

A CONFLUENCE OF ARTISTIC REALMS:  
TAN DUN'S *8 MEMORIES IN WATERCOLOR*

by  
HUI LING KHOO

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Dean Kramer, Chair of the Examining Committee

30 April 2016

Committee in Charge:      Dean Kramer, Chair  
   Claire Wachter  
   Juan Eduardo Wolf  
   Ying Tan

Accepted by:

Director of Graduate Studies, School of Music and Dance

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Hui Ling Khoo

### GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon  
Peabody Conservatory of Music, Johns Hopkins University  
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, National University of Singapore

### DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Musical Arts, 2016, University of Oregon  
Masters in Music, 2012, Peabody Conservatory of Music  
Bachelors in Music, 2010, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music

### AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Piano Performance  
Piano Pedagogy

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Teaching Fellow in Music Theory, University of Oregon, 2013-2016



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## **Introduction**

There are myriad examples in various cultures of music inspired by paintings and poetry, and vice versa. This interaction between music and different art forms is fascinating. I have always wanted to explore how this synergy of different fields of art can enrich the communication between performer and audience, therefore, the inspiration behind this project, “A Confluence of Artistic Realms: A Multimedia Performance of Tan Dun’s *8 Memories in Watercolor*.”

The project has three objectives:

1. Explore the interaction between music and visual arts and between music of different cultures.
2. Interpret *8 Memories in Watercolor* via a multidisciplinary approach by drawing parallels with different art forms.
3. Explore new ways to communicate with audiences through the use of a visual narrative.

This project will explore Chinese watercolor and traditional Chinese music. Because Tan Dun used the term “watercolor” to describe this piano music, I will look at how Chinese watercolor and calligraphy share parallel aspects with *8 Memories in Watercolor*. Furthermore, Tan Dun incorporates sounds from both traditional Chinese music and Western classical music in *8 Memories in Watercolor*. I will look at the various elements of music of both cultures and find out how they interact in the music.

I will discuss the fundamental question of how understanding the parallels between Chinese watercolor and calligraphy, Chinese traditional music, and *8 Memories in Watercolor* shape and enhance my understanding and interpretation of the music. By browsing numerous art works from museum collections, I have chosen Chinese paintings from the Han dynasty (221 – 206 B.C.) to the present to complement each movement. I have also explored the connection between *8 Memories in Watercolor* with traditional Chinese music by linking various musical elements in *8 Memories in Watercolor* to the timbres and techniques of traditional Chinese music. I will attempt to articulate how these are translated into performance.

The project culminates in a multimedia performance. One of Tan Dun's trademarks as a composer is his multimedia output. I will explore some of these works, and from the insights gained, create a multimedia performance of Tan Dun's *8 Memories in Watercolor*. My lecture-recital will feature this multimedia performance with four short documentaries that will be shared before the performance of each of the respective four movements. Through this process, I will attempt to be a cultural translator, so as to help the audience understand the cultural meaning behind the music they are listening to.

This document will focus on the first two aims of the project. It is divided into five main sections:

1. A background of Tan Dun and *8 Memories in Watercolor*

2. An exploration of how music interacts with visual art and music of other cultures
3. A brief introduction to the basic elements of Chinese traditional music
4. A short introduction to Chinese watercolor
5. A discussion about various elements of Chinese traditional music and Chinese watercolor as these art forms appear in each of the movements of *8 Memories in Watercolor*, as well as the influence of these elements in my interpretation and performance.

### **Tan Dun and *8 Memories in Watercolor***

Currently living in New York City, Tan Dun was born in 1957 and raised in a rural Hunan village in the People's Republic of China where old shamanistic cultural traditions still survived. By the time he arrived in the United States in 1986 Tan Dun was already famous in China. Tan Dun has since transcended stylistic and cultural boundaries to become one of the world's most successful composers.

Tan Dun's works can be radically experimental. His work does not neatly fit within existing categories, and in fact, he has created several new artistic formats encompassing sound, sight, narrative, and ritual. In addition to his contributions to the repertoire of opera and film scores, Tan's new formats include: orchestral theatre, which re-contextualizes the orchestra and the concert-going experience; organic music, which explores new realms of sound through primal elements such as water, paper, and stone; and multimedia extravaganzas, which incorporate a variety of cutting-edge technologies.

*8 Memories in Watercolor* is a set of 8 picturesque character pieces, each with a most imaginative title. This music holds special meaning for the composer. Originally titled *Eight Sketches in Hunan Accent*, Tan Dun composed these pieces when he left his native Hunan to study in Beijing and was overwhelmed with feelings of homesickness. Composed in 1978, *8 Memories in Watercolor* was born at a time in China when the Cultural Revolution was just ending, Western music was once again permitted, and

China had just opened its doors. Hence, the meeting of musical cultures is apparent throughout these 8 movements.

## **Interaction Between Music of Different Cultures, and Between Music and Visual Art: Interaction Between Music and Different Cultures**

In today's world, the most obvious form of interaction that occurs between music and image lies in the music video. Carol Vernallis, whose research deals broadly with music, text and image in contemporary videos, wrote a relevant chapter in her book *Experiencing Music Video Aesthetics and Cultural Context* called 'Connections Between Sound, Image, and Lyrics.' She claims that in music videos, "directors can establish connections across media through a number of devices, ... [for example] an image can be shaped so that it mimics the experiential qualities of sound ... [or] sound, image and lyrics can be placed in a metaphorical relation."<sup>1</sup> However, centuries before the onset of technological advancement allowed the creation of the music video, these "connections across media" can be observed between, music, music of other cultures, and paintings. These connections can also be observed across cultures.

Music of different cultures often interact with one another. In Western classical music, this phenomenon is termed exoticism. An example is Debussy's *Estampes*, written for solo piano. The first two movements of *Estampes* evoke sounds from Asia and Spain. The first movement, *Pagodes*, has textures and rhythmic patterns that echo the Javanese music Debussy heard at the Paris World Exhibitions in 1889 and 1900. Although the exhibition might have stereotyped orientalism, sounds of the gamelan are indeed apparent in the rhythmic patterns of triplets set against quintuplets, the stratified layers

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<sup>1</sup> Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video Aesthetics and Cultural Context*, 175.



of sound and the use of the pentatonic scale. The interaction between gamelan and Western music takes place when the above features are set against whole tone sonorities. This interaction of two musical cultures recalls the suggestion made by Symbolist writers “if one cannot afford to travel, one substitutes the imagination.”<sup>2</sup>

Just as Western classical music borrows from Asian cultures, the reverse can also be observed. Classical Chinese music, for example, is heavily influenced by Western practices. In fact, the Chinese orchestra, which is comprised of traditional Chinese instruments, is a twentieth-century invention that is modeled on the structure of a Western symphonic orchestra because Western music was then perceived as superior. The Chinese orchestra “is similar to the Western symphony orchestra in terms of performance practice, sonic ideals, and compositional strategy... [and] has become one of the most effective institutions in changing the development of Chinese music from mostly heterophonic music to polyphonic and homophonic music.”<sup>3</sup> Recently, composers have written pieces for traditional Chinese instruments to be accompanied by the piano, with some of these pieces discarding the Chinese-sounding scales in favor of experimenting with atonal music and avant-garde style.

