

Never Far Away

Bright Sheng

A few years ago, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter asked whether I considered myself a Chinese or American composer. Over the years I also have grappled with this question: what defines my cultural identity--the land I grew up in, the music language I speak, or my nationality?

In the early 1990's, about ten years after I left China for New York, I started to re-address the question of Chinese culture. After years of research and many field trips back to China, I came to realize that, contrary to what I had been led to believe, for thousands of years Chinese culture was, in fact, shaped by cultures surrounding China; and Chinese music has always been a hybrid. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), for instance, eight of the 10 categories of music classified by the imperial court were not 'authentic' Chinese music; they were the music from neighboring countries, from the desert of Central Asia to the sea waters of Southeast China.

In linguistics, pidgins and creoles refer to languages developed out of necessity by people who do not share a common tongue, a kind of 'contact language'. The initial communication (called pidgin) can be quite simple, only to fulfill the needed verbal interaction. Yet once the language is used long enough, especially when children learn it as their first language, it then transforms into an affluent language with a more complex structure and richer vocabularies—the emergence of a creole—before becoming a full-fledged mature language.

This phenomenon can be a parallel of my compositional career. I am now at a point where I have lived about half of my life in China and the other half in the U.S. But all my life I strive to better my understanding of both Western and Asian cultures in the hope that my work would reflect this personal obsession— aspiring to an evolving musical style expressive enough to communicate my thoughts with the listener while keeping each work unique to the culture that inspires it.

Of course, achieving something *Chinoiserie* would be the easiest. But it is like mixing Chinese liquor with California wine; the result is not only superficial but also unsatisfactory. A true fusion is much more complicated. It must come from the deepest roots of both cultures: when two seemingly opposites meet at their most original end, a transformation occurs naturally. And the result should enrich both.

I believe that an artist who has a profound understanding of different cultures could create works of cross-cultural elements without a deliberate attempt on his part. After all, he is creating art, not cultural identity. Further, the audience should be able to enjoy the composition for its artistic value without needing words to explain about the culture they are not familiar with.

Bela Bartók, the great Hungarian composer who unified ‘high culture’ of European Classical music with ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ peasant music from his region, believed that a composer could even write music without a trace of real or imitated folk materials that are nonetheless still imbued the true spirit of his native country. He considered this the ultimate goal of a composer—he has truly absorbed his native language, and so, like a poet, he has mastered his mother tongue. If your native culture is still the inspiration for your works, you are never far away from home.

So, to the *Wall Street Journal* reporter, I humbly replied: “I feel 100% Chinese and 100% American.”

Once I was told a story about a secret garden of treasure for which people searched and searched through difficulties. Yet when they finally found it, there was no treasure! But the experience of searching has taught them lessons about life. I think of this story often because writing music is like searching for the garden of treasure. In the end, maybe the purpose is the searching itself, through which I learn about composing as a Chinese and as an American.

Bright Sheng, composer, conductor and pianist, lives in New York City and Ann Arbor, Michigan. His Melodies of a Flute for flute, violin, cello and marimba and Hot Pepper for violin and marimba will be premiered by the Camerata Pacifica April 10-15, 2012, in San Marino, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and Ventura:

http://www.cameratapacifica.org/tickets/2011_2012/apr.htm