

The Music of Bright Sheng: Expressions of Cross-Cultural Experience

Introduction:

The idea of tapping non-Western compositional resources in Twentieth-century works is not new. With its beginning in Europe, it came to America in the mid-Twentieth century. Quite a few American avant-garde composers have tried to infuse Eastern elements in their works either by direct borrowing of melodic material or philosophical concepts. As a whole, these composers have challenged the American musical community to recognize cultural differences by finding the artistic values in this approach. Since the mid-1980s, Chou Wen-Chung, a champion of East-West musical synthesis, recruited a group of prize-winning young Chinese composers through his U.S.-China Arts Exchange to study at Columbia University. Most of these composers such as Tan Dun, Bright Sheng, Chen Yi, Zhou Long, Ge Gan-ru, Bun-Ching Lam had solid conservatory training before coming to the United States. They are now in their early 50s, and are successful in their individual careers, and are contributing a great deal for the musical life in America. Writing an article about this "Chinese phenomenon," James Oestereich notes that although the American musical community has been slow to accepted this fact, "all of these composers tend to be marginalized at times, their cross-cultural works treated as novelties rather than a part of the contemporary-music mainstream (if mainstream there be anymore)."¹ Oestereich cites an example that, "in all the criticism of a paucity of contemporary music at the New York Philharmonic in recent years, Mr. Masur seldom receives points for his advocacy of some of these composers and others of Asian heritage."² This article was published five years ago. But by now, things have changed. Tan Dun has reaped a Grammy Award and an Oscar, and Bright Sheng received the McArthur Genius Award. More importantly, the works of these composers have been programmed regularly for some of the best orchestras' concerts around the world. The "Chinese wave," which began in China, spread to

¹ James Oestereich, "The Sound of New Music Is Often Chinese: A New Contingent of American Composers" The New York Times, April 1, 2001: 2/1.

² _____. Ibid.

America, and now has caught the attention of world. Undoubtedly, the American listening public is more receptive to these works with genuine interest than just a few years ago, albeit commercialism played a role in promoting these composers. Sheng's CDs are selling well at Amazon.com where one can read serious reviews by well-informed listeners. Because of the sophistication and the depth of his musical synthesis, Sheng's music has achieved a wide appeal among serious listeners. Fusing materials from East and West, his works are the true reflections of his cross-cultural experience.

Part I: His style, Chronology and comments on his works, and Reception

His Style:

Most of Bright Sheng's compositions are cross-cultural. But, beyond specific Oriental and Occidental compositional resources and techniques, Sheng has developed a distinct personal style, which is characterized by an affinity to tonal language and motivic development, driving rhythm, lyricism, dramatic contrasts, and a sense of proportion and balance. Essentially, he is a modern classicist who transforms the classical values with new cross-cultural guises in his works. He sees his cross-cultural musical experiences as bi-cultural, in a sense of bi-lingual, and his music is an outlet to express and reflect that experience. Thus, his musical fusion is achieved at a quite sophisticated level where his cross-cultural materials are easily recognizable without the attachment of identification tags.

Sheng has a deep understanding of both Chinese and Western musical cultures. While in China, he studied Chinese music history and theory, classical, theatrical and folk traditions; he has done fieldwork in studying folk music in its socio-cultural context that gives him the freedom to create. He has insights on the history of Western music, too, in addition to a solid grounding of theory, counterpoint, form and orchestration he mastered at the Shanghai Conservatory. His style clearly demonstrates his study of Bach's fugues and Beethoven's variations, among others. After coming to American, he gained a greater access to delve into the works by Bartok, Stravinsky, Ravel, Hindemith, Ligeti, Bernstein, and his teachers such as George Perle, Hugo

Weisgall at Queens College, and Chou Wen-Chung, Jack Beeson and Mario Davidovsky at Columbia University. He sees not merely just how these composers work, but what these works meant to him and to the musical community in order to gain a historical perspective. He understands that throughout music history, the expression of human emotions has been a way to empower a musical work. He decided to follow the suite. As far as his personal hero is concerned, he emulated Bartok's inclusion of folk materials in the art music, and did so quite successfully. He believes that Bartok knew so much about the folk music to the point he composes automatically with folk and art materials fused at the roots without deliberate borrowing. A bi-product, he also absorbed Bartok's chromatic melodic style, percussive dissonant timbre, and rhythmic energy.

In Sheng's music one hears influences of Hindemith for the use of modal harmony, texture and orchestration; Ravel for mixture of parallel and triadic harmonic style, texture and orchestration; Stravinsky for the concept of shifting of sound mass and plains, and the contrast between rhythmic drive and stasis, i.e., use of ostinato, and orchestration style; Ligeti for overlapping sound layers to create special timbre, and the use of sliding string texture and strands of wind. In the end, Sheng has developed virtuosic orchestration skills in his own right.

Chronology and Comments on His Works

Up to date, Schirmer, his exclusive publisher has published 43 of his works. These works can be grouped chronologically into three periods: 1980s, 1990s, and from 2000.

Works of the 1980s

Among the published scores of the 1980s, the earliest ones were his student works composed between 1982 and 1988, including Three Chinese Poems for mezzo-soprano and piano (1982), Three Etudes for flute (1982), Three Pieces for viola and piano (1982), Two Poems from the Sung Dynasty for soprano and orchestra (1985), and Three Chinese Love Songs for soprano, viola, and piano. In these, Sheng has experimented with various Chinese materials, poems as well as folk tunes, to reflect some of the 20th century concepts he has acquired

since his arrival in New York in 1982. In Three Chinese Poems (1982), he included three poems in different styles by dynastic and modern poets.

Comments on Two Poems from the Sung Dynasty (1985): In this work, Sheng used Chinese classic poetry, *Song Ci*, from the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.). He prefers *Song Ci* because its form is freer than the earlier poetic form from the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.). Some *Song Ci* have melodies. These two poems were by Lu You (1125-1210 A.D.) and Li Qing-Zhao, a female poet (1084-? A.D.), the two best-known poets of the period. Lu You's "Chai Tou Feng" expresses his wretched feelings after meeting his ex-wife in a garden, while "Sheng Sheng Man" describes the widow-poet's lonely feelings at the dusk of a cold autumn. In "Chai Tou Feng," one hears an orchestral prelude with soft dissonant glissando which is almost siren-like, punctuated by string's pizzicato. To conclude the first stanza, the singer uses melodic sigh on the words "cuo, cuo, cuo!" meaning "mistake, mistake, mistake!" To echo "cuo, cuo, cuo!" Sheng uses dragged-out crying voice on words "muo, muo, muo!" meaning "so be it" or resignation to conclude the second stanza. Then, the poem ends with a short orchestral postlude. The poem itself is melodramatic, and is a perfect source for Sheng to recreate it in musical form which clearly employs Chinese theatrical declamation style with wide glissando between high and low ranges.

"Sheng Sheng Man" starts with an orchestral prelude characterized by percussion's three chords with silence in between, and followed by flute with contrasts between high and low ranges. Percussion once more, and followed by oboe and flute, and then, more percussion and brass, and then percussion. The texture thickens with more and more rapid percussion culminating on fast Chinese bangu, wood-block used in Peking operas, tremolo with a cadence by the Chinese percussion with Peking opera gong and cymbal. Then, there is an eight second silence. A semi-climactic point arrives with orchestra's glissando and the bangu's accelerando in Chinese style. The bassoon solo comes next, after a chord, depicting loneliness and solitude to usher voice, which is accompanied by bassoon, then, piccolo, and strings ending on the phrase "jiu shi xiang shi" or "the old acquaintance" meaning she is reminded of her old friends that highlights her melancholic mood. The Chinese theatrical singing style that

approximates the Western *Sprechstimme* is used to accentuate the phrase of "dian dian di di" or "the raindrop" and "chou zi liao" or "lasting sadness" and the singer cries on the syllable "de," the last word of the poem. For balance, as usual, Sheng uses a postlude with prominent horns, and then with woodwinds and strings reaching a gong-crashing-point. The percussion's three chords echoes the beginning at the end.

