Elements of Chinese philosophy and poetry as compositional inspiration

PhD Dissertation

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Research Question

What elements of Chinese philosophy and poetry may be identified as compositional inspiration within my music compositions?

Abstract

A recurring and significant thread appearing within my compositions since I began composing is the inspiration I have drawn from aspects of Chinese philosophy and poetry. This inspiration has never been exclusive, however I have consistently returned to these sources to find ideas to express in my music. This thesis examines how this inspiration has guided my work and the broader influence and philosophy behind the creation, performance and interpretation of my music.
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Introduction to this study and compositional background

General background and personal reflection

The inspiration arising from Chinese philosophy and poetry has created a recognisable and unified programmatic thread within my music since I began composing. This inspiration has never been exclusive, however I have consistently returned to find ideas from these themes. This introduction defines this study, its limitations and how it will engage exclusively with the necessary and appropriate concepts.

The greatest realisation I have had throughout my research has been the extent to which these philosophical concepts have inspired and influenced my music. Upon initial reflection I expected that the inspiration would primarily be programmatic, however I now recognise a deep philosophical influence that has been instilled into my music which significantly impacts the process and approach I use to create music as well as the intention behind it.

Concepts from Daoism\(^1\) are the most readily recognisable as inspiration for my compositions. Put simply, Daoism\(^2\) as a philosophy emphasises actions in harmony with the dao.\(^3\) The most direct translation of dao into English is the way, referring to the way of Nature. The meaning of this basic concept of Daoism is significant as it immediately suggests how programmatic inspiration from Daoism may also develop into an influence on compositional process.

One immediately recognisable concept from Daoism to have inspired my compositions in such a manner is wú wéi (無為/无为) which may be translated simply as “effortless action” (also expressed as “effortless effort”).\(^4\)

This concept in particular has inspired my music to the extent that it is also recognisable in my creative process in addition to the programmatic inspiration. This inspiration can be recognised to such a depth that a circular stream of influence has been created. The programmatic inspiration moved to an influence on process and also allowed me to accept this as a functional part of my compositional inspiration and process. Going beyond these superficial notions, this philosophy also led me to make the decision to actively pursue this influence within my work in a direct manner, rather than consider it as a peripheral influence.

"The sage acts without keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practises the teaching that uses no words“ Chapter II\(^5\)

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\(^1\) Throughout this thesis I will be using pinyin transliterations. Dao was formally expressed as Tao and correspondingly appears in the titles of literature. I have used the most up to date transliteration for the sake of consistency.

\(^2\) 16 Littlejohn “Dao is used as the energizing process that permeates and animates all of reality to move in its ongoing process. However... dao itself cannot be described in words.”

\(^3\) “The basic idea of the Daoists was to enable people to realize that, since human life is really only a small part of a larger process of nature, the only human actions which ultimately make sense are those which are in accord with the flow of Nature — the Dao or the Way. Their sensitivity to the way of Nature prompted them to reject human ideas or standards which might lead to an overly assertive mode of behaviour or too strong a commitment to the achievement of worldly goals.” (http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1000bce_daoism.htm)

\(^4\) 28 Littlejohn

\(^5\) 6 Lau, D. C
Scope of Enquiry

This thesis will draw exclusively on concepts and ideas which have inspired my work. Many philosophical concepts have inspired my work, however to draw connections to such vast and nebulous areas of study external from my own work would exceed this limits of this research. Instead this discussion will be limited to particular concepts which are identifiable as inspiration on my work. These influences will be identified through my compositional process. The manner in which Chinese philosophy and poetry has inspired other composers will not be featured in this discussion, nor will I be dissecting their work, as they have had no direct or indirect influence on my music and my approach. This discussion will focus will on the concepts I have encountered, and how they have influenced my music.

Composing music is a personal pursuit therefore this exegesis will also outline some of my personal beliefs on music to contextualise the topic and assist in understanding the approach I have taken. The music I write is frequently a close reflection of values and philosophical concepts which I find to accurately express ‘the human condition’, however it would be naive to claim that it is even possible that this reflection could be all encompassing and universal.

My process as a composer emphasises the desire to create a piece of art embedded with its philosophical influences and origins. Generally this is an extension of my own readings and interests at the time of the creation of each composition. Depending on the topic of influence, this may create a circular influence as the philosophical background to the music influences the content and also my process of composition and furthermore effectively indicates how my music is influenced by life. Within this thesis it is my desire to accurately and more definitively articulate my view on composition, and particularly how it applies to my compositions.

I believe that the honesty of music and its reflection of the personality of the artist are essential to a well crafted and artistically successful piece of music. Music which doesn’t attempt this may lack the quasi-spiritual and other undefinable qualities which can make it beautiful. There is no way to formulate a clear argument on this as it is certainly personal, requires some subjective ‘analysis’ or internal reflection, and is only really realisable on a case by case basis. Ultimately it comes down to limiting the disjunct between the technical aspects of a piece (both compositional and musical) and its expressive qualities. Without the necessary technique it will be difficult for fluent musical expression, as communicating ideas through music is always going to be problematic. Additionally, without rich and nuanced inspiration, it may not speak much to the listener.

I have intuitively approached this research along the lines of the traditions of Eastern philosophy rather than a Western view. I have placed an emphasis on self reflection, understanding, and internal growth, rather than being reliant on other sources as inspiration. This accurately reflects my approach to composition, as I found forcing a referential system of understanding on my work didn’t assist to contextualise it or elucidate its meaning, as it would only highlight where things are dissimilar, rather than similar. Additionally, the analysis of my music closely parallels the way I found inspiration, following the process through which each piece was composed. I have endeavoured to analyse each piece using methods unique to their creation, rather than replicating the overall analysis from piece to piece.
Part of the process of analysing my work occurred during the compositional phase, identifying the streams of thought and techniques that I used in the compositional process. However looking back at the compositions with hindsight and through the guise of this philosophical investigation I have managed to find deeper meaning and the true significance of the philosophical influence. The ongoing development of my music and my compositional craft has led me to spend more time looking back at the natural strengths rather than forcing myself to forge new paths. This is also very much in tune within the concepts of Daoism which have been an underlying inspiration in my work. My focus has always been about working with my strengths and applying effort into these areas.

“One who exceeds in travelling leaves no wheel tracks.” Chapter XXVII

To better understand how these influences have emerged in my music, I have also included a survey of my previous work to see how this influence has grown throughout the development of my compositional voice. I have always ensured that the connection between music and its influences is natural and effortless. This belief is significant in the influence on my music and I have noticed that it is also an explicit effect of focussing on the dao. The way I have written this thesis also reinforces the manner in which this discovery has come about. I have traced the journey from the natural instinct, to taking inspiration, to realising the extent of the inspiration and influence to finally accepting the nature of the influence and how to capitalise and appropriately use this influence.

As I have articulated above, it is my intention to focus on my own work rather than to discuss the works of other composers and their relationship to Chinese philosophy, poetry or Chinese music. However, I will mention some parallels in the background of inspiration and the connection to the resulting music as this has also had an influence on the creation of my present compositional voice. My inspiration has come directly from the philosophical background and inspiration, rather than superficial aspects of the music. This has created an interesting situation as the themes of my music and sometimes the overall sounds may superficially reflect a clichéd notion of an ‘Oriental’ sound. The reality is that the influences have appeared in parallel, any similarities have arisen from the foundational origins rather than influence based on or attempting a superficial resemblance.

“The way that can be known is not the constant way, the name that can be named is not the constant name.” Chapter I

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6 32 Lau - The quotes presented periodically throughout the thesis are all from the daodejing and effectively link many of the philosophical notions within my work to this thesis. The music I write is essentially a metaphorical representation of the ideas which inspired it. The nature of the inspiration coming from Daoism further emphasises this metaphorical status.

7 5 Lau
Diverse background of inspiration

Throughout my work as a composer, influences have come from many areas of my life both musical and non-musical. Principal influences have included music from the Second English folk revival, non-Western music originating primarily from India and China, Western and Eastern philosophy, ideas translated from nature and the environment themes, and aesthetic concepts derived from visual arts. These influences have varied significantly as I have developed my craft, however after sustained investigation it has become clear that one of the most significant and lasting influence which has emerged has its origins in Chinese philosophy, poetry and associated aesthetics. My compositional style has aligned closely with many properties of these areas, while until recently never exclusively or purposefully engaging with them. This began as a peripheral interest which has become more focused while I have pursued other varied musical interests and influences. This process has also revealed to me a path of discovery, including the wrestling of the identity of my own music and coming to a true understanding of the art that I create. It’s satisfying that after taking this journey and looking closely at my influences and inspiration, I have realised a clear and well articulated view of my compositional voice.