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<sup>2</sup> Lesure, foreword, III.

<sup>3</sup> Lau, *Music in China: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*, 39.

## Interaction Between Music and Visual Art and Between Music of Different

### Cultures: Interaction Between Music and Visual Art

Another form of art that composers often borrow from is visual art. A well-known example is Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. *Pictures at an Exhibition* was inspired by an exhibition of paintings by Mussorgsky's dear friend Viktor Hartmann. It was composed in 1874, a year just after the death of Hartmann. The movement *Catacombs* from *Pictures at an Exhibition*, was inspired by Hartmann's *The Catacombs*. The painting shows the interior of Paris catacombs with figures of Hartmann, the architect Kenel, and the guide holding a lamp.<sup>4</sup> It is painted in shades of gray, evoking an eerie feeling. Furthermore, only the silhouettes of the human figures are seen, lending a sense of mystery to the painting. The same atmosphere of mystery enshrouds the music inspired by the painting. This is evident in the booming echoes and rumbling bass sounds that critic Colin Fleming likens to "keys rattling in a lock."<sup>5</sup> The undeniable similarity in the moods evoked here attest to the connection between music and visual art.

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<sup>4</sup> "Images for Pictures at an Exhibition."

<sup>5</sup> Fleming, "Pictures Tell a Story," 38.



(The Catacombs, painted by Viktor Hartmann)

Traditional Chinese music also shares connections with visual art as well. In 1991, Chinese composer Chen Yi composed *The Points* for solo *pipa*, a Chinese plucked string instrument, inspired by the eight standard strokes in Chinese calligraphy that start with the point of the brush in different touches. The structure of the music comes from the eight brush stroke movements of the Chinese character “yong (永)” in Zhengkai calligraphy.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, Tan Dun himself categorizes some of his creations as “visual music.”<sup>7</sup> For his *Map Concerto*, he collected documentary footage of ancient rituals of the Tujia, Miao and Dong. Using footage from two separate trips to Hunan in 1999 and 2001, Tan not only spins ethnic source material into abstract sonorities, but often keeps that source material in its pure state on the video screen while simultaneously exploring its timbres

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<sup>6</sup> “Profile: Yi Chen.”

<sup>7</sup> “Visual Music.”

in orchestral terms. In a particularly striking example, Tan draws on the antiphonal Miao vocal tradition by having the solo cellist on stage engage a singer on a video screen. Here, the linkage between music and visual art goes a step further where a “musical form originally intended to communicate across mountains and open fields navigates entirely new boundaries of time, place and culture.”<sup>8</sup>



(A performance of Tan Dun's *Map Concerto*)

The above examples clearly show the strong connection music shares with other forms of art. I have always wanted to explore how this connection can enhance a musical

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<sup>8</sup> "Compositions."

performance with added dimensions from other realms of art. Furthermore, Tan Dun himself is an advocate for the exploration of other fields of art via music performance, as can be seen through his creations in “visual music” and those that employ multimedia. Hence, creating a multimedia performance of *8 Memories in Watercolor* by Tan Dun is a relevant endeavor that reflects the aesthetic ideals of the composer.

## About Chinese Traditional Music

What makes Chinese music Chinese? This is difficult to answer because of China's diversity. China is geographically diverse. It has many regions, each with its own distinctive musical culture and history.

When China experienced increased contact with the West and European music was brought to China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, local Chinese “equated Western music with the supremacy of Western science and technology... [while] Chinese music was considered by local musicians as unscientific and backward.”<sup>9</sup> All agreed, however, that China should have its own national music, although there were numerous conflicting voices on what that should be. In the 1930s, traditionalists suggested redefining traditional Chinese music by using only Chinese instruments so as to create a new Chinese national music, or *guoyue* (国乐). However, there were also many who had benefitted from a musical education in Europe and the United States and were eager to share what they had learned through new music institutions and a concert culture based on Western practice. China struggled with this identity until the establishment of the People's Republic of China government in 1949, which wanted to “construct a national culture to reflect its proletarian ideology.”<sup>10</sup> During this time, the term *guoyue* was changed to *minzu yinyue* (民族音乐), meaning music for the people.

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<sup>9</sup> Lau, *Music in China: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Lau, *Music in China: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*, 33.

Today, *minzu yinyue* encompasses all compositions and genres for traditional instruments. As such, various aspects of music from the various regions have been assimilated into *minzu yinyue*. This section answers the question “What makes Chinese music Chinese?” by first considering three unique aspects of *minzu yinyue*, and then exploring regional music, especially music from Hunan, Tan Dun’s home town.

Plucked string instruments lend a distinctive sound to the Chinese orchestra. Popular Chinese plucked string instruments include the *pipa*, *zhongruan*, and *guzheng*. The *pipa* is a pear-shaped lute with 4 strings; the *zhongruan* is a moon-shaped lute, also with 4 strings but with a deeper sound reaching to the lower registers; and the *guzheng* is a 16-26 string zither with movable bridges. In the Chinese orchestra, the plucked strings provide a timbre that the Western symphony orchestra cannot create as it does not have a plucked string family of instruments.<sup>11</sup> The plucked effect lends a pronounced articulation to each pitch, while the technique of *lunzhi* (轮指), where the player strums a string rapidly with each successive finger, provides for sustained pitch and a rich harmonic filler in the Chinese orchestra. Hence, a distinguishing aspect of traditional Chinese music from Western music is the prominence of the instrumental family of plucked strings.

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<sup>11</sup> Shen, *Chinese Music and Orchestration: A Primer on Principles and Practice*, 31.



(A *Pipa*)



(A *Guzheng* being strummed)

Improvisation is intrinsic in *minzu yinyue* and is passed on through an oral tradition. In fact, oral tradition and scores have always coexisted in both folk and classical Chinese music. However, until the influence of Western classical music, the scores to Chinese traditional music were “never fully notated, allowing for embellishments and variation



according to players and environment.”<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, the performer is “judged not only on the performing ability of a particular piece of music, but also on the ability to semi-improvise on the given material,”<sup>13</sup> and as a result, the same piece played by different performers could vary in its melodic, rhythmic, and dynamic interpretations. This knowledge of how to improvise on an intentionally simplified score is indeed passed on from master to pupil in an oral tradition, but eventually, it is absorbed until it becomes part of the pupil’s musical instinct.

Many Chinese compositions feature a programmatic element in the form of musical poems depicting emotions linked with pastoral scenes or narratives that recount a legend or story from history. Sometimes, one hears sonic symbolism, for example, the sound of the Chinese percussion ensemble that suggests a festival or wedding or the sounds of nature.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese composition called *Birds Chirping on an Empty Mountain* written for solo *erhu*, a Chinese bowed string instrument, is one of a large number of pieces that have a programmatic element. Its various sections depicts a leisurely walk through the mountain, and it uses a special technique in which the performer plays rapid repetitions of a single note with alternating fingers in a single bow stroke to imitate the sound of chirping birds.

The timbre of Chinese plucked strings, improvisation, and programmatic music are elements that feature strongly in Tan Dun’s *8 Memories in Watercolor*. The sweeping

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<sup>12</sup> Shen, *China: A Journey into Its Musical Art*, 182.