Comments on Three Chinese Love Songs (1988): These songs were composed for the celebration of Leonard Bernstein's 70th birthday at Tanglewood. Lisa Saffer (soprano), Burton Fine (viola) and Yehudi Wyner Premiered (piano) premiered it. For each of these songs, Sheng used a Chinese folk melody as a reminder of his experience in Northwest China, and to reflect that experience in his present status. Each of three folk songs concern love, and Sheng preserves their original titles: 1) Blue Flower, 2) At the Hillside Where Horses Are Running, and 3) The Stream Flows. In the first song, the "Blue Flower" tune is ornamented by the use of viola as a drone and by use of the piano to punctuate. Prominent, too, is the upward glissando and other deliberate ornaments in the soprano. The second song uses rhythmic ornamentations by the viola and piano. For the second verse, the tune modulates abruptly, in Chinese terms, lidiao or shifting the tonic to another pitch. In the "Stream Flows," there is a duet between the soprano and viola as a two-part counterpoint. However, the soprano, which has the tune, is in one key, while viola is in another with variant countersubjects, suggesting a love duet between a girl and a young man. Sensual expression with excitement, and tenderness are vividly illustrated in this piece.

With a strong affinity to the music of his heroes, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and Bartok, he did not abandon tonality. He knew one can do a lot more with tonality by complementing it with further development of other aspect of composition techniques such as variation, motivic development, modal harmony, polytonality, chromaticism, rhythmic drive and stasis, textural contrasts and counterpoint, and innovative orchestration. Although at Queens College he studied with George Perle, a well-known theorist of serial music and composer, he did not confine himself to serial at all. Rather, he has been able to use

the general concept of pitch-class set to serve his needs selectively. This can be seen in his first major orchestral work H'un (1988), in which he used a prominent set, a "0167" tetrachord (two minor seconds separated by perfect fourth) for building thematic and harmonic structures. The work was commissioned by the 92nd Street Y in New York City, and was premiered there on April 26, 1988 with Gerard Schwarz conducting the New York Chamber Symphony. H'un is a piece about China, and there have to be perceivable Chinese sound, Sheng put the timbre and rhythmic patterns of Chinese percussion such as Peking opera gong and cymbals to work for this piece. H'un represents a culminating point in the works of the 1980s. With H'un, and up to that point, he has experienced the process of putting varied musical components together in a work. Sheng was happy with this piece since his mother, an engineer who had endured suffering during the Cultural Revolution, told him how she was moved by the sonic images reminding her of the pain she suffered in those horrible days.¹

Comments on H'un (Lacerations): in Memoriam 1966-76 (1988): Sheng regards this piece as a dividing line between his mature works and student works. Evidently, this piece has received more performances than most of his other works. This single movement tone poem was commissioned by the 92nd Street Y in New York, and premiered on April 17, 1988 by the New York Chamber Symphony with Schwarz conducting. For completing his dissertation for his doctorate at Columbia, Sheng wrote a detailed analysis of this work, and consequently published this analysis in the Perspectives of New Music in 1995.² In his analysis, he discusses motivic development, rhythm, pitch, harmony, orchestration, timbre, use of percussion, and concept of polyphony and of form and structure. Sheng felt it was difficult to write melodies for the historical tragedy, and decided to use only short motives containing two notes (a semitone apart) in most places. Sheng shows the dominant pitch collections used as 0167 or C-C#-F#-G (with P4 in the middle) tetrachord and 0156 or C-C#-F-F# (with M3 in the middle) tetrachord. This collection serves both as motivic and harmonic material for the piece. Concerning rhythm, Sheng explains that the rhythmic structure and development are intuitively conceived rather than premeditated. Much of the rhythmic figures seem to have come from the playing characteristics

of Chinese percussion instruments, the Chinese tom-tom, for example. For counterpoint, Sheng's design can be seen at three levels: simple (between different musical elements), compound (between textures), and metric (triple against duple figures). Concerning structure, this work is divided into two parts: horror and after thoughts. The first half of the work depicts Cultural Revolution, and the second half is composer's reflection on it. The first part (A) borrows the classical sonata form with subsections as exposition, development and recapitulation, and the second part (B) is an extended coda.

The piece opens with a dissonant chord, and followed by 2-note (M2) motive doing crescendo; it is strongly rhythmical. The next, one hears a 3-note chord followed by a 2-voiced dissonant counterpoint, overlapping at sustained high-pitch, a reminder of the sound of Ligeti or Penderecki. Then, the 2-note motive reappears with crescendo, and to be developed and stretched on strings. In the next moment, one hears string pizzicato and an interplay between sustained dissonant high-pitch sound and string's motive doing crescendo, followed by further development. String's downward glissando leads to winds and string tremolo. The Bass-clarinet and clarinet become prominent here in low range—dark sound on a theme m2 up and down, then, one hears string's Bartok style snapping pizzicato, followed by horns, and oboe and Chinese percussion. Horn calls with 2-note motive on strings. Repeated note on brass (a rhythmic motive) with more percussion punctuating. Strings are on a repeated note with rhythmic motive like brass, and then a counterpoint between string and brass follow. Further development of this rhythmic motive occurs and to be intensified, and the 2-note opening motive in sequence is brought back. Sheng uses ample sforzando and crescendo to build tension for a climax with piccolo's long note punctuated by the rhythmic motive. After reaching climax, one hears the tutti downward glissando leading to gong and cymbal crashes, and the low brasses and bass drum lead to silence which lasts eight seconds. Part II begins percussion-bang and followed by soft strings sustained notes with solo clarinet's motive in the distance. Strings sing a long dirge, which is less poignant, and strings begin to play chords functioning as harmonic drone with various winds joining ascending with crescendo, and gradually becoming more

dissonant. The violins playing a minor second up and down are left at the end of the section with drums punctuating, and string bass in the background. Sheng ends the piece with clarinets on two pitches with the Chinese gong punctuating once, then dies away.

Sheng needed a new direction after H'un. He did not want to repeat H'un. The three remainder of his works of the 1980s show different approaches. In the Stream Flows for viola (1988), he borrowed Chinese folk melodies, and worked on thematic and rhythmic development, modal harmony, Chinese style modulation, and explorations of ranges and technical possibilities of the viola. This work clearly demonstrates his lyricism. For working out his favorite Chinese folk melodies for chorus and orchestra, he composed Two Folk Songs from Qinghai in 1989. There is another version of the same piece, and nine years later, Sheng revised it for children's chorus with only vocables and children's string orchestra. His My Song for solo piano (1989), a four movement work, combines a search for tonality of the folk song in the second movement and his original theme for the third movement, and closes the suite with a slow finale with a subtitle of "Nostalgia." Apparently, Sheng has been quite homesick, and this nostalgic finale seems to be appropriate to close the decade.

Comments on My Song (1989): This work was composed for Peter Serkin who premiered it in 1989. Sheng became home sick when he was composing it, and his working out the Chinese folk tunes in this suite is like searching for tonality and working out harmony.³ Movement one is based on a folk tune, which is introduced at the beginning. Then there comes the development of it in different registers with contrapuntal treatment, and ends in low register. It is very tonal. Movement Two is based on a different folk tune, which is to be developed with different textural settings and ornamented and punctuated with extreme high and low register notes. It is tonal but more dissonant than the first movement. Movement three is motivic, and is also based on folk material. It is more dissonant than the second movement. The thematic material moves from low register to high register. It is percussive with syncopated rhythm. It ends with a major second. In movement four, the folk tune is introduced quietly and repeated once, and a new phrase is introduced for third time. Again, variation

technique is used to develop the tune. The basic rhythmic pattern is preserved, but in different tonal contexts.

Works of the 1990s

Sheng composed 22 works in the 1990s, nearly doubling the amount of works he wrote in the 1980s. His quest for a personal style, which fuses Asian and Western music, has paid off handsomely with his keen taste, virtuosic technique and ever-deepening understanding of Chinese and Western cultural achievements. In his works of the 1990s, he successfully tried to combine Western and Peking opera vocal styles, the Chinese pipa with Western orchestra, cello with traditional Chinese orchestra, piano with Chinese percussion instruments, flute and pipa, the erhu, Chinese two-stringed fiddle, playing style with that of Bach's cello sonata on the cello, and pipa with cello. He also continued to explore and extend his thematic development techniques, his contrapuntal writing, and again, his lyricism. The character of each piece in this period is quite different and diverse showing his resourcefulness, which is one of his compositional goals.