It was only relatively recently that I made an intentional decision to focus on these influences rather than simply allow them to be part of my work. Having studied philosophy both at undergraduate level and privately, my interest in Chinese philosophy is much more than superficial or passing, yet I would not claim to be an expert. Within the last few years after visiting China, studying Chinese language and also engaging more seriously with traditional Chinese music I have begun to actively investigate how I can more clearly invest these influences in my compositions. It wasn’t so much that the study of these areas influenced my approach to music, but it was the realisation of the cultural and philosophical influences of these different areas had onto themselves, that I discovered the manner in which this philosophy had influenced my own music. Discovering how closely aligned Chinese music is to philosophy and other programmatic influences allowed me to see parallels in my own work and how I could develop a similarly profound connection to a well established artistic lineage. I feel fortunate that my compositional voice has developed simply and naturally.
Preface to the discussion of work in the folio

Principal influences - Conceptual and programmatic

Having outlined the direction and limits of this thesis I will now focus on what exactly I will be engaging with. I will discuss how I have established a manner of influence in my work, evolving through an organic process, which happens to closely parallel the source and the nature of the programmatic influence for the music. It also seems useful at this point to look more into the overall background to the discovery of these influences.

Prior to studying music composition I completed a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne studying philosophy, with a particular focus on Eastern philosophy. The impetus for this direction of study came about from a long-term interest in philosophy and a desire to have a complete awareness of academic thought historically, from both the West and the East. My initial contact with Daoism came via study of the daodejing. The philosophy seemed superficially quite simple however it expresses something more profound and was immediately appealing. In particular there is a deep attachment to the concepts of nature to understand humanity, particularly associated with the elements. What also struck me was that to my knowledge there was nothing like this comparable in Western culture. I discovered the study of Eastern philosophy to be immediately appealing; however it was certainly a balance of ideas from the East and West that I found to be ideal. To take a simplified and personal view on the differences between Eastern and Western wisdoms, one could suggest that Western perspectives focus on the quantifiable constants while the Eastern perspective considers the qualifiable constants. A balance of these two sides together, also taking influence from the philosophy itself in line with the Buddhist concept of ‘the middle path’ might indicate an ideal. Similarly, the notion of yin and yang in Daoism suggests a balance of two opposing ideas.

The influence of the ideas of Daoism were particularly significant as at the time I was transitioning from purely studying humanities and I had been occupied primarily with these philosophical concerns, to begin to focus on creating music. It becomes quite clear why these ideas have had significant influence on my music. It’s possible to see this balance again in the process by which I have approached the creation of my music; a balance of ideas from East and West when considered purely in background terms and additional in terms of the musical influence, from intuitive to the sought out and guided.

My engagement between philosophy and music was also at the forefront of my understanding, thus my music has received great inspiration purely from philosophy. As I came to music later than many other musicians and composers, many of the ideas I formed about music vary from what is traditionally taught about the Western classical musical canon. I began my understanding of music primarily through self erudition and no immediate desire to engage with technical virtuosity within my formative music compositions. During my education in the Western art tradition, I have noticed that technical virtuosity is frequently given more emphasis than emotional expression. I also feel that the emphasis of this in Western music is frequently displayed in the processes used to teach. Emotional and musical expression, while obviously very significant, does not appear to be considered with equal importance to virtuosity. After engaging with Chinese philosophy and subsequently music

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9 54 Rainey
10 231 Kim
11 30 Littlejohn
and musical training in China, I found that although there are many virtuosos in Chinese music, Chinese music favours directness and encourages restrained expression before technicality; there is more frequently an emphasis on creating beauty through simplicity and expression. The simplicity of musical ideas in Chinese music inspired by Chinese philosophy is often aimed at creating particular moods and there is a significant emphasis in Chinese musical training to work on the communication of emotion. This also comes about from the emphasis on the lineages from teachers. This permeates the music to the extent that the notation (for example for guqin) requires proper introduction from a teacher to interpret the music. This same emphasis on lineage is not as pronounced in the Western tradition.

Through my notated works I have always place an emphasis on ‘communication through simplicity’ which I can recognise as a result of my philosophy studies. Having received influence from this philosophy prior to becoming immersed in music, this emphasis on communication through simplicity has always been important within my own work. It’s not until more recently that I could identify why it is that this occurred. I have also since recognised the value of virtuosity in music, only after formally studying music composition for a number of years, but my feeling is fixed that emotional expression is far more significant in communicating musical ideas successfully.

I still generally follow a reductive process when composing. My initial impulses as a composer concerned finding a way to express the greatest amount through the simplest ideas. When considering all the ideas which come together to create a piece of music, I always strive for the simplest and most direct concepts to achieve the creation of a successful piece of music. My instinct is to ultimately reduce a piece of music to a single note. Nothing could be simpler and effective than a single, unambiguous note to express everything possible in a piece of music. Unfortunately, this becomes too abstract to be realised rationally and realistically. However, the best way I have found to attempt to achieve this ideal has been a frequent device I have used throughout my work; commencing and concluding a composition on a single note. Everything that occurs in between these single notes is in effect an embellishment of that one single note. This recurring practice will be analysed when looking at a number of pieces both within the folio and prior to it.

"The further one goes, the less one knows." Chapter XLVII

12 121 Tien [also from discussion with Yang Qing]  
13 131 Tien  
14 21 Tien  
15 85 Tien  
16 54 Lau
Principal influences - Musical and aesthetic

In addition to the primarily philosophical influences, it is essential to think about my musical influences. Although undoubtedly there is a great crossover, for the purposes of this discussion, I have made a distinction.

My first influence from Asia came through the music of India. Travelling through India and receiving lessons on the sitar, the melodic influence of this music characterised by its almost endless flowing lines has frequently returned to my music, but the other common musical device in Indian music, the use of a drone, has never been significant in my music. Considering the traditional music of China, on a superficial level there are similarities to Indian music in its lack of harmonic movement; however, it doesn’t rely on the concept of the drone as heard in Indian music.

I can’t carry on any particular traditions as I don’t have any particular musical heritage, so my ideas come directly from my experience, personally explored and what I have been exposed to. The blending of cultural heritages and musical heritages which have been directly influential and immediately appealing has lead to the development of my compositional voice. This most simply reflects my intentions and again follows the loop of philosophical influence. It is worth now briefly mentioning some of the influence I have gathered from Western art music and other forms of music.

Western Art Music Influences

Some of the influences from Western music which have inspired me the most include the early baroque composers, mediaeval composers, many Australian composers with whom I have had direct contact and also the music of the early and late 20th Century, for example Debussy, Stravinsky and Ligeti.

The connection between these three composers is the musical textures which they create. Of these three composers mentioned, Stravinsky seems the odd one out as his music displays more overt complexity, however with Stravinsky the primal force of his music was what immediately inspired me. It is that balance of those who maintain the musical and other traditions which functioned well for centuries, albeit with a new perspective, that I found most appealing. Radical modernists have never managed to reach me emotionally, or in any way personally through their musical expression.

English Folk

The focus here is looking at the formative influences on my music and creating a complete picture of my musical process and creation, influences and intentions. Formative influences may also be traced back to English folk. The naive singing of Anne Briggs reflects what I consider to be an organic approach to music. Not only is it the mood of this genre of music which I hope to capture, but I have a shared affinity with the simple modal melodies and the purity of the origin of this music.

I have also found a close parallel between the folk influences and philosophical influences. Philosophical origins and ideas are the core of music compositions. The direction of my musical concept is to convey ideas with simple clear origins.

\[17 \text{154 Sweers}\]
Chinese music

In comparing my own music with Chinese music, the key point to remember is that the aesthetic principles within Chinese music which recognisably reflect my work have their origin in the similar philosophical and aesthetic interests which I have pursued, rather than a replication of Chinese music. This applies even when I have engaged with Chinese musical culture through the use of traditional Chinese instruments. I feel that it is more authentic to engage through my own means, with respectful adherence to the traditions, but not slavishly copying the musical properties. Any similarity is again simply the result of a parallel philosophical origin and the idiomatic properties of music and instruments.

This discussion concerned the parallels rather than any direct inspiration. There are many interesting characteristics which I have found to align with my music. It’s the same philosophical and programmatical background about Chinese music that excited me when I first heard it. The shared characteristics and the more that I have looked into this research, the more properties I have found to already exist. The similar philosophical background has lead to shared properties. Furthermore, there were details about the technical aspects of the music in terms of melodic and orchestrational content which I found paralleled my own work. Thus in the context of the pre-existing parallel inspiration, it was worthy to investigate how I could coalesce the musical properties with the philosophical inspiration.