<sup>13</sup> Liang, *Music of the Billion : An Introduction to Chinese Musical Culture*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Liang, *Music of the Billion : An Introduction to Chinese Musical Culture*, 17-18.

glissandos of the *guzheng*, or the reflective pause after a string is plucked, are two ways in which Tan Dun uses the unique sound quality of Chinese plucked strings. Certain movements have a free sense of tempo or feature intricate ornaments, giving the music an improvisatory feel. Furthermore, every movement has a descriptive title, painting a variety of scenes ranging from the pastoral, to cultural images and activities. For these reasons, the Chinese identity in *8 Memories in Watercolor* is instantly recognizable.

China is a big country. Each region has its own culture that is manifested by unique dialects, cuisine, and music. This uniqueness of each region is clearly shown by contrasting the music of the Jiangnan region and Xinjiang region in China. The instruments, ornaments, musical settings and modes are so different that it might be hard to believe they come from the same country. For instance, ornaments in Jiangnan music are intricate embellishments of the melody while in Xinjiang music, they often take the form of portamentos, mordents or trills or larger leaps, sometimes even involving microtones, no doubt an influence from the Silk Road, a historically significant trade route between China and the Mediterranean. In fact, what grounds most Chinese in China is the sense of identification with the place of one's origin and not one's birthplace; therefore any discussion of the music from China requires a consideration of which region the music comes from.<sup>15</sup> As Tan Dun is a native of Hunan, the following part of this section focuses on music from that region.

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<sup>15</sup> Lau, *Music in China: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*, 27-28.

In approximately 700-800 B.C., China was divided into different kingdoms. The kingdom of Chu was one of the biggest kingdoms, and at one point governed the provinces of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, Henan, Shanghai, and parts of Jiangsu. The rich and long history of the Chu kingdom is influential even now. The province Hunan, is also nicknamed Xiang. Hence, Hunan culture is often termed Xiang-Chu culture.<sup>16</sup>

Music in Xiang-Chu culture plays a ritualistic role. In Xiang-Chu culture, there is a strong belief in ghosts and spirits. The society even has Shamans who are believed to be able to travel between the physical and spiritual realms. In the instrumental music of Xiang-Chu culture, the heavy use of percussion is used for religious purposes, for it is believed to help “open the doorway to commune with gods, ghosts, and ancestors.”<sup>17</sup>

Nuo drama is one of the more prominent rituals in Xiang-Chu culture. Having its origins in sorcery, the Nuo drama was performed to worship spirits as a large ritualistic dance where people would wield weapons, shout, and sing. This practice evolved over the years and is now less a religious practice than an enjoyable art form that includes popular songs and a wide variety of musical instruments.<sup>18</sup>

Hunan is also one of the provinces that are home to the Miao people, one of the ethnic minorities in China. Although Hunan comprises mostly Han Chinese, the Miao people

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<sup>16</sup> Lin, “The World of Tan Dun: the Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1.”

<sup>17</sup> Lin, “The World of Tan Dun: the Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1.”

<sup>18</sup> Lin, “The World of Tan Dun: the Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1.”

have a distinct musical culture that is part of the identity of Hunan. An instrument popular amongst the Miao people is the *lusheng*, often heard at Miao festivities. The *lusheng* is made up of 5 or 6 bamboo pipes, each fitted with a reed, giving it its nasal sound quality. The *lusheng* is capable of playing more than one pitch simultaneously and intervals of 4ths and 5ths are often heard in *lusheng* music. The playing of the instrument is always accompanied by dance. Players usually swing from side to side, though there are more complicated dance moves where players perform the instrument in upside down.<sup>19</sup> Often, the *lusheng* is associated with men. Men prove their desirability as suitors by demonstrating their prowess on the *lusheng*.



(A *Lusheng* Performance)

*Feige* is a kind of singing that is unique to the Miao people. Literally translated as ‘flying song’, it is often associated with young lovers who sing to each other after saying goodbye, the echo of their voices off the mountain flying to their beloved.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJRyvWwQEqS>

However, *feige* is also sung at numerous other festivities. It is unrestrained singing in a bright and nasal tone. Often, each verse accelerates and is ornamented with a descending portamento at the end certain verses.<sup>20</sup>

The sounds from Xiang-Chu culture and Miao tribe are apparent in *8 Memories in Watercolor*, sometimes just as a subtle suggestion, blending in with other musical elements. For example, percussive sounds and the unique harmonies of the *lusheng* are both evident in the last movement, Sun Rain, while the mystery of shamanism shows itself in No. 6, Ancient Burial, alongside Western atonality. More on how these elements unfold in the music will be discussed in the following sections.

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<sup>20</sup> CCTV-9 Documentary Channel. “[Culture Express HQ] Lusheng the Musical Instrument of the Miao People.”

## About Chinese Painting

Chinese painting has a history that spans just over a millennium. Some of the earliest paintings extant are the tomb reliefs found in ancient tombs of the Han dynasty that hint at the grandeur of wall paintings in Han dynasty halls and palaces.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the course of time, Chinese watercolor evolved. Influences from Buddhism abound in the art of the Tang dynasty,<sup>22</sup> and in the Song dynasty, for example, there was a clash of ideals between the realism of Northern Song and the more abstract expressionism of the Southern Song.<sup>23</sup> However, there are certain aesthetic principles and techniques of Chinese watercolor painting that remained constant throughout the years. This section discusses these aspects and how they relate to musical sound.

One of the principle influences behind the aesthetics of Chinese watercolor painting is Daoism. In the four hundred years after the fall of the Han dynasty and before the rise of the Tang, China sank into chaos, undergoing political, social and intellectual turmoil. Many intellectuals sought spiritual refuge in Daoism. Based on the philosophy of Lao-tzu, who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C, the name comes from the Chinese word *dao* (道), which refers to the way of nature. Daoism is thus founded on the natural course of things, and explores the relationship between individual and nature. This is the reason that nature and space feature so prominently in Chinese watercolor painting. It is also the intellectual impetus behind the aesthetic principle of *xieyi* painting.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 110-124.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 184.

Daoism “emphasizes the unity of humanity and nature together with the release of an individual’s creativity.”<sup>24</sup> Water is an important element in Daoism as it is seen as the element with least resistance, and yet given time, has a power great enough to erode rocks. *Qi*, which refers to energy, is another important term. *Qi* is understood as the guiding energy force that leads us on the most natural path, and is often associated with mist or clouds. Hence, many Chinese watercolor paintings and music across the centuries have been related to mist or clouds.

A defining trait of Chinese painting is its “treatment of empty space as solid space.”<sup>25</sup> This is a concept that springs from Daoism too, for one of its basic philosophies is that “empty space is regarded as the beginning of the myriad things.”<sup>26</sup> In a landscape painting, empty space often leads one to imagine clouds, mist, sky or water. However, “the real mystery of the emptiness is that the empty space refers to *qi*.”<sup>27</sup> *Qi* comes from the artist’s inner self, without which, empty space will be no different from blank space, rendering the painting lifeless.