His major works of this period are his opera, the Song of Majnun (1992), orchestral works, China Dreams (1995) and Postcards (1997), the same year he composed a crossover work between opera and musical theater, the Silver River (1997), and a cello concerto with traditional Chinese orchestra, Spring Dreams (1997). His solo violin piece, the Stream Flows (1990), the violin version of the same work of 1988 for viola, and solo cello piece, Seven Tunes Heard in China (1995) are two examples of his sophisticated treatment of Chinese melodic material and the Chinese erhu playing style for the violin and cello in a synthesis respectively.

Comments on The Stream Flows (1990): This two-movement work was commissioned by the Foundation for Chinese Arts in Boston, for the Taiwanese violinist Nai-Yuan Hu, who premiered the piece in Jordan Hall, Boston on Oct. 20, 1990. In 1988, Sheng wrote another piece with same title for viola. This one is based on the 1988 viola version with substantial revision. Through listening to this work, one gets a glimpse of the ways Sheng works his material out. Sheng uses Chinese

tunes in both movements only as points of departure. He develops the innate potential of the material thematically, harmonically, instrumentally and formally with his personal stamp on the work. In the first movement, he presents the most part of the tune first, but does not allow it to finish before starting to explore it in different keys and ranges of the violin and developing of its motives, ending a phrase with a dissonant major second, then returns to the theme. He is fond of variations and continuous to write variations for the motives of the tune. The movement ends on harmonics. In the second movement, there are two alternating contrasting sections: section A is loud fast and festive, and section B is soft tender with the tune hinted. Sheng's interest in using contrast in dynamics, expression, tempo, and texture is clearly seen here.

Comments on Seven Tunes Heard in China (1995): This piece was composed for Yo-Yo Ma who premiered it in 1995. With the approximation of the playing style and ornamentations of the Chinese erhu, and Chinese tunes by the solo cello, Sheng offers his listeners a new kind of listening experience, though, re-creating the sound of the Chinese qin on the piano and an ensemble of Western instruments was done by Chou Wen-Chung more than three decades earlier. In another sense, this solo cello suite makes a gesture as a homage to the cello suites of J.S. Bach. Writing about this work, Chinese cellist Xiao-Qiang Pan traces the sources of the seven tunes: "Siji Ge" in movement one, "Cai Diao" in movement two, "Xiao Baicai" in movement three, "Zuiyu Changwan" in movement four, "Diu Diu Dong" in movement five, "Mu Ge" in movement six, and "Tibetan Dance" in movement seven.⁴ Pan has noticed that Sheng used two contrasting keys in a movement, and the rhythm is complex. With an early experience in playing the erhu, Pan tells us that grafting the erhu playing style to performing on the cello is possible.

In 1996, for the first time after 14 years in America, Sheng went back to China, and renewed his musical tie with his motherland, and continued to produce successful works one after another. The Flute Moon for flute/piccolo, percussion, harp and strings (1999), orchestral tone poem Nanking! Nanking! a threnody_for pipa and orchestra (1999), the Red Silk Dance for piano and

orchestra (1999) The work was commissioned by the Boston Symphony for Emanuel Ax who premiered it, and Three Songs for pipa and cello (1999) are the last four works at the end of the decade.

Comments on China Dreams (1995): This four-movement orchestral suite was composed between 1992-1995 at different times when he was Composer-in-Residence with the Seattle Symphony. Sheng assembled these movements, which were written for different occasions and different people, from his portfolio, and dedicated each for its commissioning agent: movement 1, *Prelude*, was dedicated to Christoph Eschenbach and the Houston Symphony Orchestra who commissioned it; movement 2, *Fanfare*, was dedicated to Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic who commissioned it; movement 3, *Stream Flows*, and movement 4, *The Three Gorges of the Long River*, are dedicated to Gerald Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony who commissioned this suite. The last two movements clearly evoke Chinese images.

At this time, Sheng was very home sick while composing this piece, and the first half of the last movement came to him in a dream. The first movement features continuous motivic development with three climatic points. It uses a Chinese folk melody on the woodwinds with the countersubject on strings and then, brass joins this interplay in the middle of the movement, reminiscent of Hindemith's Matheis der Mahler. It is tonal, and has a lot of lyricism for the folk song themes, and the flute-oboe opening theme with string's countersubjects in different keys recalls the style in the minuet from Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*). The quiet English horn solo ends the movement.

The second movement features the horn fanfare that appears first after the strings' The Rite of Spring like pounding rhythm on a "Chinese tune," and reappears at the end. The middle section is thick with plenty of overlapping voices and is quite dissonant. The strings pounding tutti on a Chinese tune returns, and is very rhythmical, almost sound like the "Augurs of Spring". In contrast, there is a softer and lighter texture by woodwind with soft strings with Horns' fanfare with trumpets ornamenting. The texture gets thicker with more voices joining and becomes more dissonant followed by changes of rhythmic character from duple to triple, and the big gong crashes at a climatic point. The movement closes with horn's fanfare for the last time.

The third movement is for strings on the "Stream Flows" tune. It opens with long and sustained notes after the first chord, and then there comes motivic and harmonic development of the tune. A love duet can be heard between the solo violin and viola, and then, the tune is picked up by the string orchestra and pushed to a climatic point. The duet alternating with orchestra resumes, and the tune is sustained by violin in high range, and taken over by violas and cellos with their warm sound. The movement ends on the tune on viola with a special timbre accompanied by strings' harmonics.

The last movement starts, again, with strings playing the lyrical theme from the first movement with clarinet's countersubject. Then, the theme is played by trumpet, and by oboe, flute, and clarinet with trombone's sliding sound. Then, there is a new theme on woodwinds with the first theme on strings with timpani's punctuation, and the two voices come together to a loud point. Now the brass has the tune with bassoon on a countersubject and string's pizzicato with trombone's sliding sound ornamenting. Trombone's sliding is featured with xylophone and string pizzicato. In the next segment, bassoon's fast scalar passage is followed by other woodwind and string's pizzicato. The tune is on horn with string pizzicato and woodwind scalar passages. Then, xylophone joins to start a long section of development. The concluding section features low brass, and, then brass and tutti. This is the most dissonant presentation of the theme. Here one hears trombone's 2-note sliding motive again. The muted string on a pentatonic theme with solo clarinet and bassoon push the tempo and dynamics to an accelerando-crescendo to end the movement on a loud chord.

Comments on Postcards (1997): This four-movement work was commissioned by Hugh Wolff and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra who premiered it on January 22, 1999. After screening ten composers, Ruth and John Huss, patrons of the orchestra, decided to offer this commission to Sheng for their silver wedding anniversary, because Sheng's music reminded them about their trip to China. Sheng dedicated this work to the couple. For reminiscent the couple's journey to China musically, Sheng selected "musical postcards" from different regions in China. All four movements have program titles: movement one, "From the Mountains";

movement two, "From the River Valley"; movement three, "From the Salvage Land"; and movement four, "Wish you were there."

The first movement opens with piccolo and English horn on a mountain folk tune with glissando. The tune is on strings and on clarinet and oboe for an interplay, then the strings take over to play with horn and woodwind. One can hear plenty of ornamental grace-notes. The tune is, then, played by the piccolo and oboe in a duet. Then, clarinet joins with a countermelody. A dissonant flutter ends the movement quietly.

The second movement begins with trumpets playing the tune with other brass, and woodwinds and xylophone ornamenting. Clarinet has a running figure to add motion. More instruments join in: timpani, then bassoon, oboe, clarinet and string pizzicato this segment becomes more dissonant. Here the theme is on the piccolo with bass-clarinet, then muted horn and to loud piccolo. Quiet string ends the movement on a sustained chord.

The third movement opens with string pizzicato on a 2-note ostinato followed by oboe and piccolo with low strings punctuating. Then, there comes a string tutti on a Chinese minority folk tune, then horn and bassoon join, and the texture gets lighter with bassoon's ostinato with clarinet, oboe and flute and 2 piccolos on the tune with string pizzicato in the style of the Rite of Spring. Then the tune is played in dissonant thick texture with piccolos and trumpets crescendo to a loud point. The "da- da- -da da-" rhythm on a single pitch and its variants ends the mvt with a loud chord.

The last movement starts in very soft atmosphere with soft oboe in the distance on a Chinese folk tune, in its entirety, with clarinet, string pizzicato accompaniment. This is followed by a duet by piccolo and horn duet playing the tune, accompanied by string's pizzicato. The tune is, then, on clarinet, and piccolo, clarinet and bassoon, which holds a long note with string pizzicato on a descending motive to end the piece in void.