Thinking for a moment exclusively about the objectively definable properties of my music which may be shared with those of Chinese music, examples include: the use of limited pitch sets, primarily pentatonic and correspondingly modal constructions, and also the use of tonal and modal shifts rather than harmonic shifts.18

The idea of a tonal centre in Chinese Music is similar to that in Western music where the music revolves around a certain key. Just as in Western music, modulation occurs when the melody starts to move away from this tonal centre. However, Western music has the harmonic structure as its basis while Chinese music emphasises more on the linear melodic progression of the music.19 As a result, the approach and treatment to tonality differs somewhat.20

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18 [2centsmusic]
19 64 Tien. “In traditional Chinese music, however, the focus in qu has tended to be on the “horizontal” or “longitudinal” dimension in the musical contour of the sonic experience.”
20 62 Tien. “qu ㄑ ㄑ lit.‘a musical piece; composition’. In simple terms, a qu is a structured musical experience based on sonically present elements (at least in its prototypical sense). Though not necessarily written down, something considered qu must be formalised or conventionalised in some way, typically melodically, so that the musical experience can be reproduced. Since its earliest known existence in Chinese musical records, the qu characteristically has been associated with vocal compositions (human voice with musical accompaniment) and, in this context, the role of words (i.e. poetic verses in ancient Chinese or, song lyrics in modern Chinese) has been considered an indispensable part of the musical experience.”
Traditional Chinese music frequently emphasises the connection to nature by taking direct influence to express the sounds of things such as water, wind, birds and the movement of animals.\textsuperscript{21, 22} There is also a great emphasis on the expression of such ideas in a very straightforward way. Abstraction is considered to simply obscure the communication of ideas.\textsuperscript{23}

One very important musical and philosophical property that my music and Chinese music often shares is the hope that the music can achieve a sense of purity and ‘nothingness’. Clearly this will be articulately differently from there simply being silence. This is the feeling that the music philosophically satisfies the sense of nothingness musically.\textsuperscript{24, 25}

Since I began composing I have always had the inclination to allow the performer great freedom with interpretation. This has fundamentally gone against Western art music tradition where it is the composer who receives the principal credit for the creation of the music. Ultimately this comes down to the notion of improvisation. This plays a central role in the performance of much traditional Chinese music. Music in the Chinese tradition relies more on traditional pieces, so the interpretation by the performer is more significant. The composer, or at least the piece (if the composer is unknown) still receives the greatest attention, but it is understood how much the performer has contributed to the creation of the performance.

One of the particular qualities of Chinese musical aesthetics which has a parallel within my own music is the emphasis of the performer’s role in the creation and performance of a work. The composer is obviously the key to the creation of the work, but in Chinese music the emphasis of improvisation and interpretation give allow the performer to exert a more significant influence on the music than would occur in a Western art music context. A good example here is the music written for and performed on the guqin, one of the most ancient Chinese instruments.\textsuperscript{26} No fixed tempo is given within the traditional pieces composed for the guqin and much of the notation allows the performer to use their own interpretation. The poetic nature of the notation means each performer will find their own meaning and depend also on the performer’s skills and understanding.

One clear connection which exists between my work and Chinese music may be seen through guqin notation. I have notated in both Western and guqin notation. The traditional guqin notation is still favoured by modern performers as it allows the performance an exact guide (except tempo) to the performance of the piece (in some way analogous to contemporary guitar tablature notation and

\textsuperscript{21} 131 Tien
\textsuperscript{22} 251 Tien “The guqin player who, ultimately, is the one who makes the decision as to whether a piece of music (or parts of it) should be played quickly, is encouraged to seek inspirations from Nature – natural themes or images that involve quick or rapid motion, such as the surging water in a waterfall which has great momentum.”
\textsuperscript{23} 39 Tien. “In the Confucian doctrine, it was preached that great music has to be kept simple. This is the notion of da yue bi yi 大樂必易, found in “The Book of Rites”, or Li Ji 礼記 from the Warring States Period. “Simple” music in this regard should comprise as few notes as possible, including the use of sonically slight or sonically absent elements. The rationale behind this is that, what really matters are the thoughts, feelings or motifs that are to be communicated across to the beholder, using sonic or musical forms as a means of facilitating communication. As such, it is pivotal that sonic or musical forms be kept minimal and do not become distractions.”
\textsuperscript{24} 70 Tien
\textsuperscript{25} 218 Chan “[T]he nothingness of Dao should not be taken to mean pure absence, but rather boundless presence beyond description.”
traditional lute notation.) The other aspect which I found refreshing about guqin notation is the connection which is possible directly to the music. As noted elsewhere in this thesis I prefer to work directly with music thus allowing a connection which traditional notation often interferes with.

There are frequently strong connections between traditional Chinese music, poetry and philosophy. Through research and discussion with a number of Chinese musicians some significant poems which have influenced Chinese music include: 关山月 (Li Bai - The Moon over a Mountain Pass), 秋风辞 (Li Bai – Autumn Wind Tune) and 阳关三叠 (Wang Wei – Three variations on the Yang Pass). Traditional Chinese compositions pieces which use the understanding of a poem to create the music include: 长门怨 and 沧江夜雨. A highly characteristic and well-known Chinese piece which has displays the influence of nature and poetry: 高山 流水 (High Mountain, Flowing Water).

The structure of Chinese pieces is often by design, very natural and flowing. This comes about to emphasise the improvisatory nature of the music. Melodies have a logic which encourages a certain pattern of breathing, and finger positions which are easy to apply.

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27 252 Tien “[I]t is up to the guqin player to determine whether a given emotion or impression demands that s/he plays the musical instrument relatively quickly or very quickly, [...] not only in an attempt to capture certain fast-moving themes or images in Nature (floating clouds, flowing waters and the rapid waterfall, etc.) but at the same time be inspired by those themes or images.”

28 60 Tien “There is a vast body of literature since ancient times describing the winding, turning and curved quality of the musical contour of qu. According to the”Book of Rites”, Confucius’s student Zi Gong 子贡 apparently asked a musician by the name Shi Yi 師乙 about the nature of a musical composition. In response, Shi Yi asserted that a musical composition must be shang ru kang, xia ru dui, qu ru zhe 上如抗、下如隊、曲如折 ‘the musical contour must rise and fall at will and be able to turn (in a curved way)’.”
Survey of earlier works

In order to provide context to my present compositional voice and inspiration, this discussion continues by tracing the path of the emergence of the inspiration already discussed within a number of earlier pieces which signal the development of the compositional path I currently follow. This will outline the process of the inspiration coming from philosophy, to poetry in addition to discovering inspiration and parallels directly with Chinese traditional music.

The purpose of this survey is to recognise the path which my music has taken from my earliest compositions leading toward the works written in the last few years which contribute to this PhD. The importance of this reflection is the focus on specific qualities which can be identified as inspiration. It is interesting to note how some musical associations with traditional Chinese music came to rise even though they were realised from a different perspective. Perhaps this suggests the shared philosophical and conceptual influence may have led to a more audible influence in the musical traits. While it is not my intention for me look in detail at the manner in which Chinese music is influenced by poetry and philosophy within my research, I will examine some of the similarities and parallels which have occurred in my own compositions.

Certain musical properties have come to categorise my work. These properties were established quite early in my compositional career. One of the first examples, and also only my second orchestral work (perhaps also my first major composition), Te Matua Ngahere reveals recognisable motifs and compositional structures which have pervaded my work since.

To begin with, the following unified stylistic features may be identified:

A general avoidance of modernist ideas, less interest in harmonic change (but with the consideration of harmonic zones (or colour zones) with specific drone or pedal points) thus creating a greater reliance on modality rather than diatonic (or other) harmony, use of quartal harmonies to create an ‘open’ sound and harmonic ambiguity, a lightness of orchestrational style, use of doubled octaves and unisons and remaining dedicated to what comes naturally.

Some of the general stylistic gestures which in some way more closely reflect the aesthetic inspiration from Chinese philosophy; the sense of space, the interpretation of the poetic motives, the reflections of cyclical patterns - particularly concerning nature, the metaphorical relationships compared to nature. These ideas then relate back to the poetical and philosophical ideas from Chinese philosophy.

At times I have used direct imitations of sounds from nature (for example, bird sounds and leaves rustling) aimed at the creation of texture. However this developed into more of a creative or metaphorical relationship as my development as a composer progressed. This has also included structural devices which had their impetus in nature; including the representation of growth, and the use of the golden section as a structural device. This has often provided my compositions with a natural climax point which will be discussed further during the analysis.

My compositions generally lack harmonic progression. Harmony has never held much importance for my music, the creation of many layers in my music and the organic flow of sounds; the creation of structure through texture, density and melodic fragments dictates my intentions instead of harmonic structures. The use of harmony only comes about at brief moments of accent rather than overarching
structural points. During the compositional process I rely on my instinctual feelings when creating a piece and this applies to every element possible. Relying on instinct could also be considered as a reflection of Daoist philosophy.

A number of my early works show the emerging, tentative inspiration from Chinese philosophy. The first major identifiable use of this inspiration came within my work *At every moment, I am dying* (2005). This phrase was borrowed from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* authored by Sogyal Rinpoche, a Tibetan Monk. The concept behind the work was to present continuously changing sounds as a parallel to the notion of life as presented in the book. Two of my key musical influences within this work are quite obvious. I was listening to the music of both Igor Stravinsky and Gyorgy Ligeti at the time. The influence of Stravinsky may be heard through the use of freely fluid melodies which interact producing a complex and fluid line, irregularly accented dense chords, and repetitive motifs interplaying with all these ideas together. The influence from Ligeti may be heard toward the end of the piece, where I borrowed the idea of *micropolyphony* and also and masses of sound he used in his characteristic pieces such as *Atmosphères* and *Apparitions*. These musical ideas have been blended together to represent the programmatic concept of the piece.