In the painting “Winter Landscape” by Li Gongnian from the Northern Song dynasty, one senses the presence of *qi* in the painting with the mists that enshroud the mountains

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<sup>24</sup> Weimin He, *The Mystery of Space: An Exhibition of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese Paintings* (2005), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Weimin He, *The Mystery of Space: An Exhibition of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese Paintings* (2005), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Cleary, Thomas F., and Laozi, *Wen-tzu: Understanding the Mysteries*, 7.

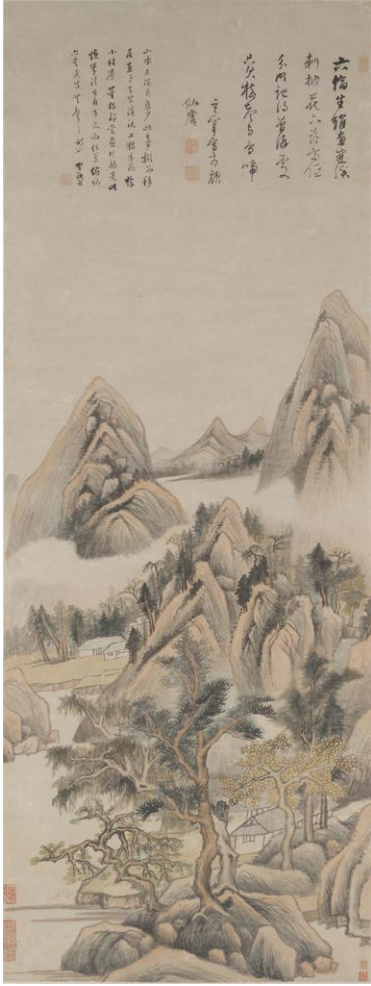
<sup>27</sup> Weimin He, *The Mystery of Space: An Exhibition of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese Paintings* (2005), 2.

and the with a view of the vast sky that makes up most of the upper third of the scroll. This was painted in 1120. Five centuries later, in 1621, Dong Qichang, A Ming dynasty painter painted “Reminiscence of Jian River.” Compared to the former, this painting has greater detail in the landscape through the use of color and shading, but the presence of *qi* is apparent in the exact same ways, showing that the concept of *qi* is one that permeated the centuries.



*(Winter Landscape by Li Gongnian, 1120)*





*(Reminiscence by the Jian River by Dong Qichang, 1621)*

The corresponding principle in music would be that a rest is not a stop, but a musical event. Pianist Artur Schnabel is noted to have said, “I don’t think I handle the notes much differently from other pianists. But the pauses between the notes – ah, there is where the artistry lies!!”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "Arthur Schnabel, in Chicago Daily News, June 11 1958 Quotes.

*Xieyi* (写意) is an important concept in Chinese watercolor painting. It literally means ‘writing the meaning.’ *Xie* means ‘to write’, and “refers to the painter’s brushwork, which resembles the calligraphic manner of writing in a loose brush technique,” while *yi* means ‘meaning,’ and refers to not just the content of the work but the “significance and substance of things.”<sup>29</sup> *Xieyi* painting forced the artist to express his own personal attitude to and imagination of the world depicted.

The concept of *Xieyi* originated early in the history of Chinese painting. Zong Bing, a painter of the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, wrote his *Hua shanshui xi* (Preface on landscape painting) in which he claims that landscape painting is high art because it “reaches out into the realm of the spirit” as the “correspondence (between forms and colors in the picture and those in nature) will stir the spirit, and when the spirit soars, truth will be attained.”<sup>30</sup> In a brief essay by Wang Wei, a musician who died in 443 A.D., he mentions that “landscape painting ... [is] a symbolic language through which the painter may express not a relative, particularized aspect of nature seen at a given moment from a given viewpoint, but a general truth, beyond time and place.”<sup>31</sup> The similarity behind the words of the above artists lies in being able to find meaning beyond the material and superficial, a main tenet of Daoism.

In music, the aesthetic parallel would be that the notes do not just represent the tune, but if performed with meaning, express an emotion. Lao-tzu himself believed that “There

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<sup>29</sup> Josef Hejzlar, *Chinese Watercolors*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 105.

<sup>31</sup> Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 105.

are only five musical notes, yet the variations of those five notes are so many as to be beyond our power to hear ... There are only five colors, but the variations of those five colors are so many as to be beyond our power to see.”<sup>32</sup>

Another unique aspect of Chinese painting is its use of perspective. It is a common occurrence in Western art that the use of shadows and a single vanishing point give perspective to the painting. Song dynasty painter Li Cheng used similar perspectives in painting; when he painted mountains or pavilions, he always painted the eaves from below as that is how one perceives them when looking up from eye level.<sup>33</sup> However, Song dynasty critic Shen Gua attacked Li Cheng in his *Mengqi bitan* (Casual writings from the Garden of the Stream of Dreams), where he writes that Li Cheng was “absurd.” He further emphasized that “all landscapes have to be viewed from the angle of totality to behold the part... If we apply Li’s method to the painting of real mountains, we are unable to see more than one layer of the mountain at a time... Could that be called art?”<sup>34</sup>

Evidently, Chinese painting applies what Sullivan refers to as “shifting perspective”.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese painter does not intend for the viewer to take in a panoramic scene at once, but instead invites the viewer stroll through the scene bit by bit as the painted scroll unfolds with “shifting perspectives”, hence combining the element of time with space.

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<sup>32</sup> Cleary, Thomas F., and Laozi, *Wen-tzu: Understanding the Mysteries*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 176.

<sup>34</sup> Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 178.

<sup>35</sup> Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 178.

Sullivan notes that this was an effect Western art did not attempt until modern times, and that the nearest European parallel lies not in art but in music, with the idea of thematic development.<sup>36</sup>

Brush strokes and ink washes are two fundamental skills that every pupil of Chinese watercolor painting has to master. Mastering brush strokes is a skill that has its roots in Chinese calligraphy. There are eight basic strokes, each with their own names and distinct appearance. Students learn to write characters from patterns, and it is from this that the foundations of holding the brush and learning the extensive system of strokes, touches, and shading is built upon.<sup>37</sup>

Training in ink washes involves creating nuances of ink from the deepest black to the lightest shades of grey. The “exact dilution of ink with water is usually carried out by dipping the brush twice”<sup>38</sup> in the water, and the painter’s skill is then judged by how well the subjects in the painting are expressed with various ink values.

There are three main styles of painting in Chinese watercolor that became apparent in the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 A.D.). The first involved precise line technique with added decorative mineral colors. This was popular among Tang court painters and was derived from earlier artists such as Gu Kaizhi.<sup>39</sup> The second style was founded by the poet-painter Wang Wei, and featured monochrome painting in the *pomo* manner. *Pomo*

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<sup>36</sup> Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 178.

<sup>37</sup> Hejzlar, *Chinese Watercolors*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Hejzlar, *Chinese Watercolors*, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 148.

means “splashed ink,” and is characterized by free rendering of diluted ink over the surface.<sup>40</sup> The third style is called the painterly. It uses an “articulated, calligraphic line [that] is combined with broken interior ink washes to produce a richly integrated texture.”<sup>41</sup> This style was developed by Zhang Zao, a contemporary of Wang Wei, and would later be adopted into mainstream landscape painting in the later dynasties.