Comments on the Flute Moon (1999): This piece was commissioned by Christoph Eschenbach and the Houston Symphony, who premiered it on May 22, 1999. It is in two movements. The first is for piccolo, 2 timpanies, piano, 3 percussions and strings, and is entitled "Chi Lin's Dance." The second is for flute and

orchestra, and is based on a classic art song by Jiang Gui, poet and musician of the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.). "Chi Lin" is a Chinese unicorn, a mythical creature. Sheng's music depicts a scene of several "Chi Lin" dancing. Thus, the dancing rhythm figures prominently with a special timbre by combining low strings and piano in low range, and with timpani punctuating; it later disappears in the distance. Then, there comes a theme on the xylophone. The theme is not overtly Chinese, though it reminds the sound of the "Mountain King" in Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite. This theme is played first on soft strings which gets louder, and passed on to the piccolo for development while interacting with strings and percussion. It gets loud and soft. The opening material returns with xylophone and clapper, and the movement ends softly with piccolo giving a hint of pentatonicism. The second movement opens with slow and sleepy string's lush harmonic background which gets very soft for a while, and gets louder to usher flute's entrance. The flute comes in with trilling figure and slow moving string's harmonic background. It becomes animated a little with string pizzicato, and falls back to slow sleepy mood. The flute comes back with trills and is much more animated with louder background tutti. The main pentatonic theme is played on strings with dotted rhythm and flute's ornamentation of long notes, and continues to develop. A faster tempo leads to the flute cadenza-like passage with string's consonant cadences alternating with dissonant ones building up to a climactic point. The climax collapses immediately led by the crash of gongs, loud timpani, special timbre of percussion and strings on the pentatonic theme. Then, there is an eight-second silence followed by the solo flute with a countersubject on muted strings. Flute's theme gives hints of Chinese flute music, which is sometimes playful and sometimes fleeting. Flute's trills lead to a soft ending.

Comments on Nanking! Nanking! (1999): This work was commissioned jointly by the Northern German Radio and by Marshall Cloyd for Seven Horizons, a concert for the new millennium on January 14, 2000, conducted by Christoph Eschenbach. Sheng dedicated this work to Eschenbach. In this work, Sheng uses the pipa to tell the story as the victim, witness and survivor of the infamous Nanking Massacre that occurred in December 1937, the Japanese troupes murdered over

300,000 Chinese after the city fell. Sheng also uses this work to celebrate the triumphs of humanity, since there were many unsung heroes who risked their lives to rescue the lives of others during the massacre. The Main features of the work include: four-part division (1. sharp dynamic contrasts between soft and sudden loud; 2. pipa with bass-clarinet and orchestra; 3. dirge on strings based on a Chinese folk tune; 4. pipa and bass-clarinet with sudden loud ending), use of a five-second silence, special pipa plucking timbre, a quasi-Japanese tune on the piccolo, special timbre by a combo of pipa, violin, and flute, and the use of muted string's harmonics.

Comments on the Red Silk Dance: Peter Catalano, a reviewer for the American Record Guide, notes, that Sheng's merit lies on not repudiating tonal music of the past or imitating it, but build on and extend the past with his original ideas. So, this new work was more comfortably received than those more discordant 20th century works. However, to Catalano's surprise, the piece was received only tepidly. The piece was dedicated to Emanuel Ax who premiered it. The piece is in two seamless parts. It begins with ostinato by a sequence of 4ths with syncopated rhythm and accelerating tempo and comes to a whirl of multi-layered rhythmic and motivic tutti. Catalano complements, "Sheng's writing is indeed colorful and energetic, yet a cerebral element prevails as well." Catalano further complements on Sheng's ability to keep two independent elements, the piano and the orchestra on different musical element going at once without sounding like Charles Ives.⁵



Production still from *Silver River*, performed at the Spoleto Festival USA (2000).

Source: Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 20, Slides. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Works of the 2000s

Sheng composed his fourth string quartet, subtitled "Silent Temple" in 2000. This is his second published string quartet. The last one, quartet number three, was composed in 1993. Between 2001 and 2002, he composed two pieces with Tibetan dance music as an inspiration. Tibetan Dance for violin, clarinet and piano was composed in 2001, and Tibetan Swing for wind, percussion, and strings, 2002. In the latter, Sheng incorporated the dance rhythms of Tibetan long sleeves swing and the foot stomp steps. The year of 2003 saw the production of Sheng's fourth operatic work, Madam Mao, a full-length anti-heroine drama at Santa Fe. Sheng collaborated with his British librettist Colin Graham, and used onstage flashback settings with a juxtaposition of Western and Chinese operatic styles and inserted excerpts of Peking opera. Two other works, the Song and Dance of Tears for pipa, sheng, cello, piano and orchestra (2003), and Variation Fugato for piano (2003) were completed. The former was the result of a two-months-trip in the summer of 2000 to the Silk Road in Northwest China to collect classical and folk music with a grant from the University of Michigan. This work evokes his memories of the music and culture he had

experienced and absorbed, and expresses his reactions to these memories. He combined several folk songs he heard on the trip to write a melody for in the last section of the piece, entitled "Tears," a quadro-concerto. "Tears" were those of an old man who wanted to be young forever.² In 2003, Sheng composed a duet "Three Tunes for Pipa and Erhu," two traditional Chinese instruments.

Sheng wrote three works in 2004. Among these, Colors of Crimson for marimba and orchestra (2004), and the Phoenix for soprano and orchestra (2004), with his adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's text. Colors of Crimson was commissioned by the Luxembourg Philharmonic, and especially for its percussionist Evelyn Glennie. While these two works were for orchestra and a soloist, the Boatman's Song (2004) was for chorus, percussion and harp. The last two pieces for 2005 were Concerto for Orchestra: Zodiac Tales (2005), and La'I (Love Song) (2005), his first piece for concert band.

Reception and Reviews of His Works

A pragmatic composer, Sheng knows himself and his style well, and knows the kind of audience he would be communicating. He knows what he wants to express and how his audience would hear and feel. He knows how to communicate with his audience effectively. Therefore, his music has a strong emotional appeal. This is directly reflected in most reviews of his works.

It would be interesting to make a comparison between Chinese and American audience's reactions to hear the same work. However, since the lack of information on Chinese reviews, questions regarding the Chinese audience's aesthetic values, psyche, mentality and levels of analysis cannot be answered here.

From reading reviews by American listeners, one sees a trend: Sheng's music has caught the Western psyche, the Western mentality of love for adventures, for exotic (has a positive spin), for entertainment, for shocking experiences, and for the experience to be moved emotionally. One reviewer complained about "the passion of the story is understated musically in his opera, the Song of Majnun."⁶ Another made a similar complaint for Sheng's other opera, Madam Mao, that

"the emotional effect is thereby quite limited. I want to be surprised and moved in the opera house; Madame Mao did neither; it was old tea in old cups."⁷

Emotional appeal is the foremost value in Sheng's music. Sheng believes that emotions are trans-cultural, and wants his audience, both from East and West, be less concerned about understanding the contents of foreign material used in his work, but to appreciate his work in its own right. However, the Western curiosity for exotics, seen as romantic, does play a role in accepting the fusion of Chinese and Western elements in a composition.

The receptions of his music in America can be seen at three levels: 1), impressions of newspaper reporters, 2), more informed descriptions of his works and technical merits by serious musicians and scholars, and 3), in-depth analysis by doctoral students. The difference between these levels is the depth. Like those reviews by newspaper reporters, most of the doctoral dissertations deal with a single work, but in great detail. Since these doctoral students are performers and the works they are analyzing are only for their graduate recitals, not much attention has been paid to Sheng's biographical material, and its connection with his works. In other words, these are purely technical analyses. There are ample materials, technical as well as biographical and cultural scattered around awaiting for a composite study, another dissertation or a book.

A summery of reviews of his works from Schirmer, Sheng's publisher's website:

These reviews are selected and compiled from newspapers. Most reviewers recognized Chinese music in his works such as pentatonic scales, Chinese tunes, Chinese percussion timbre and energy, Chinese sentiment and nature metaphors in landscape paintings, Chinese bent and sagging flute tones on Western flute, Chinese rhythmic styles, Chinese theatrical singing styles, Chinese instrumental playing style imitated on Western instruments, and the interplay between Chinese and Western instruments.