Some of the elements which suggest aesthetic inspiration from the ideas within this book can be seen as the constantly changing texture, melodic and harmonic content. As my first orchestral piece, I threw numerous ideas (with hindsight, possibly too many ideas) into this piece making it an interesting but not mature work. The important thing to note here is the influence from philosophy on the structure of the piece through the continuous changes the music goes through. The program note for this work reads as follows.

“The title *at every moment, I am dying* is a phrase from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinponche. Rather than reflecting a morbid fascination with death, these words should be considered as an expression of the natural cycle of life. The music was through-composed using continuously changing “harmonic realms”; a parallel to the impetus for the piece.”

Another work which I composed in 2005 displayed the emerging influence of Chinese philosophy. The chamber opera *Delphi* (2005) which I composed for the University of Melbourne, Faculty of Music Opera Project used a libretto which developed from texts borrowed from the *dàodéjīng* and a work by Tibetan author Chögyam Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom and the Way of Meditation* (1976). This composition primarily exhibits a conceptual attachment to the philosophical and poetic influence represented within the content of the libretto. A general aesthetic influence on the piece is less significant to note, however the ongoing influence displayed here is key.

The second orchestral work I composed, *Te Matua Ngahere* (2006), shows the ongoing inspiration in a new manner. Taking inspiration from nature is a practice composers have engaged in throughout all art music traditions. As already mentioned, this has also been a frequent source of inspiration amongst Chinese composers, both ancient and modern, particularly those who have taken influence from philosophy. The common approach identified here is augmented by the audible influence on the musical content. The approach taken here to represent the environmental inspiration involves aural representations of different forest environments. This is reflected in the original program note, as follows.
“Te Matua Ngahere ("The Father of the Forest") is an ancient kauri tree, believed to be more than 2000 years old, located in the Waipoua Kauri Forest on the North Island of New Zealand. Being in the presence of this tree several years ago has remained one of the most profound experiences of my life. This inspiration, coupled with a series of recent walks through different botanical gardens around Victoria, provided much of the motivation for this piece. This stimulus has been in some instances direct, for example, aurally recreating the visual textures of the environments that I encountered. Alternatively, inspiration came simply through reflecting upon these experiences.”

Inspiration from the *dàodéjīng* appears again in the next orchestral work I composed, *before and after follows each other* (2006). The title *before and after follow each other*, refers to the inspiration for this piece in addition to its structural conception; the music is a meditation on mortality and is primarily through-composed. A literal interpretation of the title, a phrase from the *dàodéjīng*, suggests that when the distinction between life and death is abolished, death is no longer something to be feared. The music was composed in recognition of the philosophical concepts suggested in the text. The instrumental passages constantly dove-tail, again indicating the natural flow from one idea to the next; an ongoing property of my music. The music is almost seamless throughout its duration. The passage from the *dàodéjīng* which inspired the piece reads as follows.

Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;  
The difficult and the easy complement each other;  
The long and the short off-set each other;  
The high and the low incline towards each other;  
Note and sound harmonise with each other;  
*Before and after follow each other.*

*dàodéjīng*, Book 1 Chapter 2

Yet another orchestral piece taking inspiration from the *dàodéjīng* followed directly. Composed for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and performed in 2008, *A Sudden Downpour* (2007) again took inspiration from philosophical and poetic influence on the structure and programmatic concept. This built on the previous works stylistically strengthened the connections to both environment and philosophy which I had explored in the previous works.

*A gusty wind cannot last all morning,  
and a sudden downpour cannot last all day.  
Who is it that produces these? Heaven and earth.  
If even heaven and earth cannot go on forever,  
much less can man.*

*dàodéjīng*, Book 1 Chapter 2

The orchestral work *crux* (2009) didn’t use any of the direct programmatic inspiration like the other examples given above. However, it accurately articulates the philosophical inspiration of the aesthetic concepts which I’m discussing. This work displays the beginnings of the ‘aesthetic concept’ of simplicity.

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29 6 Lau  
30 28 Lau
which I had started to recognise as significant in my work. The piece opens and closes with a single note and for the entire duration of the music the same note is heard, passed between different instruments. This note acts in different functions through the music, including as the harmonic root, a pedal note, and as the soprano melody line.

The next work I composed built on all of the ideas which I had gathered influencing my voice in this direction and is a significant turning point in this journey. *The Constant* (2010) is the clearest example of some of the aesthetic concepts I had been working toward in the preceding years. Inspiration came both from a programmatic realisation the philosophical and poetic concepts put forward in the text used as inspiration while also articulating these concepts in the manner I had dealt with them in preceding compositions. Some of the key points of the words of the English translation of the poetry reflect well in what I wanted to achieve. “Attain emptiness”, “hold firmly to stillness”, “all rise together and watch their return”, “Returning to one’s destiny is known as the constant”, “act from knowledge of the constant” all can be seen as direct connections to the texture, melodic content and overall construction of the piece. This piece takes inspiration in part by a fragment of the *dàodéjīng* which reflects the aspects of life and emotion that remain stable during a transitional phase in life. The three phases of the piece utilise similar material in quite diverse ways. An overall arc moves throughout the entire piece which is exhibited musically through the mainly upward melodic and arpeggiated ideas in the first movement and is brought into contrast to the third movement which involves mainly downward motion. Appropriately, the second movement acts as an apogee between these two musical thoughts. This may be considered to symbolise that change comes about through a slow realisation, sudden response, and then gradual acceptance.

The passage providing inspiration for this work is as follows.

*I do my utmost to attain emptiness;*
*I hold firmly to stillness.*
The myriad creatures all rise together
And I watch their return.
The teaming creatures
All return to their separated roots.
Returning to one’s roots is known as stillness.
This is what is meant by returning to one’s destiny.
Returning to one’s destiny is known as the constant.
Knowledge of the constant is known as discernment.
Woe to him who wilfully innovates
While ignorant of the constant,
But should one act from knowledge of the constant
One’s action will lead to impartiality,
Impartiality to kingliness,
Kingliness to heaven,
Heaven to the way,
The way to perpetuity,
And to the end of one’s days one will meet with no danger.
*dàodéjīng*, Book 1 Chapter 1631

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31 20 Lau
Works contributing to the folio

Introduction

The path I have taken which has resulted in my compositional voice has been enunciated through the introduction. Detailed analysis of the specific influential factors is provided for the following works which contribute to the thesis folio. *The Cosmic Dance* (2013), *Liujiang Ancient Town* (2014), *The Good Rain Knows Its Season* (2015) and *Autumn Sky* (2016). The discussion concludes with an examination of the work in progress *So Early in the Spring* for guqin (2016).

One of the principal issues I have considered in analysing my own music is constructing an objective point of view about something which is unavoidably subjective. The elements of the composition, from the broader structure, right down to the minute details, arise primarily through intuition. With that consideration in mind, I approached this compositional analysis initially through the same methods used to compose the music. Discussion of the structural and technical processes is also included, however that discussion is limited to only what is useful as ‘conventional’ techniques of composition were avoided. It also accords to the concepts of Daoism which have influenced my work.

"The whole world recognises the beautiful as the beautiful yet this is only the ugly" Chapter II

My compositional method is not dictated by exact structural limitations determined in the early phases of the process. A large number of considerations are taken into mind which may have only subtle identifiable influence on the actual note content; however, they all collectively influence the music and are thus important to discuss. Correspondingly, each piece is discussed in a different manner, however sometimes sharing common themes. This is both because the analysis given to each piece most accurately represents the compositional method used to create it. More structured works therefore rely more on recounting the structure of the piece. Extended descriptions are therefore required for those pieces which arose from intuition and free-development. This analysis builds a narrative of my work and focuses on defining and further establishing my compositional voice and artistic practice. The way in which I have analysed each piece is also a greater reflection on what I learnt from each piece, the compositional process, the performance and the reception by the musicians and the public.
Cosmic Dance (2013)

Preliminary background considerations

The first stage of the analysis presented here concerns the influence of some of the background issues and influence. The initial stages of composing The Cosmic Dance dealt with the most fundamental issues such as the ensemble available, the duration and performance context. Orchestral winds, brass and a large percussion section were offered in order to balance out the heavy emphasis on the strings elsewhere in the programming. Initially my desire was to compose a work in the vein of a concert fanfare as the ensemble available immediately suggested certain musical ideas which would be effective in such a piece. The idea was also to compose a work to fit in with the established canon of such pieces which would be performable by non-professional orchestras, and particularly community orchestras. The mood of such a piece would have been in contrast with what I had composed recently at that time, so would have been a useful in my development as a composer. In addition to the material which was ultimately used in this piece, I also composed some highly rhythmic and percussive motifs which were to form the basis of a piece in the style of a fanfare. However, this turned out not to be the path I would pursue. During the early stages of composing the work, I was not content with the music I was writing in that vein, feeling in some way that I was forcing a particular style or mood onto my music which was not in tune with what I was naturally inclined to compose at that moment. I took this impulse seriously as it is my desire to compose music which is as organic in nature as possible, so I allowed my intuition to take the music toward its final state. Part of this came about through what became the programmatic background to the piece.