The use precise use of brush strokes, ink wash, and styles of Chinese watercolor painting give depth and variety to the artwork. Music works similarly. On the piano, the use of brush strokes can be likened to touch. Different touches draw out different tones. Ink wash can be likened to pianist’s control over resonance, which is the thickness of sound, partly an effect of the use of pedal. These different ‘colors’ of sound form a wide spectrum. Tan Dun tests the boundaries of this spectrum in *8 Memories for Watercolor*, which will be discussed in the next section.

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<sup>40</sup> “Pomo.”

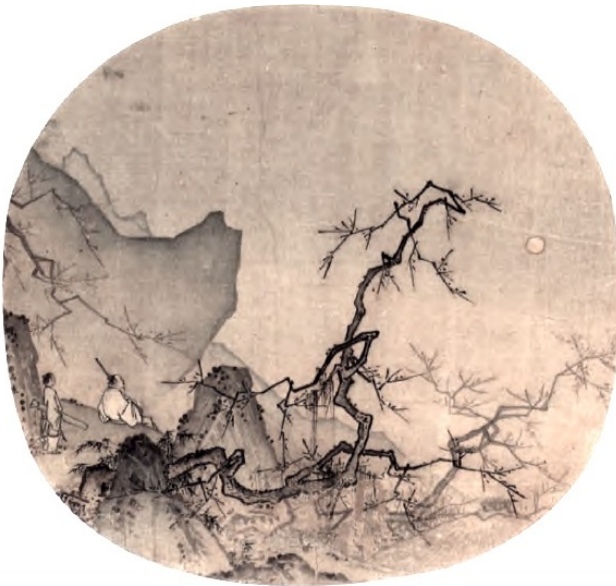
<sup>41</sup> Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 149.

## A Confluence of Artistic Realms in 8 Memories in Watercolor

### 8 Memories in Watercolor: I. Missing Moon

Chinese poets have referred to the moon as “a metaphor for longing for the hometown, and the full moon as a representation of family unity.”<sup>42</sup> *Missing Moon*, the first movement of *8 Memories in Watercolor* is about homesickness.

An artwork that transcends its façade by communicating an emotion that touches the spirit is what defines *xieyi* painting. *Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight*, painted by Song dynasty painter Ma Yuan, is an example of a *xieyi* painting. This painting portrays a longing for home, making this art work a visual twin of the music of this movement.



(*Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight* by Ma Yuan, early 13<sup>th</sup> century)

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<sup>42</sup> Lin, “The World of Tan Dun: the Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1.”

In this painting, a diagonal line of symmetry separates space from the subject content, and the main figure of this painting is seen gazing reflectively across this space at the moon. The brushstrokes that depict the branches and silhouette of the mountain are jagged, showing the painter's instinctive spontaneity typical of *xieyi* paintings. The various shades of ink wash, from the darkest branches to the faint color of the sky, give the painting depth. The combination of these elements creates a sense of poignancy that subtly paints the emotion of yearning.

These visual effects can be heard in the music. Many sounds in this movement recall the *guzheng*. In *guzheng* music, long notes that are perceived as an opportunity for reflection often follow plucked portamentos. This effect is apparent through the acciaccaturas in this movement. Other grace notes and the descending arpeggiation in the upper register are like the strumming of the *guzheng*, a sonic depiction of shimmering moonlight. There are numerous pauses for reflection, and the freedom with which the left hand unfolds the melody in the *rubato molto* section is very much like a painter letting loose his emotions in a cathartic rush of spontaneous brush strokes.

This movement has a still nature and is sparse in texture. However, in the spirit of *xieyi* painting, the performer could make the notes on the page reveal the most tender of emotions.

## 8 Memories in Watercolor: II. Staccato Beans

The second movement of *8 Memories in Watercolor*, called *Staccato Beans*, exudes life and vitality with its abrupt and large range of dynamic contrast. It is a good study of articulation such as slurs and various types of staccatos.

The main melody originates from a Hunan folksong called *My New Sister-in Law*. The words of the song describe a girl singing of her new sister-in-law's beauty on her brother's wedding day.<sup>43</sup> However, the varied articulation markings in *Staccato Beans* are unlike singing. Instead, the music resembles the sound of traditional Chinese plucked string instruments.

Staccato means detached, and the image of beans suggests individual articulated sounds. Plucked string instruments effortlessly produce detached and articulated pitches. Often, the player employs a left hand vibrato to sustain the pitch after it is sounded. The speed of vibrato affects the tone of the plucked sound and can be likened to the different degrees of staccato this movement demands. Plucked string instruments are also capable of joining two notes seamlessly together. Within a single pluck, the player can shift their left hand across the string, forming a slide or portamento. This is how I hear the slurs to sound in this movement. The sforzando chords, further accentuated by the dissonance of F# and G, recall the powerful sound when a *pipa* player rapidly and forcefully strums across all four strings.

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<sup>43</sup> Lin, "The World of Tan Dun: the Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1."



Brush strokes in Chinese painting are based on the eight main strokes in Chinese calligraphy. Some strokes are short and detached, and can be likened to staccato sound. These angular strokes are often called texture strokes, or *cun*, and are used to portray the busy texture of leaves or the rough texture of rock and mountain. Another kind of detached brush stroke is called the mi-dot, invented by and named after Song dynasty painter Mifu. The mi-dot technique uses extremely moist washes<sup>44</sup> to form soft spots of ink. It is commonly used to paint mist or the blurry distant peaks of mountains. These different strokes are like varying degrees of staccato; the texture stroke would sound like a staccatissimo while the mi-dot, a portato.

There similarities between the physicality of producing detached brush strokes, sound production on Chinese plucked string instruments, and staccato playing on the piano. More punctuated sounds or strokes require quick movements of the fingers and wrists, while longer sounds or rounder strokes require the use of the forearm. In *Staccato Beans*, the performer discovers that the idea of staccato connects these art and music metaphorically and physically.

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<sup>44</sup> “Mi Fu.”

### 8 Memories in Watercolor: III. Herdboy's Song

The image of a shepherd sitting atop a buffalo playing a tune with his flute is a common one in both Western and Chinese painting. Daoist artists saw in the herdsman and buffalo theme the basic elements of nature's rhythms, while in Chan Buddhist painting in the Song dynasty, this theme symbolizes the path to enlightenment.<sup>45</sup> In the painting *Shepherd Playing a Flute in the Evening* by Li Keran, the shepherd boy sits atop a branch in a carefree manner playing his flute, with his shoes thrown carelessly to the ground. There is a calm that is portrayed by the sleeping buffalo and the stillness of a spider web dangling from a bare branch. *Herdboy's Song* is defined by this sense of freedom.



(*Shepherd Boy Playing A Flute in the Evening* by Li Keran, 1978)

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<sup>45</sup> Anonymous, *Boy Leading an Ox Along the Farm Path*.