Several reviewers pointed out Western elements in his works as the orchestration recalling Rimsky-Korsakov or Stravinsky's Firebird, his hard-driving rhythm recalls Shostakovich, again, Shostakovich and Stravinsky plus

Ravel recognized, his use of waltz in Madam Mao reminds Prokofiev's War and Peace, his Phoenix recalls Stravinsky, in his Red Silk Dance, influences of Brahms, Bartok, Hindemith and Prokofiev are heard, Bartok is heard for the same work by another reviewer, Western form, rhythmic complexity, and harmonic language recognized.

Sheng's own merit is recognized as a maker of skilled fusion, use of orchestra to create drama, his lyricism, ability to fuse diverse materials well, ability to evoke emotions in the listener and strong emotional appeal, beguiling melodist, contrast energy and stillness, simplicity, graceful, earthy, wistful lyrical, modal harmony, juxtaposing ancient and modern (creative).

Reviews of Sheng's CDs from Amazon.com and Newspaper Reviews

Among a handful reviews, some reviewers are well-informed listeners of modern music, others are less experienced listeners of classical music. One reviewer said listening to Sheng's works was his first experience with contemporary music with a Chinese composer, and his first trip dip into the China Sea. He thinks Sheng's music has much emotional appeal to him that goes beyond cultural boundaries.⁸ For a more experienced reviewer, Sheng's H'un (Lacerations) is "not any more inaccessible to the average listener than Stravinsky's Sacre du Printemps or Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony."⁹ Another reviewer thinks that Sheng's H'un (Lacerations) "is an incredibly powerful piece—from its dramatic opening until the early sad excruciating ending—it's an unforgettable musical experience."¹⁰ The piece's emotional appeal is clearly seen here.

Some comments on technical aspect of Sheng's works come from informed musicians. Christopher Forbes, for example, sees Sheng as "a Chinese version of a neo-romantic," and his works are characterized by "infectious dazzling orchestration, expansive statements, a dissonant harmonic language that borrows equally from Bartok and Stravinsky with occasional hints of even wilder influences such as Varese. Grafted onto a melodic idiom taken from Chinese sources and you have a vibrant, muscular but pleasing music."¹¹ In Two Poems, Forbes heard the influences of Sheng's teachers Chou Wen-Chung, and Mario

Davidovsky, and in Nanking! Nanking!, he heard outpouring emotions, and found that "the pipa is beautifully integrated into the texture, neither clashing or subordinating itself to the primarily western idiom of the orchestra"¹² Another reviewer also mentions the emotionalism in this work as "comparable to Penderecki's Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima and Shostakovich's wartime symphonies."¹³ In Sheng's opera, Madam Mao, a reviewer heard the influences of Shostakovich, Stravinsky and Ravel.¹⁴

Concerning musical fusion, most of newspaper reviewers hear the Chinese materials without difficulty, but identify the Western techniques as Sheng's "idiom." This is not in complete agreement with Sheng's claim that Chinese material is his mother tongue and Western material is his father tongue. The reason for this disparity is these reviewers' unfamiliarity of the Chinese material. Another level of fusion heard by some reviewers is Sheng's own idiom with that of Bartok, Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Ravel.

Reception of his works:

Since its premiere in 1988, H'un has been performed most frequently by over one hundred orchestras worldwide, and has been received warmly. In 1993, Kurt Masur included it for the New York Philharmonic's European tour. The Song of Majnun has also been performed frequently after its premiere in 1992; it has been performed in San Francisco, Seattle, Houston and New York. The performances have been received enthusiastically. China Dreams, Postcards, and Flute Moon that evoke exotic or romantic images of China for the American audience are accepted equally with enthusiasm. Herald Schoenberg's negative view on fusing the best of two cultures as "mixing the best beer and the best wine" or the "beer-wine" analogy has dissipated over a decade as a renewed interest in exoticism is gaining ground.

Part II: A Sketch of Sheng's Life, His Experiences and Composition Process:



Left to Right: Margret Fieldman (Sheng's sister), Bright Sheng, Kurt Mazur (conductor), David Cheng (father) and Alice Cheng (mother) after the premiere of H'un in New York City with the New York Philharmonic (1993).

Source: Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 1, Photographs. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

A Sketch of Sheng's Life

Bright Sheng was born on December 6, 1955 in Shanghai into an intellectual family. His grandfather came from a wealthy landlord family and was able to come to America to study in the 1920s. He received an electronic engineering degree from the University of Wisconsin, and returned to China to work as an engineer. Sheng's father studied medicine and became a radiologist, while his mother went to engineering school and became an engineer. Like those typical intellectual family in Shanghai, music was an important part of cultural life for the Sheng family. Sheng's father was a music lover, and an amateur performer of Peking opera. He played jing hu, two-stringed fiddle for Peking operas, and taught his son to play. He also had a collection of recordings of Western classical music, and his mother studied piano when she was growing up. Sheng received piano lessons from his mother at the age of 4.

In addition to piano, Sheng also learned to play dizi, the Chinese bamboo flute, and jinghu, and various string and percussion instruments. The costume, singing style, and acting of Peking opera were not foreign to him because of

this early exposure. In spite of all this, Sheng later confessed that he was not interested in music as a child, but his talent in sight reading was discovered by his piano teacher.

He was forced to practice two hours a day, and eventually accustomed to this regimen. In 1966, when he was eleven, the Cultural Revolutions broke out. Because of his landlord and bourgeoisie family background, his family was the enemy and target of the revolution. The Red Guards, a revolutionary youth organization, searched his family apartment, and took away the piano, which was seen as a symbol of the "four old traditions," and a cultural symbol of old ruling class. In those days everything was turned upside down and to be scrutinized by the revolutionaries. For the sake of spreading revolution messages, travel was free, room and board were free, factory stopped production, and schools were closed. The country was in chaos; economy was wrecked and left in shambles. There was not much to do, if you choose not to participate in revolutionary campaigns and join revolutionary organizations. Tenthhs and thousands of youth were idling at home or on the streets. Sheng recalled that since the piano was taken away, he felt the playing of piano was missing from his daily routine. He had to practice on a piano in a junior high school when one was around. He kept up piano practice and became an outstanding player.

In the summer of 1971, Sheng was not yet sixteen years old. It was the time to graduate from junior high. He would face the prospect of being sent down to the countryside for the re-education by the peasants and to live like that for life. To avoid that, he auditioned for several art troupes. He was accepted many times, and then turned down immediately after the political background check. His family background was clearly undesirable by the revolutionary standard. However, there was one art troupe in Xining, a remote region, in Qinghai province that had less revolutionary fervor than to recruit talents, accepted him.

After arriving at the troupe in Qinghai, he realized that to find a piano teacher and to continue his piano lessons was virtually impossible. He was the percussionist of the troupe, and did arranging on the side. That made him

became increasingly interested in composing, and fascinated with the local folk music, the "Hua Er", or "the flower song." He was drawn to the sensuality and the roughness of this music. His study of the *Hua Er* and its comparison with *Jia* songs enabled him to gain insight into the differences between traditional Chinese culture and cultures of Qinghai. For example, in traditional Chinese culture, it would be in a bad taste for a man to express his appreciation of a woman's physical beauty directly, but to do it in poetic metaphors or in third person. The lyrics of the *Hua Er*, on the other hand, uses explicit terms to communicate such an appreciation between two genders, sometimes quite sexually graphic. His analysis of melody, lyrics and rhythm reflects his in depth understanding of this material. It seems that he has been following Bartok's example to study, understand, and absorb those folk songs as an important composition resource. This music had a strong influence on him, and he wanted to infuse this material with Western harmonic, instrumental techniques and forms. He knew his knowledge for composition was limited, and started study seriously, besides learning about and collecting folk songs. He taught himself music theory, orchestration, and learned the ways to put a piece together.

In 1977, a year after Mao's death, China reopened the doors of universities, and allowed young people to take entrance exams. The admission rate was about one in one hundred applicants.