After hearing a preliminary performance of this work, a number of necessary alterations were made. Principally these alternations concerned variations of tempo and further performance indications to assist the flow of the piece. Some of these were discussed in the rehearsal process but weren’t translated into the performance. The changes were made to reflect my original intentions and more clearly define and refine the sound I hoped to create. This process of development and improvements happens with most of my pieces.

Primary changes were also made to improve the flow of the piece. The cosmic dance is staged as a series of interlocking moments; the tempo fluctuates, dramatically rushing to create the surges of sound and the smooth connections between each moment. This feeling was not well reflected in the performance so more time for pauses is now given where necessary. In basic terms this translates to alternations such as fermatas over performed notes and also over rests. These improvements have come about partly in response to a deeper reflection of the (Daoist) philosophy back onto the music. The development has been made from the initial performances to create the ultimate version.

The development of the relationship between notation and music takes a different amount of time for each piece. I have developed a relationship between a spoken transfer of information which is never possible solely through the score or text; an element of collaboration.

One of the most significant concepts that I hope to achieve is the emphasis of the energy level in my music. The way I approach notation requires that additional level of personal input. I find no matter the manner in which I notate music, discussions are necessary to reveal the ultimate performance. This is one aspect of my music which doesn’t always readily translate from notation to performance.
Over time I wish to establish a ‘performance practice’ around my music similar to those which exist around other established composers. This greatest emphasis is on the performance notes within my music. The desire for the musician to fully embrace the performance instructions is necessary. I feel that improvisation through developed musicianship is necessary to accurately perform my work.

Programmatic influence

At the time I was composing this piece, I was reading Fritof Capra’s The Tao of Physics. This book represents a particularly interesting crossroad in my interests. The connection with Daoism is obviously significant here to this discussion however this interest is also combined with my passion for scientific study. Prior to becoming seriously involved in music, I had studied physics and chemistry at university and seriously considered following a career path in a scientific field. The idea of the two areas of philosophy and science converging therefore became a significant inspiration. To represent the connection I made with Capra’s book, I used the title of one of its chapters as the title of this work — The Cosmic Dance. The association I have made with the idea of a dance could be thought of as playing with the listener’s expectations, as the music is fairly non-dance-like in a conventional sense. However, here the dance is represented by the convergence and interplay of ideas.

There are two parallels which dominate the programmatic influence to the work. The first connection is emphasis on unity and flow as predicted by Daoism. Secondly the parallel I saw between science and Eastern philosophy, which also connects logically to music, could be seen through the use of the breath — essential to human life and also fundamental to many Eastern spiritual practices. This convergence is particularly clear with this piece as the ensemble emphasises instruments which are primarily aerophones. The concept of breath then became a major structural motivator throughout the piece. This concept may be seen as influential on elements from the overall structure of the piece, right down to smaller gestures. Some examples of this influence exist in a variety of the gestures throughout the piece; the unity of the ensemble collectively taking a breath and exhaling and the particular focus on the beginnings and endings of notes. On a greater structural level, the sections of the piece are often created through different instrumental groupings; the smaller groups exist typically through staggered phrases and the larger groups in a synchronised manner, always with the emphasis on the music flowing smoothly.

The final instrumental choice I made was to use exclusively metallic percussion, an aesthetic decision which is also sympathetic to the concept of breath. The long sustained decay of the cymbals and tuned percussion are a closer analogue to breath than the short percussive sounds of untuned percussion instruments including wooden instruments and drums.

Musical materials

For all of my compositions, early on in the writing process, often in parallel with the developing programmatic background to the music, I begin to develop a verbal description of the music. This is essentially a commentary which acts as a guide through the beginning phases of the compositional process. In conjunction with this verbal description, I may also create a textural diagram which acts as
a visual structure of the piece, aiding the formation of orchestral concepts and immediately expressing a sense of temporal flow. Written details describing mood and gesture are also included. These written details play a great role in translating the music from concept to performance. The visual diagram and initial sketches rarely represent a guide to follow during the entire creation of the piece. There are generally a number of ‘false-starts’ where material goes through a proving process and can move around the piece before the ultimate structure is confirmed.

Looking specifically at The Cosmic Dance, the harmonic content began as an extension of the music I composed for my song cycle Fragments of Truth. I wanted to explore further some harmonic ideas from the song cycle, which are denser and somewhat more astringent than the generally open and modal sound of my recent music. One particular feature of this piece is the use of quartal material. When arranged as stacked fourths or fifths this results in wide-spaced, clear harmony; but the same note collections may also be expressed in dense, close spacings featuring seconds.

The musical considerations of this piece include a focus on limited musical material, especially to maintain a thematic and harmonic unity within a work of a relatively short duration. There is also an emphasis on long interconnected melodies of a primarily modal quality. Examples of such themes are discussed in the following section.

Specific musical examples from The Cosmic Dance

The following specific examples drawn from the music display some of the unity found in this piece.

The first example I discuss was one of the first musical fragments composed for the piece. Figure 1 shows this motif in its base form (Theme 1) as heard in the first Clarinet at bar 68.

Figure 1

Theme 1 plays a pivotal role in the piece as different permutations of the five-note motif in bar 69 were extrapolated throughout the piece in different guises.

Key elements of this motif are the stepwise scalar motion in the first half, here from E to B in E minor, and in the second half, large leaps which are preceded and followed by stepwise motion.

In the beginning stages of composition, this motif as presented formed the basis for the opening passage of the piece. As an introduction to this section and particularly this motif, this opening was then pushed back behind new introductory material. An entire section, which represents over a third of the completed piece in turn replaced that new introductory section, and then this motif found its present place as the lead up to the first of the two major climaxes in the work.

Although it does not appear in its original form until later in the piece, Theme 1 appears at the start in a modified form. Figure 2 shows a modified Theme 1 in bars 1 to 3 as played by Oboe 1.
Figure 2 shows the same minor scale motion seen as seen in the original version of Figure 1, but the complementary passage of leaps is truncated. This motif provides the basis for the entire opening section doubled by several instruments and the nucleus of this motif is then expanded over the opening nine bars through eight of the winds. The ‘sound cloud’ created here is augmented by accents in the tuned percussion and support from the piano, with additional sustained chords in the brass.

Immediately following the appearance of Theme 1 shown in Figure 2, an altered retrograde form of Figure 2 is used to bring the opening cloud ‘back to earth’, prior to leading up to the first minor climax at bar 22. This altered form as played by the first Bassoon at bar 10 is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3 shows the introduction of scalic reordering with the appearance of a leap of a third in this version of the theme. Other similarities apparent between the Figure 3 version and the Figure 1 version are the framing of the themes within an octave and the importance of the movement by a fifth, firstly in the first bar of Figure 3 moving from the Bb to the Eb, then in the last bar from F to Bb.

In the lead up to the final climax Theme 1 appears again, albeit in a much simpler form (Figure 4). Again, the importance of the fifth is clear, as the scalic passage has been simplified to a leap of a fifth, but the complementary second part of the theme remains identical.

A series of statements of this simplified form are heard in Oboe 2 at bar 119, the Flute at 1 bar 120, the Cor Anglais bar 121 and finally as in Figure 4, heard played by Trumpet 2 at bar 123.

![Figure 4](image)

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32 The term 'sound cloud' which I use here refers to passages of sustained but slowly moving lines which create an evolving harmonic area.
Adaptations of Theme 2

The second significant motif (Theme 2) heard throughout the piece takes a quite a different function to Theme 1, as the permutations of Theme 2 are used to create a number of different structural parts of the piece. The section of the piece from bar 28 to 55 relies principally on this motif as heard in the oboe from bar 28.

**Figure 5**

Comparing Figure 3 and Figure 5, an instant connection can be made between these passages, despite their origin being distinct. Theme 2 follows an almost identical scalic reordered pattern (motion by step or thirds). The opening phrase of Theme 2 is similarly framed by a fifth, and the complete theme is framed by an octave.

Figure 6 shows the complementary motif to Theme 2 as heard in Clarinet 1 from bar 33.

**Figure 6**

More interesting connections can be found when comparing Theme 2 (Figure 5) with its complement (Figure 6). Figure 5 shows a basic descent-ascent-descent structure, while Figure 6 reverses this as ascent-descent-ascent. The final phrase of each example features a descending minor triad preceded by a stepwise ascent.

The function of this motif is tri-fold; firstly it propels the music as foreground material, shadowed and harmonised by a number of instruments. The opening part of this motif then moves to a middle ground role while its complement is heard and harmonised more densely. Bassoons 1 and 2 at bar 42 are in Figure 7.

**Figure 7**

Finally, the third function of Theme 2 appears when it takes the role of background material as heard in the contrabassoon at bar 50 given below.
Figure 8

There is a convergence of the material from both the motifs discussed here, as the main motif is heard in altered form across the entire ensemble in bars 123 to 128. Then the second adapted motif is heard again in an altered form at bar 130 split between the Cor Anglais and Clarinet 1 with harmonic material developed from bar 41, as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9

This leads to the final climax which expands upon material heard in the first minor climax at bar 22. The final post-climax calming section from bar 152 to 158 revisits some of the chamber-like motifs initially heard in the section between bars 46 to 60 in an altered form.