The title implies that this movement imitates song. In fact, this movement recalls *feige*, a style of folk singing of the Miao tribe in Hunan. *Feige* is often sung between two lovers communicating over vast mountain ranges. The unmetered phrases, heterophony, and descending portamentos at the end of phrases found in this movement sound like the echoes of the lovers' voices reverberating through expansive valleys. In *feige*, there is often an *accelerando* toward the middle of the verse and a *ritardando* and *crescendo* towards the end.<sup>46</sup> If one interprets the phrases in this movement thus, character of *feige* in this movement becomes more vivid.

The image of the shepherd is inseparable from the flute. Perhaps this is why the long phrases and lyrical lines of this movement recall the sounds of the *dizi*, a Chinese bamboo flute. In fact, this movement specifically recalls the *dizi* piece of Hunan character, *Spring by the Xiang River*.<sup>47</sup> *Spring by the Xiang River* employs the more lyrical and subtler characteristics of the “Southern” style of *dizi* playing. It starts off with an introduction that in Chinese traditional music is known as the *yinzi*. The *yinzi* is often unmetered, highly ornamented, and quasi-improvisatory, like the opening of *Herdboy's Song*. If the pianist can imitate the expansive and lyrical sound of the *dizi* through extreme legato playing, the sound of the *dizi* playing a *yinzi* would be aptly expressed.

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<sup>46</sup> “Qiantan miaozu yinyue 浅谈苗族音乐 [A Brief Discussion of Miao Music].”

<sup>47</sup> Jian, Guang-yi 建广义 and Shu, Peng 树蓬. *Dizi jiaoxuequ jingxuan (xia) 笛子教学曲精选 (下) [Selected Study Pieces for Dizi (Volume 2)]*, 74-77.

What is most interesting about this movement is its spin on exoticism. In the *andante rubato* section, the D sharp in the melody forms a jarring dissonance with the predominating A minor pentatonic scale. In the context of Western classical music, exoticism refers to music that borrows from non-Western cultures. However, this movement has such a strong Chinese character that the chromaticism of the D#, which would be less surprising in Western classical music, now paints an exotic soundscape.

## 8 Memories in Watercolor: IV. Blue Nun

*Blue Nun* centers around a woman's loneliness. It is based on two folksongs from Hunan. The opening melody is based on the folksong *A Nun Desires a Normal Life*.<sup>48</sup> The middle portion of *Blue Nun*, measures 17-33, is based of the folksong *A Girl from the Country is Coming to Town*, a humorous song about a city man who wants to wed a country girl.<sup>49</sup> The ironic juxtaposition in content of these two folksongs highlights the Blue Nun's loneliness and yearning for companionship.

Women in Chinese paintings tend to portray certain themes, the most common of which is that of the "sorrows of a deserted woman."<sup>50</sup> One such painting is Tang Yin's *Lady Ban Holding a Fan*. The painting is of Lady Ban Jieyu, a consort of Emperor Chengdi of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.). Sabotaged by slanderous remarks from a rival consort Zhao Feiyan, Lady Ban retired to live away from the main palace, where she composed the poem "Autumn Fan." In this poem she "compared herself to a fan that in summer would bring relief with a slight movement but in autumn was discarded and stored in a box."<sup>51</sup> The loneliness and pain from being neglected is captured in the painting as the solitary Lady Ban stands in an empty garden with a fan in hand and a melancholic expression.

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<sup>48</sup> Lin, "The World of Tan Dun: the Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1."

<sup>49</sup> Lin, "The World of Tan Dun: the Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1."

<sup>50</sup> Fong, "Women in Chinese Painting," 24.

<sup>51</sup> Fong, "Women in Chinese Painting," 25.



(*Lady Ban Holding a Fan* by Tang Yin, late 15<sup>th</sup> century/early 16<sup>th</sup> century)

The theme of loneliness in Chinese paintings of women surfaces in this movement, *Blue Nun*. At first hearing, there seems to be polyphony between the right and left hand in the form of a canon. However, upon closer inspection, one realizes that the second part varies the first like a decoration; the texture more closely resembles heterophony. Heterophony is a texture that results from “simultaneous variation of a single melody”<sup>52</sup> often heard in Chinese music. This heterophony disguised as polyphony is a monologue

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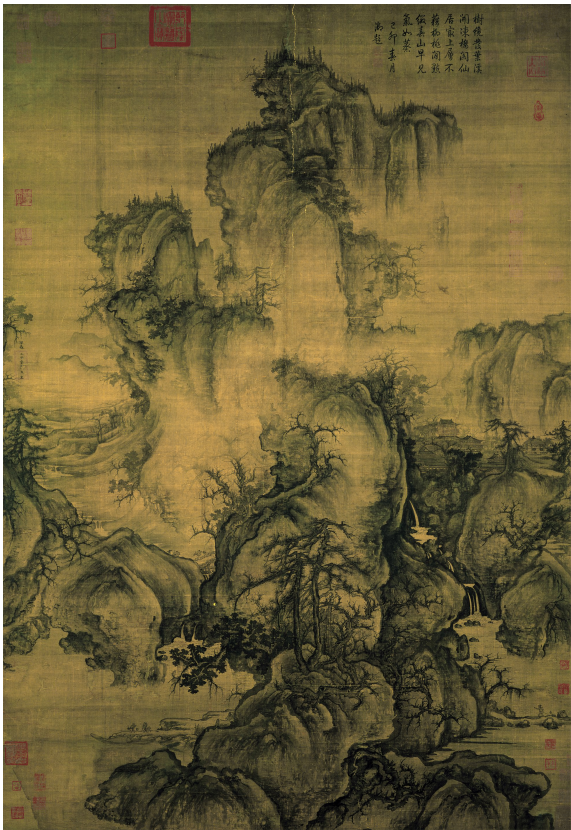
<sup>52</sup> “Heterophony.”

that gives the illusion of a dialogue. This imagery evokes the solitary suffering of the *Blue Nun*.

## 8 Memories in Watercolor: V. Red Wilderness

*Red Wilderness* is a meditative journey through nature, whose musical elements share a close connection with various aspects of Chinese landscape painting.

*Early Spring* painted by Guo Xi, a Northern Song dynasty master, is similar to this movement in many ways.



*(Early Spring by Guo Xi, 1072)*

The expansive use of space evokes a sense of calm, portrayed in this painting through mist and distant mountains painted with pale ink washes. Multiple perspectives are



observed in this painting. Instead of being drawn to a single vanishing point, the eye is drawn simultaneously to the grandeur of the mountain peaks, the waterfall in the right portion of the painting, and the space leading to the distant mountains in the left third of the painting. In addition, the majesty of the mountain gives way to spindly trees and fine texture strokes that define the rocks as the viewer looks more closely at the details of the painting. It is as if one were discovering small details of the scenery in a stroll instead of taking it all in at once from a distance.

*Red Wilderness* has musical parallels to the painting *Early Spring*. The concept of space is captured in the long note values within the phrases and in the accompaniment. These are similar to *guqin* music. The *guqin* is a plucked zither. It has a mellow tone, and the music written for the instrument is often reflective because of the stillness captured in the pauses between the notes.

The image of mist is expressed through Debussy-like textures. This movement alternates between three and four layers of sound. One of the accompanimental layers always involves a syncopated, dissonant chord or dichord that evokes a sense of floating. This is also observed in the first movement of *Estampes* by Debussy, called Pagodes. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, the inspiration behind *Estampes* and *8 Memories in Watercolor* are similar. Pagodes has an oriental feel, and *Estampes*, meaning “prints,” was inspired by Japanese prints.