Sheng left Qinghai in 1978, and soon, took the entrance exam for the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. He was accepted as a composition student. He entered Shanghai Conservatory that year at age twenty-two, and found that he had no idea about what a composer was about. His curriculum at the conservatory included only from Bach to Brahms, nothing was taught before the 18th c. and after the 19th c. He now recalls that "even the part from Bach to Brahms was twisted. . .It was superficial and didn't get into the essence of the Western music."¹⁵

After Sheng entered Shanghai Conservatory, he noticed the culture there was extremely "Chong Yang" or worshipping things from the West. Western music was considered "real music," and the Chinese Music Division in the conservatory was thought for those students who couldn't get into the prestige Composition

Department. Sheng, however, saw learning about traditional Chinese music as an opportunity, and sat as much as he could in classes of Chinese music, and everyone thought he was crazy.¹⁶

Sheng graduated at the top of his class, and the Shanghai Symphony had performed his orchestral work. In 1979, he won the first prize of the Art Song Competition in Shanghai, and won both the first and second prizes of the Chamber Music Composition Competition in 1980.

In 1980, Sheng's parents decided to immigrate to America. They arrived in the United States in that year, and settled in New York. Sheng followed his parents and came to New York two years later. When Sheng arrived here, his father pushed him to change music to business, because his father thought it was a bad idea to pursue music as a profession. He said, "music will never make you a good living." Sheng answered, "Give me five years. If I do not succeed as a musician, I will choose another profession."¹⁷

He did not have the money to go to the top-notch music schools in the city. He went to Queens College instead. He knew that he had a solid training in classical Western compositions in China, but lacked knowledge of contemporary techniques. He studied avidly. Between 1982 to 1984, in two years, under the watchful eyes of his teachers George Perle and Hugo Weisgall, two well-known composers, he mastered the basics of 20th century approaches, e.g., serialism among others. Then, in 1984, he entered Columbia University's composition program and worked with Chou Wen-Chung and Jack Beeson and Mario Davidovsky, who was his thesis advisor. He received his Doctor of Musical Arts from Columbia University in 1993.

His studies seemed going well at Columbia, but he struggled. He felt that he could replicate those styles he had studied. He also realized that those styles were not his own, in which he couldn't express himself freely. Also during these two years in New York, he routinely attended performances of contemporary music, but was disappointed with many of them, which had little to offer, he thought. He tried to learn from the performances of classical composers' works.

With scholarships to Aspen and Tanglewood summer music camps, he met the pianist Samuel Lipman, who sent him to Gerard Schwarz, who commissioned and premiered his H'un in April, 1988. Also at Tanglewood, he met Peter Serkin, the renowned pianist. In the summer of 1985 he met Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein who championed his works.



Left to Right: Bright Sheng, Aaron Copeland, and Leonard Bernstein at the Tanglewood Music Center when Sheng was a student in the Center's Composers' Workshop (1985).

Source: Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 1, Photographs. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Sheng often talks about his view on his cultural identity that he sees himself as a product of both Chinese and Western cultures, and considers Chinese musical resources as his mother tongue, and Western musical resources as his father tongue. This view didn't come about without struggle. While a student at Columbia, he had qualms about whether the divergent Chinese and Western musical materials can meaningfully co-exist in a single style as in his cross-cultural experience. As he was pursuing an authentic style, as he calls it, he was told by his teachers and friends not to pursue a style which mixes Chinese and Western music. He should compose either Chinese music or Western music. Not knowing what to do, he asked Bernstein, who was surprised and looked him and said, "What do you mean fusion?" "Everything is fusion. Stravinsky is fusion. Shostakovich is fusion. Debussy is fusion. Brahms is fusion with folk music. I'm fusion. Of course it's possible."¹⁸

Bernstein became an ideal model for him, besides Bartok, the combination of pianist, composer and conductor in one person. As Bernstein's student, he religiously attended all Bernstein's rehearsals, especially for Bernstein's recording of the second cycle of Mahler symphonies. He appreciated the music more from seeing how it was put together at these rehearsals. Naturally, he learned a great deal of conducting from these direct observations in which Bernstein would make difficult things easy and convincingly manageable for him to emulate. He learned from Bernstein how to think, work, compose, and a great deal more.

The lasting influence of Bernstein on Sheng is Bernstein's musical insights, which comes from a profound understanding of musical composition as well as culture. Those insights enabled Bernstein to explain difficult and complex concepts and composition techniques with very simple terms that make these concepts easy to understand. This is to benefit him not only for composing, but also for teaching. Bernstein had advised him to study things at their roots.

In 1988, Bernstein had just finished a new work, "Arias and Barcarolles for two singers and two pianos," and asked Sheng to orchestrate it, since Sheng had been his rehearsal pianist. Sheng felt that it would be more appropriate for Bernstein himself to do it, but Bernstein insisted. Sheng remembers that "one day at the rehearsal I told him that it would be really nice if he orchestrate it," but "the next day he came to me and said, 'I think you're right, but you should orchestrate it.'" Sheng then said jokingly, "you want a Chinese Bernstein? You know my music is very Chinese." Bernstein replied, "Fine, whatever you want to do." So, Sheng did orchestrate Bernstein's piece. Later, Bernstein had programmed Sheng's H'un with this work with Sheng's orchestration.¹⁹



Bright Sheng with Leonard Bernstein and the performers after the premiere of *Arias and Barcarolls*, music composed by Leonard Bernstein, orchestration by Bright Sheng (ca. 1988).

Source: Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers: Box 1, Photographs, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Speaking of Bernstein's influence, he acknowledges that Bernstein pointed out a way for him, as he still trying to find his own voice after mastering contemporary composition tech on top of his composition training in China. Bernstein told him to deepen his understanding of traditions, simply learning the tech is not enough. He followed this advice for 5 years until Bernstein's death, and felt his eyes are opening and became more resourceful. To further understand tradition is the most important lesson he learned from Bernstein. He followed Bernstein on tours to observe his conducting. Bernstein encouraged him to develop his own style, and told him that he and Sheng liked each other's music, yet their styles are very different. As a conductor and often attending rehearsals and performances of his own works, he had opportunities to hone his conducting skills. Sheng's friendship with Bernstein lasted till the day Bernstein died on Sunday, October 14, 1990. He was with the ailing master the day before in the midst of revising his orchestration of *Arias and Barcarolls*²⁰

From 1989 to 1992, Sheng was the Composer-in-Residence at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, where he composed his first opera, the Song of Majnun, and saw its premiere there. Immediately at the end of that position, he was appointed Composer-in-Residence at the Seattle Symphony. Gerard Schwarz, Sheng's friend, has been its conductor for over two decades. Two years later, in 1994, while in Seattle, Sheng accepted another appointment, Artist-in-Residence at the University of Washington with full teaching responsibilities. When these two residency positions came to an end in 1995, he joined the composition faculty in the School of Music at the University of Michigan. Rising rapidly through the rank with his outstanding teaching and creative activities, he currently holds a full-professorship. To honor his achievements and his friendship with Bernstein, he received the title of Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor from the university in 2004.



Bright Sheng with University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman during the awards dinner where Sheng was bestowed with the Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professorship (2004).

Source: Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 1, Photographs, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

In 1996, for the first time after fifteen years in America, Sheng went back to China to find an orchestra of traditional Chinese instruments in Shanghai or Beijing for writing a cello concerto "Spring Dreams" with Traditional Chinese orchestra for the cellist Yo-Yo Ma who commissioned the

piece. In Shanghai, he experienced total culture shock because China had changed. But after three days, he was comfortable as if he left only a day ago, not fifteen years. With a grant from the University of Michigan to collect folk music along the "silk road," in the summer of 2000, he took another trip to China, and later composed The Song and Dance of Tears, a quadruple concerto for a mixture of Chinese and Western instruments.



Bright Sheng along the Silk Road in northwest China (2000).

Source: Photograph from Bright Sheng Papers, Box 20, Slides. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Since then, he has maintained a close-tie with musicians, and musical organizations in China, and has been bestowed an honorary professorship at Wuhan Conservatory. His reputation has been growing in China, and he gave a special interview for a Chinese reporter who flew all the way from Shanghai to Michigan just for the occasion of the performance of his Phoenix by the touring Danish National Symphony Orchestra in Shanghai in spring 2004. This has fulfilled his longing for reuniting with his motherland as he implied in his opera the Song of Majnun. Now the love between Majnun, representing himself, and Layla, representing China, can be consummated.

He got married in the summer of 2004 at the age of 49, and is as busy as ever balancing between composing, teaching, performing, conducting, and his family life.