Another aesthetic property which may be found in this is piece is the role of ‘musical space’. The piece opens with a widely spaced but thinly orchestrated chord. As previously noted, this is the first of a number of ‘sound clouds’ which occur throughout the piece. This creates the space at the opening of the piece which indicates to some extent the ‘physical space’ the piece will inhabit. The opening chord spans a range of over five octaves; almost the limits of the available instrumentation. Within only 8 bars this ‘cloud’ condenses to a single note approximately at the centre of the range of the orchestra. The flow of the music then rapidly extends downward through the lower range of the orchestra. The music then expands outward again, shifting the general tessitura to emphasise the upper range of the orchestra before coalescing on a single note at Secondary Climax A which is the first expression of Theme 2.

This theme is significant as it can also be used to represent some of the changing role of the material in the musical ‘space’. The use of thematic content in different functions ‘opens’ the space. The adaptation of Theme 2 from foreground, to middle ground, to background roles from bar 28 through to bar 50 is a useful indicator of the changes in other aspects of the music. By this point attention is shifted by to the re-entrance of Theme 1. A change in the spatial dimension of this theme can be noted as the orchestration accompanying this expression and adaptation of Theme 1 creates a new ‘sound cloud' that gently ‘floats’ upward toward Primary Climax B.

Most of the piece is characterised by slowly changing and evolving sounds. However, there are a number of points of increased movement and energy. At all of the indicated Primary and Secondary climaxes, a change in the rate of movement occurs due to the increased rhythmicity. Section 2 features recurrent moments of great energy in the form of the five ‘lunges’ toward minor climactic points which then lead to Primary climax A. Consistent with the other climax points, the rhythmicity is halted and
the orchestra is relatively static. The contrast in the movement aspect of the music increases the impact of the climax.

**Liujiang Ancient Town (2013)**

Preliminary background considerations

My desire with this piece was to take inspiration from a natural environment (and surrounding cityscape). The town which provides the inspiration and title of the work is classically beautiful and characteristically Chinese, thus it immediately provided inspiration for this piece. The motivator may therefore be seen to be the ‘effortless action’ concept. With this piece I found a new perspective I toward embracing the concepts of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. My previous readings of Chinese poetry and philosophy perhaps gave me a vision for what I could do, but it was here that I fully recognised the direction I’d been taking unknowingly. Prior to this my inspiration had been concentrated on my study of various texts and using the philosophical impetus however now this inspiration was now coming first hand, paralleling what I discovered as a similarly artistic model to my works. I have previously used inspiration from the environment for many of my pieces however these environments were largely restricted to familiar locations close to where I lived, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

With this piece I hoped to explore how a different primary environmental source would inspire my music. This idea is another which I have frequently attempted to unpack throughout my time composing music. What I’m considering here doesn’t apply only to the basic inspiration. This concept can be applied to any aspect of a piece of music. What exactly is it that makes a piece unique and characteristic of its influence and its author (composer)? An idea from the *daodejing* is central to this belief: “the name that can be named is not the constant name”. The more we search for some kind of meaning and the more words we write about our understanding of some profound idea will get us no closer to a true understanding.\(^{33}\) It’s actually through reserving this level of analysis that we can understand these elusive ideas more completely and accurately. In simple terms you might say it comes down to “reading between the lines”. (That is, as soon as we start attempting to confirm what it is we are looking for by writing it down, the significance and meaning is lost as the absolutely definable aspect of this concept is one that can’t be written down.) In my opinion, music is the one art form more than any other which has that ephemeral and indefinable aspect. This piece really made it clear to me what significance this idea may have.

**Programmatic influence**

This piece came about when I visited China in 2013. It felt prompted to compose this work using the environment (specifically the town) as an influence on the structure and programmatic concept. The concept behind this piece was to take inspiration from the surroundings of the town and develop this inspiration into music.

\(^{33}\) 28 Littlejohn
I spent an afternoon sitting on the roof of the hotel where I was staying, in pouring rain, protected by a small eave which prevented me from getting drenched. I could see a panoramic view in front of me. With me I had nothing more than a music note book and a camera. I recorded my impressions visually. The scene presented before me included a view of the river that was rapidly expanding. As I didn’t have any access to the internet or other news sources, I wasn’t aware at the time of the significant threat that the rain was imposing on this and other nearby towns. I had instinctually wanted to simply express a feeling of the town and what I saw but at that stage I hadn’t intended the rain to be the governing aspect of the music.

The rain can be heard throughout the piece; sometimes clearly and sometimes blended into the atmosphere of the music. At first the scene is presented and the rain has already commenced. There is no gradual opening; we are immediately confronted with the image of the rain represented through repeated arpeggio gestures which move throughout the ensemble.

The image of the city and its people then appear through the rain, the green of the forest and the mountains that surround the city are also introduced. The thematic content of the music builds and goes through several lulls before a major climax near the end of the piece. The rain is still relentless as the city can be heard to be washed away. Finally the city has dissolved to nothing, but the rain continues. The mood of the piece remains from the beginning of the work, but the sound, and the view has been altered. I discovered after leaving the town the following day that the whole area was decimated by the amount of rain that fell in only a few hours. It was a significant confrontation between nature and humanity and perfectly suited in my mind for the subject of a composition.

Musical materials

The performance of this piece came about through a Fellowship I received connected to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The ensemble of mixed winds and strings was fixed but it was exactly suited to the concept I wanted to realise within this piece.

There are some easily identifiable musical tropes which may be heard in the piece. The arpeggio figurations which repeat throughout the beginning of the work can be seen to represent both the flow of the river through the village and the emerging bursts of rain which arrive over the town.

Figure 10

The piece is largely built around a single theme which is repeated in many guises, unadorned, augmented through embellishments and abstracted within the ensemble. The energy of movement is maintained from beginning to end of the work. The repetition of this theme picks up from the arpeggiated figurations at the opening of the piece signifying the relentless nature of the water moving through the scene.
Preliminary background considerations

This piece approaches the Chinese influence directly by using a well-known poem by the poet Du Fu (杜甫) Using poetry by one of the famous Chinese poets has been an approach to composition which has been on-going for centuries. This piece is effectively a partner piece to ‘The Constant’ as its intentions and sound world superficially reflect that piece.

This work was composed as a commission for the Plexus ensemble and performed during the Melbourne Metropolis series of 2016. This creation of this piece was the result of a very natural evolution. During its composition I listened to a great deal of traditional Chinese music including orchestral ensembles and solo music for guzheng and guqin. However, my intention was never to replicate or take any direct influence from Chinese music as with this piece. The emphasis was on translating some of the philosophical concepts of the poetry as discussed below to attempt a reflection of my understanding of the meaning of the poetry.

I discussed the metaphorical meaning of the poem with a number of people, and correspondingly I aimed to incorporate metaphor within my composition. There were a number of significant realisations which came about from this piece as it coincided with an extensive amount of feedback from the public and discussion from a number of people, including other composers and academics familiar with Chinese poetry.

An interesting point emerging from composing and hearing the performance of this piece was the different interpretations which people imposed. Often a listener will go for the simplest explanation for a metaphor or so forth to achieve understanding of the piece. The most frequent comment about this work, through direct feedback and also reviews which I read was that this work represented a reflection on ‘the seasons’ or ‘weather’. This was surprising as just as metaphor exists in poetry, I would have expected a deeper response. There are two ways in which this could be interpreted. Firstly, perhaps audience goers are used to elaborate faux-intellectual musings on the meaning of the music as seen by the composer. The common requirement these days of people over explicating the music is not beneficial in my opinion. Hopefully an informed listener would recognise that poetry rarely represents the literal expression of its words. The poet is likely searching deeper and is using metaphor to express concepts.

Within the programme note for this work, I purposely limited the analysis of the poem as I felt any kind of lead provides would be too much to interpret the music (and the poem) for the audience. With hindsight it may go in either direction; if the listener doesn’t automatically think of the metaphorical properties of a poem or piece of music, describing them specifically is not going to help.
“To know yet to think that one does not know is best; Not to know yet to think that one knows will lead to difficulty.” Chapter LXXI

The problem I have with being so transparent with a description of a piece of music is that it leaves little for the listener to do. Also, if they don't hear the music as I do (which they almost certainly won't) the listening experience will be a disappointment for them as it won't align with their own perceptions. Ideally it’s about creating a balance between enough information to tempt the listener, but not too much to either overwhelm and/or bore them.

As discussed below, each piece has a long development and then the composition phase happens quite quickly. In effect, it is almost like ‘training’ or ‘practicing’ for the performance/event rather than laboriously reworking a piece until it becomes ‘perfect’. It is more about creating an ‘improvisation’ based on the preparatory work.

The performer then has the opportunity to interpret this ‘improvisation’ with a certain degree of flexibility. The willingness on the part of musicians to 'interpret' a piece of music is a key part of my compositions. The success of each performance may be predicted in part by how open the performers are to take this opportunity and the strength of their ability to tastefully do so.