The concept of multiple perspectives is apparent in the music through ambiguity of phrasing. The phrases in this music do not follow a symmetrical structure. The ear is not led to harmonic cadences. Instead, the melody undergoes constant development, subtle yet unpredictable in nature, like a journey one takes through a landscape painting with multiple perspectives. Furthermore, the ornaments that always sound just before a long note are the musical details that are discovered spontaneously in the journey through the soundscape of *Red Wilderness*, like the intricate tree branches or texture strokes found within the majestic scope of the landscape painting.

Landscape painting is more than an illustration of the scenery. Through the skillful use of space and multiple perspectives the painter enters a meditative state through the brush. This process can be translated to the music of *Red Wilderness*. Through the music the performer can manipulate pitch and time to achieve a state of reverie.

## 8 Memories in Watercolor: VI. Ancient Burial

The title of the sixth movement, *Ancient Burial* paints an unsettling and somber picture while evoking an atmosphere of mystery. These moods are brought about by the simultaneous interaction between twentieth-century Western sounds and the chimes of ancient Chinese bells, as well as in the art works found in excavated tombs over a thousand years old.

The opening phrases are atonal, creating an uneasy atmosphere. However, when the music starts building towards the climax at *piu mosso*, there is a shift to bitonality. Dissonances and consonances weave in and out of the polyphonic texture, so that the surreal and unsettling Expressionism of Berg's *Wozzeck* is apparent here as well.

Befitting the word “ancient” in the title, the ritualism of Nuo Drama and the gong and bell-like sounds that recall the ancient Chinese bells called *bianzhong*<sup>53</sup> can be heard in this movement. These gong and bell-like sounds are heard in the quarter-note ostinato that opens the movement and in the long whole-note accents in the bass in the climax. Made of bronze, the *bianzhong* are extremely resonant instruments. Hung in a wooden frame and struck with a mallet, they are used as polyphonic musical instruments. These bells range just over 4 octaves, and are shaped so that they can produce two different pitches, depending on where they are struck. Furthermore, they were capable of sounding a 12-tone scale just as in this movement. The design of the bells “requires a

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<sup>53</sup> Lin, “The World of Tan Dun: the Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1.”

theoretical grasp of physics, engineering and musical acoustics formerly thought to have evolved only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>54</sup>

A complete ceremonial set of *bianzhong* was found during the excavation of the tomb of Marquis Yi from the Zhou dynasty (1046 – 256 B.C.). He was the ruler of one of the minor states of the ancient State of Chu, of which Hunan, Tan Dun’s birthplace, once belonged. The bells in his tomb were “delicately inlaid in gold filigree with intricate dragons and inscriptions, documenting music theory and the precise instrumentation of ancient orchestras over two thousand years ago.”<sup>55</sup>

The mystery that enshrouds the topic of death culminates in the age-old question: what happens after death? Many ancient tombs have been uncovered and the unearthed artefacts, from the massive tomb of the Qin Emperor with terracotta armies to accompany him even after death, to the mummy that stayed freshly preserved for two millenia in the tomb of Lady Dai from the Han dynasty imply that ancient Chinese believed in an afterlife. Draped across the coffin of Lady Dai was a flying banner, a painting on silk. It depicts the afterlife journey of the deceased; the bottom part of the banner shows burial preparation of the deceased, the middle portion depicts the journey with a painted figure of Lady Dai and her servants, while the top part symbolizes the celestial realm, a balance of the yin and yang forces via the moon and the sun. The

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<sup>54</sup> Hubei Song Dance Ensemble of the People's Republic of China. Liner Notes. *The Imperial Bells of China*. Fortuna Records 17075-2. 1990, compact disc.

<sup>55</sup> Hubei Song Dance Ensemble of the People's Republic of China. Liner Notes. *The Imperial Bells of China*. Fortuna Records 17075-2. 1990, compact disc.

writhing serpents are shaped like the vessel of *Penglai*, a Daoist symbol of immortality. While most Chinese paintings are of landscapes or figures, this banner, however, gives insight into the ancient beliefs regarding death and shamanistic burial rituals.

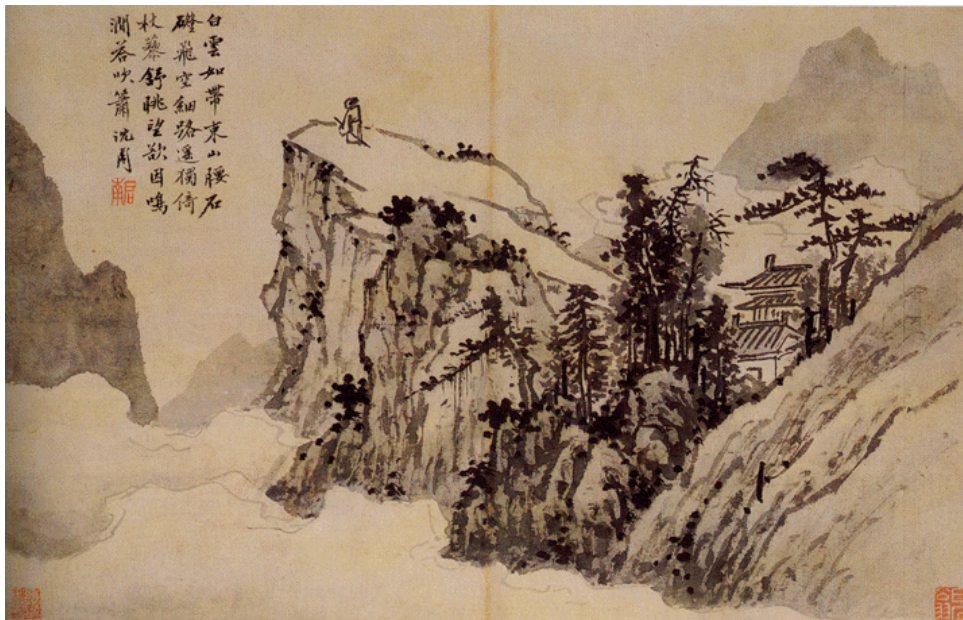


(Flying Banner draped across Lady Dai's tomb)

In *Ancient Burial*, old traditions and progressive ideas find a synthesis. Sounds and images reenact the mystery of ancient rituals, while the unnerving sonorities of atonality are a contemporary reminder that death remains the ultimate mystery.

## 8 Memories in Watercolor: VII. Floating Clouds

I decided to link this movement to the painting *Poet on a Mountaintop* by Ming dynasty painter, Shen Zhou. This painting combines what are known as the “three perfections”: painting, poetry, and calligraphy. In the painting, a lone figure seems to stare reflectively into both space and at the poem in the painting at the same time. The poem speaks of sounds of the brook and the flute, which can be heard in the music of *Floating Clouds*. Linking music to this painting brings the “three perfections” a step further.