His Composing process and experiences

Concerning his search for ways to make fusion, Sheng likes to tell the story he heard as a child about an adventure of searching for treasures in a secrete garden turned empty handed. The punch line is the adventure itself, the process, is the reward, not the treasure.²¹

He sees the process of composing as coordinating the affective and cerebral aspects of telling a story. The optimal result is the perfect union of the two. He does get excited and perhaps even emotional when he composes, and is always looking for a better way to organize his musical material. He commented on Stravinsky's neo-classical period after the Rite as a new avenue to produce more works. He is not looking for a new route or stepping stone to increase his output, but to stay his course.²²

He usually conceives a new piece during walks that he starts to hear sounds and he processes them. He then selects the section that excites him and takes more walks and hears more of it, and he begins to hear more details of it. The next step is to work that material out on the piano. He usually has the shape of the work before sitting down at the piano. However, he also tried the opposite, and thought that, to him, it was quite stimulating.²³

He has experienced thinking about music in dreams. He recalls that this has happened to him many times. When he faces a mental block, he would go to bed. He would have the solution in dreams and would wake up, excited, and jotted it down, though found out the next day it would be unusable. However, he did have a "dream-come-true" experience while working on *China Dreams* (1995), a four-movement orchestral work. With three finished movements, he was pondering how to gel them structurally in the last movement. Then, in a dream, he saw himself following the conductor's score of the fourth movement that used materials from all the previous movements. In the dream, the orchestra stopped due to too many mistakes. He woke up still remembering the notes on the score, and quickly jotted everything down, and hoped that they would still be good the next day. They sure are. He gave the work present title.²⁴

For the issue of inspiration, he cites Shostakovich who wrote everyday. He prepares himself to be mentally and technically ready to receive inspiration. He uses an antique shop analogy to illustrate this point.²⁵

Intuitively, he sees the success of his work does not depend on flawless performances and compliments, but on his own satisfaction. An adequate performance of his own favorite work would make him happy that he does not have to worry about reviews. A good review for a mediocre work would worry him; he had to ask: Did he do his best?

In an interview, Sheng was asked about how he fused Oriental and Western elements in this work. He explains that the fusion is subtle, and suggestive. For example, phoenix in western culture symbolizes male, yet in the east it suggests female, thus he used soprano, and this fusion has transcended cultural boundaries. Though he did not deliberately try to make it Chinese, the Chinese character may have come through unconsciously. When he was asked about his approach to fusing Chinese and Western cultures in his music, his answer is the effort in profound understanding of both traditions.²⁶

When he just came to the U.S., he had a clear separation between Chinese and western materials, and wanted to use more Chinese material. Now, he does not think that way, instead, his concerns are the aural impression of the work and the outstanding features of the work. He believes that since, as a Chinese, he is a carrier of the Chinese culture, he does not have to deliberately make cultural statements in his works. The Chinese mannerism, aesthetic values, world view, and behavioral patterns will seep out automatically anyway.²⁷ Bartok is his model. He learned from Bartok that Bartok's deep understanding of folk music and the classical tradition go hand in hand for a successful fusion. He believes that Bartok saw folk music as fresh resource, and as "invaluable rejuvenation for art music, and an alternative to 12-tone music. His concept of fusion is stated as only the deepest understanding of both cultures can bring true fusion since the deepest understanding goes to the root of each.

In the end, and again, Sheng believes that the ultimate question about values in music is its emotional appeal. Composing is not technique for technique's sake, but to move the listeners with an affective experience. To do that, he himself has to be moved first. Appealing to human emotions is an important ingredient in his music. He hopes to write immortal works that can stand the test of time.

Part III. (Theoretical considerations, a Comparison with Chou Wen-Chung's fusion, and conclusions)

Theoretical Considerations

Sheng claims that he is 100% Chinese and 100 % American, meaning his works are not half of each, but representing the best of both in his fusion. In other words, he sees himself as musically bi-lingual. To come to this point, he had experienced the re-acculturation, deepening the understanding of a bi-cultural carrier's cultures, in both traditions and become the true carriers of both cultures. The process of re-acculturation has been associated with the concept of syncretism for explaining cultural synthesis.

The concepts of Syncretism:

The concept of cultural syncretism emerged in the 1930s first from the anthropological study of acculturation; it was defined by Elsie Parsons as a mechanism functioning in the process of acculturation.²⁸ Parsons investigated how Western Catholicism was incorporated into indigenous Mexican religious practice. The idea was that the natives accepted only those aspects of the foreign culture in which they could find parallels in their own culture. For example, their adoption of the worship of St. Mary was based on their own worship of the Earth Mother, a figure comparable to that of Mary. Melville Herskovits was specific about the use of syncretism as a conceptual tool for clarifying cultural synthesis as a process:

This [reinterpreting new elements in traditional terms], in turn, is further refined by references to the process of syncretism, the tendency to identify those elements in the new culture with similar elements in the old one, enabling the persons experiencing the contact to move from one to the other, and back again, with psychological ease.²⁹

This interest in developing a theoretical framework for the study of the blending process for different musical elements resulted in two important articles of the 1950s, both by Herskovits's students, "African Influence on the Music of the America," (1952) by Richard Waterman, and "The Use of Music in the Study of A Problem of Acculturation," (1955) by Alan Merriam.

The term "musical syncretism" was first articulated by Waterman in his 1952 article. In this case study, he applied Parsons' and Herskovits' idea of conceptual and material compatibility and concluded that the African Americans' absorption of European elements in their musical fusion was due to compatibility or syncretism.³⁰

With the concept of syncretism or compatibility as a point of departure, Merriam contrasted African-American's adoption of European musical traits, and showed that due to the incompatible outlook of their musical materials, the native Americans tended to resist foreign influence, and the exchange of ideas rarely occurred between the natives and Westerners.³¹ Merriam's illustration is based on his generalizations of the prevalent practice of these two cultural groups. However, both Waterman and Merriam tell us nothing about the behaviors and activities of the specific agents of the synthesis or individuals in these groups.

It seems to me that the process of reinterpretation of indigenous tradition by indigenous cultures requires evaluations of both foreign and native traits. This implies that before the final selection for adopting certain foreign traits, the natives have to go through a comparative appraisal of the traits in both foreign and native cultures, and the re-evaluation or enculturation of indigenous culture often results. This is especially true for those natives, who have acquired Western-style education.

Acculturation is a long term process which can take decades. Thus, following a fusion maker's career pattern and his cross-cultural experiences can provide the link between the early and late stages of acculturation, and between one person's experimentation and the group's reaction and adoption of his results. The study of these career patterns and experiences must deal with the analysis of musical material, mediating activities, the thoughts or motivational factors behind his activities, and the degree of rationality for fusion-making.

The Concept of Experience:

As far as theoretical models are concerned, Edward Bruner's discussion of the anthropology of experience seems to be relevant for interpreting the

process of musical synthesis. Bruner sees expression as a cultural text arising from experience which is defined as a person's conscious reception of events or reflections of actions and feelings.³² As the expression or reflection of an experience, a musical work may be interpreted to uncover cross-cultural conflicts and psychological crisis in self-identity in one or both cultures. This experience is usually shared with others or to be interpreted through expression.

In order to trace how a syncretic process may have been taking place, it would be useful to apply the concept of experience to document the fusion-maker's activities, and to use the concept of syncretism as a referential tool or variable to check the results of these activities. It is important to emphasize the dynamic and progressive nature of the fusion-making process and to see how the fusion-maker confronts those issues that require him or her to position or to identify himself/herself. In Sheng's case for example, the fusion-maker was forced to realize his own inadequacies in dealing with a deeper understanding of the cultures he had been straddling. Therefore, to gain such an understanding, a new kind of experience was needed, and this new kind of experience seemed to play an important role in reinterpreting foreign elements in his own cultural terms. Therefore, the innocent idea of simply mixing elements from two cultures is elevated to a conscious goal of self-enlightening and, in the meantime, in bringing about a new kind of fusion which reflects this new learning experience.

How does the fusion-maker understand the relationship between his art and life? Will his experience reshape his art? A relevant issue in fusion-making is how that experience is understood by the fusion maker. It seems to be inevitable that the fusion-maker has to, in some way, reconcile the cultural conflict or contradictions he has experienced. In this reconciliatory process, the fusion-maker works out his self-identification crisis, the fusion-maker's understanding of two cultures deepens, and he becomes more and more conscious and articulate about his cross-cultural experience. This articulated experience is often shared with others. As Sheng articulates his cultural identity publicly that he is musically bi-lingual, and is 100% Chinese and 100%

American, after over twenty years of working this problem out in his quest for a personal style, and his musical style is a reflection of this experience.

