra-folk-performers](http://articles.philly.com/2004-11-10/news/25379314_1_tan-dun-philadelphia-orchestra-folk-performers).

nature rules everything, and man, together with any other existing creatures in nature, should always keep the balance so that in harmony is undisturbed.

Tan Dun's respect for Taoism is perhaps the reason why we hear so much sound from nature in Tan Dun's music. In this Op. 1, Tan Dun used almost all the writing skills from eastern and western style that he had learned in order to paint watercolor paintings of his memories, in which, hometown recollections and nature, is a big part. Then in his later works, it was not enough to use man-made artificial instruments to imitate the sounds of nature anymore. Tan Dun then started composing organic music using material from nature including water, paper, and stone. These compositions show organic materials in artificial musical forms. *The Water Passion after St. Matthew* (2000), is a work written in honor of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach's death. In this piece, performers tap on sides of a bowl and even tap on water in order to create different pitches and unique timbres. In addition, this piece contains both acoustic and electronic instruments.<sup>77</sup> Instead of working only with his imagination, he goes directly to working with the real world.

### **Eastern Mysticism**

Growing up in Hunan, Tan Dun got to hear unique folk music everyday and saw Shaman wizards performing ceremonies on a daily basis. Nuo Drama is deeply in his blood since he lived across the street from a cemetery. *Ancient Burial*, from his op. 1, is his first attempt to evoke this world, and it can be seen as his most conservative try too. Later, he applied the

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<sup>77</sup> Frank J. Oteri, "Tradition and Innovation: The Alchemy of Tan Dun," *Tan Dun Online*, October 15, 2007, Organic Music, accessed May 31, 2014, <http://www.tandunonline.com/>.

spirit of Nuo directly into his music. People may find his music sometimes hard to understand, but once you understand that this is Nuo, the music makes make sense. The essence of Nuo can be summed up by Tan Dun's description of his own composition *Ghost Opera*: "everything is a spirit."<sup>78</sup> Viewing this world in this way gives Tan Dun the freedom to play with odd combinations.

Throughout his life, Tan Dun's musical world has been continuously expanding. From his first introduction to Western Classical music at the Beijing Central Music Conservatory to the avant-grade styles of music presented to him at Columbia University, Tan Dun's composer identity was challenged at many stages throughout his life. In spite of so many influences, Tan Dun was able to stay true to his own personal style that he had developed from a young age. Many of the reoccurring themes and compositional devices that we see in his Op. 1, *Eight Memories in Watercolor* continued to be important even as his musical world has expanded to this very day.

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<sup>78</sup> Michelle Chan, "Tan Dun's Ghost Opera," *YouTube*, January 31, 2012, accessed May 02, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zpljner7mIw>.

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## VITA

Lin Tian is from a musical family in China. She started playing the piano at the age of four. She got her bachelor degree in piano performance from Shandong University in China in 2009 then came to the United States. She got her masters degree from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2011. Then, she attended Louisiana State University where she is currently studying with Prof. Gregory Sioles and plans to get the Doctor in Musical Arts degree in August 2014. Lin has been a frequent prizewinner both in China and in the U.S. She has always been an active performer both in solo and collaborative genre. Since her undergrad, she has been teaching group piano classes and private lessons as a teaching assistant. Since 2010, she has been invited to travel back to China to give recitals and master classes every year.