(*Poet on a Mountaintop* by Shen Zhou, 1500)

This is the original poem and a translation of it:

白雲如帶束山腰，  
石磴飛空細路遙。  
獨倚杖藜舒眺望，  
欲因鳴澗答吹簫。<sup>56</sup>

White clouds sash-like  
wrap mountain waists,  
The rock terrace flies in space,  
distant, a narrow path.  
Leaning on a bramble staff,  
far and free I gaze,  
To the warble of valley brook  
I reply with the cry of my flute.<sup>57</sup>

“Just like floating clouds, the tonal center of this piece is always changing.”<sup>58</sup> Some of these shifts are chromatic, and when these sonorities are sustained in the pedal, they evoke the same surreal, misty atmosphere as the painting. The ascending pentatonic arpeggiation in the left hand can be likened to the “warble of the valley brook.”

In the Chinese version of the poem, the sound of the brook is answered by the lone man playing the *xiao*. The *xiao* is another kind of Chinese flute, but unlike the *dizi*, it is breathier in sound and is played vertically. The pianist can imitate the airy sound of the

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<sup>56</sup> “Poet on a Mountain Top.”

<sup>57</sup> “Chinese Literati Painting.”

<sup>58</sup> Lin, “The World of Tan Dun: the Central Importance of Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op. 1.”



*xiao* by playing the lyrical treble melody in this movement with a light legato touch with weightless forearms to create the ideal soundscape for this movement.

Drawing connections between the music of *Floating Clouds* and Shen Zhou's painting *Poet on a Mountaintop* stirs the imagination of the listener by borrowing from and going beyond the tradition of the "three perfections" via a confluence with art and music.

### 8 Memories in Watercolor: VIII. Sunrain

The final movement of *8 Memories in Watercolor* is festive in nature. The combination of “sun” and “rain” in the title perhaps indicates the season of Spring. *Sunrain*, like Spring, is upbeat and full of life.

I hear the sounds of *lusheng* and *huaguxi* in this movement. The fourths and fifths that decorate the melody played by the right hand are the same intervals often heard on the *lusheng*. Together with the bright and nasal sound quality of the *lusheng*, these resounding intervals grab our attention, perfect for festive music. Furthermore, the phrases are of regular and predictable length, either two bars or four bars long. One could easily imagine *lusheng* musicians swinging and dancing to this symmetrical phrase structure with ease.

*Huaguxi*, or Hunan flower drum opera, is “one of 300 different types of Chinese regional opera.”<sup>59</sup> First mentioned in 1695 during the Qing dynasty, male performers at the time “dressed in colorful clothing and appeared with painted faces, sang popular songs, and danced in the streets celebrating the spring festival alongside lion and dragon dances, magic acts, and acrobatic shows.” In *huaguxi*, percussion instruments play a pivotal role. The drummer functions like the conductor. Other important percussion instruments include the *luo* (gong), *xiaoluo* (small gong), and the *bo* (cymbals). In the movement *Sunrain*, one can hear crashing cymbals in the loud, accented chords that

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<sup>59</sup> Chen, "The Tradition, Reformation, and Innovation of Huaguxi: Hunan Flower Drum Opera", 129.

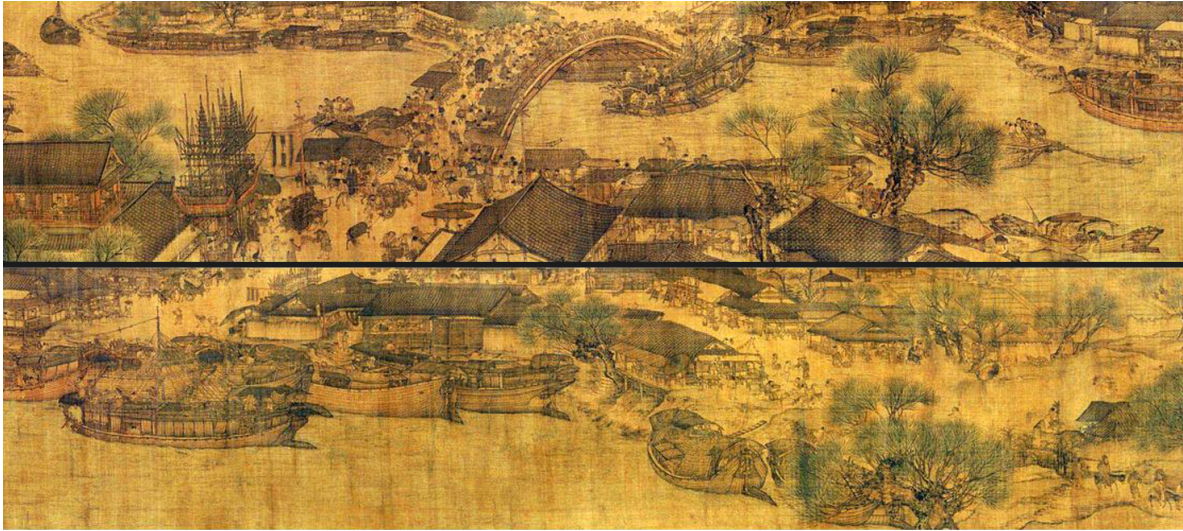
span four octaves, and the small gong in the edgy, off-beat rhythms that permeate the movement.

*Huaguxi* was banned during the Cultural Revolution in China and some performers were even driven to suicide.<sup>60</sup> *8 Memories in Watercolor* was written just after the Cultural Revolution. Perhaps Tan Dun ended the cycle *Sunrain* to depict more than just a festive spring festival, but rather as a hopeful anticipation for the future following the end of the revolution.

The busy sounds of this movement bring to my mind the painting *Along the River During Qingming Festival* by Song dynasty (960 – 1279 A.D.) painter Zhang Zeduan. The painting offers a glimpse into the lives of the people in that era; their activities, clothing and architecture. The busyness of the painting is brought out by the countless activities happening across the city. Within the same picture, one can spot peddlers, jugglers, fortunetellers, monks, scholars, millers and so on. The festive atmosphere of the painting is expressed through the sheer number of people creating numerous bustling scenes.

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<sup>60</sup> Chen, "The Tradition, Reformation, and Innovation of Huaguxi: Hunan Flower Drum Opera", 142.



*(Along the River during Qingming Festival, by Zhang Zeduan)*

A performance of *Sunrain* would be lifeless if one fails to hear festive Chinese percussion instruments or imagine the hustle and bustle of a city like the one depicted in the abovementioned painting.

## **Epilogue**

The confluence of artistic realms has fueled my imagination when performing the work. The short documentaries show how Chinese painting, traditional Chinese music and *8 Memories in Watercolor* are connected. I hope that audiences will be able to go beyond appreciation by catching a glimpse into Chinese culture via a multimedia performance of *8 Memories in Watercolor*.

Looking forward, my experience with this project has inspired me to make connections between different artistic fields when learning new repertoire. As mentioned, there are numerous examples in piano literature whereby the visual arts and music are connected. I believe that one can always find aesthetic parallels between music and visual art. Some pieces are not associated with artworks but have a programmatic element. Aesthetic parallels can also be drawn between the narrative and the music itself, for example, in Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage* or in Ravel's *Miroirs*. I believe that cultivating the musical imagination to find connections between different art forms inspires a performance of greater conviction.

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