As an active student-composer in New York in the 1980s, Sheng was well aware of the problem of making a superficial or artificial (lack of real cultural understanding) musical fusion of Chinese and Western elements, and he took Harold Schoenberg's "beer-wine" analogy seriously. The problem is that up to that point, Sheng's cultural identity was already a mixture, as he continuously to be re-aculturated in two traditions: digging deeper into Chinese folk music and trying to understand the development of Western music with a real insight; he wanted to reflect this identity in his works, and tried to redefine the word "fusion" as to what to fuse and how to fuse for a philosophical foundation or finding new meanings in his fusion.

A comparison with Chou Wen-Chung's fusion

Sheng's approach to musical synthesis is intuitive and natural, as he searched through his cultural roots and his cultural identity. He has Bartok as his model for the confluence of folk and art musical elements, and following Bartok's example, he has found the compatible point for fusion in the root of the two that is where the synthesis is formed. The roots, like the quality of the folk melody for being savage or rough or primitive, and Bartokian and Stravinskian types of Western dissonance and rhythmic drive are compatible points for confluence or transformation. This has been his goal. He wants his audience, both from East and West, be less concerned about understanding the contents of foreign material used in his work, but to appreciate his work in its own right. To that end, he did not hesitate to juxtapose traditional Chinese instruments, e.g., pipa, with Western instruments, a method Chou Wen-Chung did not use. His "Seven Folk Tune Heard in China" uses cello to imitate the Chinese erhu. This echoes Chou's Willows Are New, a piano piece to imitate Qin, a classical Chinese zither, and Yu Ko that uses Western instruments to imitate music for Qin, also.

Both Sheng and Chou have studied Western tradition and their own tradition and composed works to reflect that cross-cultural experience. The difference between the two is the material they explored in their researches. Sheng studied the folk songs China with an interest in their structure and socio-cultural context, while Chou studied the aesthetic principles of classical Chinese arts and the I-Ching or books of change. Chou's approach is more arduous, objective, and rational that he searched for conceptual compatibilities before creating his fusion, fusing Varèse's sound as moving mass with the ink-flow of the Chinese calligraphy, for example. This choice was made rationally, and specific concepts on the nature and property of musical sound were fused through re-living the cultural experience and reinterpretation of previous experience. His experience shows a set of relationships: conflict-reconciliation, mediation-choices of materials, and reinterpretation-synthesis.

Both Sheng's and Chou's musical development clearly show their problems with the naive idea of mixing Chinese and Western materials resulting in self-identity crises, i.e., inadequate knowledge of Chinese culture as a Chinese, and their efforts in subsequent years to reconcile these elements in different ways in their mature works. As new experiences were gained, they grew to be more and more articulate about what they had experienced and began to share this experience with others.

Unlike his teacher, Sheng is more inclusive in the use of his composition resources. He used folk songs, classical poetry, theatrical singing styles. He tried to juxtapose seemingly incompatible instruments in his works. With a central value of evoking emotions, he thinks that his eclectic approach can transcend cultural boundaries. David Hwang, the librettist for the Silk River, quotes Sheng's comments about hybridization of central Asian influence in China, and saying that there shouldn't be a rigid definition of authenticity of what is 'real' or 'fake' Chinese, rather to embrace eclecticism of modern experience. Sheng said that he is a mixture of Chinese and Western cultures and his "Silk River" reflects his background in both cultures, particularly operas and theaters. Sheng further comments that the merit of an artwork is not

depended on authenticity of styles but on how it relates to humanity, hence to be appreciated cross-culturally.³³

Conclusions

From Chou Wen-Chung's pioneering works in cross-cultural musical synthesis in contemporary America to Sheng's success and popularity with this approach, we see a shift of composers reaching out to a wider audience, and a more enthusiastic response from the audience. Sheng's important contribution to this shift is his ability to communicate his listeners effectively with his eclectic approach to musical fusion, and his mastery of composition techniques, namely, effusive lyricism, resourceful motivic development, impressive counterpoint, and brilliant orchestration. His music has a classical bent with those values as clarity and balance; it also has a social dimension as far as accessibility is concerned.

Sheng thinks hard and works hard. His musical development progressed along with his new understanding of both cultures and with his efforts to search for shared values; his musical development also reflects the social and artistic changes and general attitudes in the West. In the meantime, it shows how these changes affected his choices in selecting conceptually compatible material for his cultural musical synthesis, and how his experience has shaped his composition style and reshaped his worldview.

3:50 p.m., Sunday, March 5, 2006

¹ Bright Sheng, "H'un (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966-1967 for Orchestra" Perspectives of New Music, Vol. 33, No. 1/2 (Winter-Summer, 1995), 602.

² Bright Sheng, "H'un (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966-1967 for Orchestra" Perspectives of New Music, Vol. 33, No. 1/2 (Winter-Summer, 1995), 560-603.

³ Leighton Kerner, Quoted Sheng in CD liner notes, in Bright Sheng H'un (Lacerations) and Other Works. New World Records, 80407-2, 1991.

⁴ Xiao-Qiang Pan, "A Study of Seven Tunes Heard in China for Solo Cello by Bright Sheng." D.A. diss., University of Northern Colorado, 2003, 136-138.

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- ⁵ Peter Catalano, "Boston Symphony: Sheng Red Silk Dance," American Record Guide, Vol. 63/3, May-June 2000: 51.
- ² Bright Sheng, "Programme Note for The Song and Dance of Tears," <http://schirmer.com> Accessed 2/23/06.
- ⁶ Dorothy Samachson, "Understated Passion," Opera, 43, Aug. 1992: 916.
- ⁷ J.A. Van Sant, "Santa Fe: Mao flops, Katya flies," American Record Guide, Vol. 66, Nov-Dec. 2003: 20-22.
- ⁸ O Dubhthaigh, "Intriguing Postcards from China's Vanguard of New Music" for CD Bright Sheng: China Dreams; Flute Moon; Postcards, March 5, 2003, Amazon.com. Accessed Jan. 25, 2006.
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- ¹⁰ Chev, "A powerful mix of cultural influences," August 24, 2004. Amazon.com. Accessed Jan. 25, 2006.
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- ¹⁴ Hugh Canning, "Santa Fe" Opera, 54/11, Nov. 2003: 1382-1385.
- ¹⁵ Mark Swed, "Classical Music: A Long Musical March From China" The New York Times, Dec. 2, 1990: 2/29.
- ¹⁶ Lindsley Cameron, "Classical Music: At Home in Tow Worlds" The New York Times, February 16, 1997: 2/33.
- ¹⁷ Pamela Chen, "Biographical Essay of Bright Sheng," the Online presentation of the Bright Sheng Collection at the Bentley Historical Library of University of Michigan.
<http://www.umich.edu/~bhl/bhl/exhibits/shengb/shenghome.htm>
Accessed 2/27/2006..
- ¹⁸ Mark Swed, "Classical Music: A Long Musical March From China" The New York Times, Dec. 2, 1990: 2/29.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Humphrey Burton, Leonard Bernstein. New York: Doubleday, 1994: 531.
- ²¹ Lindsley Cameron, "Classical Music: At Home in Tow Worlds" The New York Times, February 16, 1997: 2/33.
- ²² Bright Sheng, "Why Do I Compose?" (unpublished) email attachment from the composer: 1.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hong Yuan, "Xingyun Zhong Buduan Qou Suo-Dan Mai Guojia Jiaoxiang Yuetuan La Hu Yanchu Qian Yue Yang Zhuanfang Sheng Zong-Liang" [Luck Is Not Enough-Cross-ocean Interview with Bright Sheng Before the Danish National Symphony's Tour to Shanghai], Spring 2004, in Chinese, manuscript provided by the composer, 1-2.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Elsie Clews Parsons, "Milta, Town of the Souls," Univ. of Chicago Publications in Anthropology. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1936: 521.

²⁹ Melville Herskovits, "Problem, Method and Theory in Afroamerican Studies," The New World of Negro. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966: 43-57.

³⁰ Richard Waterman, "African Influence on American Negro Music" in Acculturation in the Americas, Sol Tex ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952: 207-218.

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³³ Ibid.