There are well established ways of interpreting music by many composers. These interpretation standards have not necessarily come about from the composer themselves, but they are more a result of years of repeated performances. It would be arrogant to claim that my music should already deserve its own performance practice, however through a number of performances I have noticed the difference as to how my music is performed when using the standard performance practice applied to contemporary concert music compare to my intuitive understanding as to how it should be performed. This is something which I hope to further establish through future work.

Realistically I think this kind of performance practice may only be applied to solo and small ensemble works. Anything of an ensemble larger than a handful of players will be problematic, except when applied to solo parts within an ensemble texture. I would consider as a close guide as to how to perform, but allows a great deal of flexibility. I think it is essential that the performer injects a sense of their personality into the performance of my music. I have found that this is a problem with much concert music both historically and contemporary.

Since the invention of computers and other programmable electronic instruments most music can be ‘performed’ or at least heard with minimal fuss. The ability to finely craft the sound of the music with the use of a computer is theoretically so close to giving a perfect performance that humans are no longer necessary. This is the reason why I feel the contribution of the performer within music is so essential. Music which uses computers for playback, processing or synthesis is in one respect an attack on the human elements of music which make it so interesting. I am aware that people do not necessary share this view; however, with the increasing use of computers not only within the arts, but in all aspects of society, the human element is diminishing. It is for this reason that I wish to emphasise the human elements of the performance.

However, there does need to be a limit to the extent to which a performer inflicts their personality on the music as otherwise the personality of the composer is completely lost. I think it is the fear of many composers (and also evidence of uninteresting music) that their personality is not evident in their
music. Many listeners will reduce a composition down to its various components. Other listeners will impose their understanding in a very limiting way, frequently pointing out that the piece didn’t do what they wanted, for example pointing at a ‘lack’ of properties which they expect within a piece of music. Most pieces shouldn’t attempt to encapsulate ‘everything’ in the Mahler-style ‘symphony as a reflection of the world’.

Many of my pieces are very much attempts at reflecting one aspect of a sound and exploring a single feeling, analogous to a single colour. I find the excessive use of harmony detracts from a piece of music. Too much harmonic change feels like a violent shift in feeling which shouldn’t necessarily happen within a piece of music which lasts for less than ten minutes. An extended piece may perhaps include greater colouristic variation, but again this seems like something imposed through tradition rather than being something vital to creating a good piece of music. It is for this reason that I have felt a strong pull towards the music of both India and China. Correspondingly, the use of drones and modal melodies is quite frequent in my music.

Programmatic influence

A translation of the poem which accompanies this work:

The good rain knows its season,
When spring arrives, it brings life.
It follows the wind secretly into the night,
And moistens all things softly, without sound.
On the country road, the clouds are all black,
On a riverboat, a single fire bright.
At dawn one sees this place now red and wet,
The flowers are heavy in the brocade city.

The programmatic influence appears in two respects. The direct and perhaps ‘simple’ interpretation is the basic idea of influence taken from the given poem. I was careful in the presentation of this piece to the audience to limit the amount of interpretation that I provide for the listener. It is important to recognise the methods to successfully capture your audience, and to approach the ‘marketing’ and labelling of a piece of music using such a ‘traditional’ programmatic referential means is acceptable. I will look at both the philosophical interpretation and the overall programmatic influence.

The concept here was to approach the idea of nothingness within a piece of music. This could be interpreted directly as perhaps having all or mostly silence, but obviously this isn’t musically satisfying. The poem ‘Song of the Pipa player’ by Tang poet Bai Juyi describes this idea well. The sound of a Pipa over water blends and reflects the sounds of water. These sounds are a mere representation of another sound we may hear. But when silence arises in the context of music, there is nothing which it may represent so it effectively becomes the purest ‘sound’. The lack of sound (once established in a musical concept) becomes the most powerful sound of all.

The phrase from the poem is:
For the stillness told more than any music could...

Carrying on the idea of the metaphor, after the sounds are interpreted to represent certain ideas (bird song, water etc) the understanding of metaphorical silence becomes even more mysterious (my music has often attempted to achieve the feeling of silence while still using sound to do so). There’s really no way to adequately express this concept and that is exactly why it is so appealing. This concept has been an ongoing interest of mine for many years, however it was only recently that I discovered that there was a pre-existing way to articulate it.34

Beyond this approach to musical silence I have focussed on uniformity between the instruments. All three instruments essentially act as one large instrument and use their idiomatic properties to express different feelings at the appropriate time.

The structural concept here is similar to the piece *The Autumn Sky*. This is a sectional reflection on the poetic source material. My initial approach was to break down the lines of the poem and attempt to reflect some essence of my interpretation musically. In the early stages of the piece I considered creating eight brief miniatures to reflect the poem, adapted to reflect the line structure of the English translation which I primarily used in reflection of the piece. Then this would possibly allow them to be performed in a different order from the poem.

This was at first a way of exploring a different idea. However this was abandoned after I realised that it wasn’t going to successfully reflect my intentions. The idea persisted for a while during the composition process until eventually each miniature was absorbed into the whole.

However it’s still possible to recognise the separate sections as each line of poetry effectively ‘blooms’ from a single note. This will be described more fully below.

Bar 1 The good rain knows its season, (F)
This first section almost predicts the following section. The atmosphere of the piece is established in addition to the basic modal climate.

Figure 12

34 Four Chinese concepts stand out as contenders addressing the phenomenon of sonic absence: jing 靜 lit. ‘silent, quiet, tranquil, still’, mo 默 lit. ‘silent, quiet’, ji 寂 lit. ‘still, solitary, quiet’ and xiu 休 lit. ‘rest’. Apart from xiu and one of the polysemous senses of jing , each of these concepts substantiates the claim made earlier in this chapter that “hearing” something through the mind’s imagination etc. (i.e. mental or cognitive “hearing”) is encouraged from the Chinese perspective, as an alternative to “hearing” something with the ears (i.e. sensory or perceptual “hearing”) (see cultural script at [A]). Most importantly, these concepts demonstrate that, at least in so far as the Chinese interpretation of sonically absent elements goes, there is more to the story than suggested by those definitions in the OED definitions. (70 Tien)
Bar 24 When spring arrives, it brings life. (Db)

Figure 13

The piano enters here, possibly reflecting gentle ‘rain’ falling, bringing life after ‘waiting’ for the right moment as indicated in the first line. Metaphorically, the introduction of the piano carries the sense of change.

Bar 46 It follows the wind secretly into the night, (Gb / A)

Figure 14

A change may be identified here through the appearance of the A natural.

Bar 66 And moistens all things softly, without sound. (Gb)

Figure 15

Octave duplication between instruments and a feeling of continuing the prior mood, expanded upon and augmented.
Bar 107 On the country road, the clouds are all black, (Eb)

*Figure 16*

Bar 121 On a riverboat, a single fire bright. (F / Ab)

*Figure 17*

At 131 the flickering fire enters...

*Figure 18*

Bar 136 At dawn one sees this place now red and wet, (F)

*Figure 19*

Captures the mood and expands upon the previous section.
Musical materials

The initial musical materials were simply a result of extended improvisation at the piano; Improvised sections of the piece were gathered together into a piano only performing score; The aim of the piece was to create the feeling on a single sound from which multiple ‘shards’ of sound (analogous to shards of light) emerge from. Again, this reflects the moments of sound ‘blooming’ from a single origin.

From the very beginning of the compositional process, my decision was not to use the piano in an idiomatic way. Quite simply I would say that the piano acts more like tuned percussion (if it were removed from the uniform sound). The piano often has a feeling of heaviness to my ears. Its use is generally characterised by its flexibility. The fact that one can play a reduced version of an entire orchestral piece is certainly a strength of the instrument. However, to insert that sound into a piece where it may still be acting in such a regard becomes overwhelming to my ears. This relates to my instinctual lack of interest in extensive harmonic movement. Thus it was necessary for me to limit the way in which the instrument in used for this and many of my pieces.

I purposely limited the amount of embellishments written between the long notes of the phrases. A slowly moving piece like this is often prone to the inclusion of such musical devices; however, I felt that it would let down the calmness which I hope to achieve.
The Autumn Sky (2016)

The last two pieces in this discussion are the natural culmination of the direction of my work generally and within this folio. They combine the influence from Chinese poetry from the use of the programmatic pieces as the commentary for the work. It includes the influences from Daoism in terms of structural and philosophical influence for the creation of the music. The final piece also features the crossover with the use of a traditional Chinese instrument within the Western music context.

Preliminary background considerations

After taking inspiration from Du Fu for the piece *The Good Rain Knows Its Season*, I looked further into classical Chinese poetry specifically with the idea of using it as inspiration for this large work. I found the poetry form known as *Yuefu* which is a folk song form made famous by numerous Chinese poets dating back to the Qin dynasty around 220BC. It has continued as a popular form ever since. Acclaimed poets Li Bai (and also Du Fu) from the 8th Century AD were also adherents to the form and contemporary poets continue to write poems in this style. This type of poetry has strong connections to music, and it has frequently used as inspiration for Chinese composers which strengthened my resolve to use it for inspiration here.

The more I read about this poetry form, I could see the potential it offered as inspiration. Finding a collection of four songs (or poems) which were inspired by the seasons, I realised the potential it could have in reflecting nature, from the poetry itself and other ties to numerous well-known pieces of music and other art which have been inspired by the changing of the seasons. I poems I decided to use were written by an anonymous poet from the Southern Dynasty era in China (approximately 420 to 589). These four poems are from a collection poem titled *Midnight Songs of the Seasons*. The translated text which inspired the programmatic background to this work is as follows:

**Spring**

The spring wind moves a spring heart,
My eye flows to gaze at the mountain forest.
The mountain forest's extraordinarily beautiful,
The bright spring birds are pouring out clear sound.

**Summer**

Now I've finished tending the fields and silkworms,
The yearning woman's life is still bitter.
I have a new set of summer clothes
To send to my departed husband.

**Autumn**

The autumn wind enters through the window,
The gauze curtain starts to flutter and fly.
I raise my head and look at the bright moon,
And send my feelings a thousand miles in its light.

---

Winter
If you wish to make a good friend,
Just look at the pine and cypress woods.
Amid the frost, they do not fall to earth,
Without disloyalty when the year is cold.

Initially by planning to incorporate the use of guzheng in this piece, I felt it was respectful and appropriate inspiration for the music, coupled with an effective method of highlighting the new inspirations and connections I was making. Thus with this work I attempted to fully embrace the many aesthetic and philosophical influences I have discussed here. I have taken the inspiration further by composing music that parallels the approach taken by numerous Chinese composers who have similarly taken influence from Classical Chinese poetry. I do not wish to replicate Chinese music, however I hoped to parallel the approach within my own style and include a limited amount of direct musical influence from traditional and contemporary Chinese art music.

I have discussed the concept of approaching composition within an 'intercultural' style with a number of Chinese composers and performers. It was frequently remarked that I was in a fortunate position as many Chinese composers are forced to interact with their own culture in a specific pre-conceived manner, dictated by the culture itself. Thus approaching this project as an outsider from Chinese culture allows me to pick and choose how I wish to interact with Chinese culture and produce an artistically free creation unlimited by any preconceived notions.

Musical materials

Again, taking another view of using this influence to create a variation of this influence, (initially the use of a guzheng was involved but this was discarded, however the concept remained intact, using elements of traditional Chinese music and influence from Chinese poetry, but ultimately maintaining the aesthetic roots in the Western tradition.) This piece aims to encapsulate many of the threads which have come together prior to and since commencing my PhD.

Structure

As with many of the pieces I have composed, I started with a clear concept of what I wanted to achieve. This piece actually began as a series of moments, or fragments conceived to be like brief songs or seasonal variations; a very similar structural plan to The Good Rain Knows Its Season. The exact number of proposed fragments changed during the time it was composed, but as this process continued again I found that it was best to integrate the segments into a continuous piece. One of the reasons for this was to accurately express the intentions of the programmatic background; to represent a life cycle, or any period of life (for example, recurring seasons). I at first ‘fragmented’ these seasons as we are prone to do as we classify information. Though again, I turned to the philosophical concepts which I wished to explore and I realised that it was far more intuitive to create a continuously flowing piece of music.
A preliminary rehearsal of this piece was attempted and recorded, however the sounds created were inadvertently similar to the sheng (笙 shēng). I was listening to a large amount of traditional Chinese music at the time I wrote this, however I did not wish to liberally use or reflect those sounds for this piece. It was my intention to take inspiration purely from the philosophy.

**So Early in the Spring for guqin (2015)**

The next step in realising the Chinese influence on my music was to compose a work for a Chinese instrument. The idea here is to extend the influence of the philosophical background of the pieces to the creation of a piece for guqin. Although I am not including this work in the folio, I am including some discussion of the piece as it indicates some of my future development and helps provide some understanding to my journey as a composer.

**Preliminary background considerations**

After understanding the connections between music, poetry and philosophy in Chinese culture it felt like a natural evolution to write a piece for a Chinese instrument. After studying guqin performance and its role in not only Chinese music, but culture more broadly, it felt like a logical step. The interesting thing about guqin and how it aligns with my own musical leanings in the manner in which it is taught as a lineage passed down from generation to generation.

As one of the only instruments with such an unchanged technique and unchanged music, it is a fascinating instrument to deal with. To write for this instrument was exciting as felt like a connection to music (and the human exploration of music) that hasn’t been ‘contaminated’ by thousands of years of intervening culture. It is immune from change, however to understand music from a time before recording and modern music pedagogy expresses concepts without connection to contemporary culture.

The role it plays in traditional Chinese culture is also interesting. Traditionally, music was one of a number of skills which were considered essential to master to be recognised as a cultured person.

As I have mentioned, another of the exciting historical features is the way in which it is notated. It is essential to understand the instrument’s complete history to do any justice to performing (let alone composing for the guqin).

To be able to play the same pieces of music essentially as they existed thousands of years ago is an immersive experience.

**Programmatic influence and Musical materials**

The programmatic background to this piece came about from the desire to fully incorporate/align the way in which I have taken influence from Chinese philosophy and exert its influence on my music. The title of the piece is borrowed from a traditional English folk song but its poetic nature in line with my
Chinese poetic titles intrinsically appealed. Moving beyond the very superficial perspective it occurred to me that there is a common thread between English traditional music and Chinese traditional music with their usage of modal sounds and strong connections to traditional/ancient poetry, inclusion of improvised ideas.

Although in some sense the impetus for this piece is similar to The Autumn Sky, the result and resulting intention is different. In this piece I took inspiration from the idea of the seed (again, it is nothing more than an element of another life cycle, but here there is a sense of a beginning somewhere, not simply the on-going journey of something already in existence).

The preliminary objective of this piece was to develop a series of functional concepts which reflect the programmatic idea of the piece and then freely explore these ideas instinctually. The ideas from which the piece develops include: cycles, both rhythmic and scalar, which may be realised by moving through various scale degrees; degrees of intensity; revisiting the same themes with variations; returning to the root notes of the scale; the initial concept and the starting point, what follows is a free exploration of this concept. This approach is how I most often create a new work, a firm idea but then explored freely. This allows instinctual processes to flourish which would be limited by a rigid adherence to an artificially imposed concept.

The idea of exploring a repetitive and hypnotic variation of my naturally inclined style also appealed to me. I planned to create an almost dance-like effect; a revolving sound, the repetition of life and birth. This idea of the ‘dance-like’ music is distinct from much of the guqin music I have heard, so I felt that it could also be an original way of composing for this instrument.

The metaphor is quite clear here again, involving rebirth in life and in nature. The use of cyclical patterns is nothing new in terms of music; however, I haven’t ever personally studied music which uses such patterns, so it was a new and interesting concept to explore.

In preparing to compose this work, I immersed myself in music for all traditional Chinese instruments. I have learnt to play guzheng with a basic proficiency and also studied the guqin in preparation to compose this piece. The guqin is a highly idiomatic instrument and a traditional/ancient instrument with limited range in terms of dynamics, note range and technical possibilities. Having a good understanding of the instrument was essential to compose for it respectfully, I do not believe in challenging conventions without a fundamental reason.

Through my study of music for the guqin, performing and general listening I noticed a frequent and consistent use of repetitive patterns (extended cycles) over the duration of each piece. A primary theme is well established then a slight variation is created. This enables a familiarity throughout a piece. I felt it was respectful and appropriate to consider this in creating my one work.
**Concluding remarks**

The main themes concerning my compositional voice involve the gathering of many different influences which have come about organically. The clear foundational influence however has come from Daoism. This has entered into almost all facets of my compositional process in addition to influencing my work programatically.

I’ve always resisted attempting to self-categorise my music. I have also consciously avoided creating a compositional voice by design. However, through the process of assessing my work during and prior to this PhD and I have found how consistent I have been in my compositional process, my ideas towards the creation of a piece of art music. Also, it is clear the manner of influence which has permeated my music. I have always had great respect for composers who have established their compositional voice over a long period of time. I have now recognised this for myself and I can appreciate the variations in musical material, compositional process (and theoretical background) as well as programmatic background.

Another significant aspect here is the recognition of the programmatic background of my work. I have never felt that absolute music had a purpose. Music as an art form seems pointless if it doesn’t attempt to express something, particularly if it can express something which reflects a human perspective. Prior to this self-reflection I felt that programmatic music was also in a way inessential. Programmatic music to me represented nothing more than a composer’s attempt at describing a place, a painting or perhaps a poem. Perhaps some beauty may arise from this, but in effect it doesn’t necessarily contribute any further understand of the material. In between these two extremes I believe is practical music, which has an original source and intention.

The discovery I have made which is the representation of something otherwise impossible to represent really does achieve/satisfy what I hope to achieve, without feeling that there is any kind of weakness in allowing myself to find inspiration in other sources of art. I readily accept that other composers and listeners are satisfied with the concepts of programmatic meaning and so forth. However, I’m happy that I have been able to find my own satisfaction within my work.
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