

COMPOSER INTERVIEW

Against the Tide: Julian Yu and the 'New Wave' of Chinese Music

Martin Greet

Since coming to Australia, Julian Yu has attracted considerable attention as a composer for the freshness of his approach and the sincerity of his music. I personally came to know his works after taking my first composition lesson from him several years ago, and then following in his foot-steps to study at La Trobe University. His music tends to be complex and intricate, yet clearly structured. Having found an opportunity to talk to him about his compositions, I began by framing a number of quite specific questions about his working methods. These we eventually did get around to addressing. Of greater concern to Julian, however, was the issue of the so called 'New Wave' of Chinese composers.

The following interview is based on a transcript of a recorded conversation I had with Julian in mid-1999 at his home in Melbourne. In the transcript I attempted to preserve his words as they were, while tidying up some of the 'loose ends' that normally occur in spoken conversation. Julian then edited this transcript, producing the document presented here.

Martin Greet: Recently I have heard that there is a so-called 'New Wave' of Chinese composers, the group who left China in the mid-1980s and who are now attracting attention in the US and Europe. I presume you have heard of them?

Julian Yu: I first heard the term 'New Wave' in the 1980s. In 1995 the London Sinfonietta organised a Chinese 'New Wave' concert featuring some of the composers. I was invited to this concert because my piece was also chosen. I didn't know the concert title until afterwards, but I felt my piece didn't fit very well with the style of the other ones, which were more obviously 'Chinese.' But I was glad to hear some comments after the concert. I remember one of the composition students from the Royal Academy of Music saying that he liked my piece because I was not trying to be Chinese or to be clever. One musicologist said 'Julian's piece is good, because it is not pretentious.' Even after two or three years, I have continued to hear this sort of comment. I am glad my piece was not one of those described by the critics as a 'Chinese grocery' or 'a mixture of beer and wine.'

MG: What did the critics mean by those two expressions?

JY: I think they were describing music that makes superficial use of Chinese folk music materials.

MG: But don't you think it is important that composers inherit their cultural background?

JY: Yes, very important. But it should be done at a subtle and deep level, not just by superficially using raw materials. My Japanese composition teacher Joji Yuasa influenced me on this point very profoundly. He believes that what is inherited should be a way of thinking and the spirit of the culture. He says that musical tradition takes many forms, and in traditional music the superficial phenomenon is very important, but that we need to think deeply where these superficial phenomena come from, and reflect in new music the fundamental way of thinking of traditional music.

MG: Your own approach to composition has been heavily based on the traditional Chinese method of ornamenting a 'mother piece,' as you call it.¹ Is this an example of taking a Chinese practice, but using it in a new, sophisticated way, with a new language?

JY: Yes. I'm using the way of thinking to create music, rather than the material. It's very hard to do, for I'm deliberately avoiding so-called Chineseness when I compose.

MG: With this method, you preserve the mother piece in your work by increasing the durations of the original notes, then adding ornamentation in between them, so that what was in the foreground now recedes into the background, and a new foreground is placed on top. How important is it that the original piece is still there in the structure?

JY: Well, it provides a very firm base to work on. That's the most difficult part when you compose. For example, a piece of music may initially sound wonderful, but after a few minutes it may not hold your attention if it is poorly structured overall, if it is just composed of small sections. If you look at the great masters like Bach or Beethoven, their music is quite simple in structure compared to contemporary music, but it holds your attention. I've been wondering why this is. With Bach's music it's the contrapuntal thinking which holds your attention, and so with Beethoven, or Brahms. If you analyse their music, you can trace the basic level, the firm framework on which they are constructed. This is very important. Chinese instrumental music, with its ornamentation, has many similarities. It has a very firm ground. The embellishments are made on top of that, to make it more interesting.

MG: Do all your pieces function like that? Is there a mother piece for all of them?

JY: Not for every piece. The thing is, I need to write not only one good piece. I need to write at least a few! These have to have different mother pieces and different levels of ornamentation so I can say that this way of writing works. I can't just write one piece and say, this piece has been performed several times, so that's proof. Mozart needed to write a few hundred pieces to persuade people that, yes, this works.

MG: What have you been aiming at in your recent pieces?

JY: I want to create many different examples of the way in which the thinking behind Chinese instrumental music can be applied to the Western medium. Sometimes I use a piece by one of the Western masters as a mother piece, and sometimes I create my own framework.

¹ See Julian Jing-Jun Yu, 'Ornamentation in Traditional Chinese Instrumental Music and its Application in Original Compositions,' MA Diss., La Trobe U, 1993.

MG: When you construct a mother piece yourself, is that a complete miniature composition, or do you lay it out in large durations, with space already there for the ornamentation?

JY: It's not intended to be a separate composition. It's only the framework.

MG: But there is a small piece that exists somewhere; you might not want it published or performed, but there is a small piece.

JY: Yes.

MG: According to your biography in Sound Ideas, when you were in China, you wrote a lot of music for film, television, theatre and radio. Since coming to Australia, you've been writing concert music.² Do you still have any interest in that sort of functional music for those other media?

JY: Yes, I have a lot of interest. But I'm glad I don't do that all the time. I imagine that if I did that sort of composition all the time, I'd just become a manufacturer, a worker. They judge purely by ear, and can repeat all the time what they are doing. But in the future, if I have the chance, I would be interested to do that again. Actually, I've been talking to the ABC recently. They are doing a symphonic stories series with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. They want to commission some composers to write a narrative with orchestra for young children, so they are asking me to write one piece for that. I would treat that not purely as a commercial exercise, but it would involve some relief. It think it's very important for composers to reach a high level, but then come back and write pieces based more on intuition. But if you are always working by intuition, you don't reach that intellectual level.

MG: You've said previously how important the visual aspect of the score is for you. Looking at your scores, there's a very clear structure that just leaps straight off the page at you (see Example 1).

JY: This is very important. Our ears' ability is behind our eyes. What you can hear is behind what you can see. You can see a lot of things happening in a score, but you can't always hear them, because of recording quality, or other physical things. So if we only base our music on hearing, our music will always stop at one point, that's for sure. If you write a piece of music based on intellectual achievement, either visual or calculations or whatever, it will lead you to an area you can't go to purely by ear. So I believe that a visual texture on a score will work.

MG: To take an extreme example, a purely graphic score in which the notation doesn't actually link to a note or sound but is completely abstract can look very impressive, but it doesn't actually convey a sound.

JY: That's different. A shape on a score should reflect the direction and register. Low must mean low. When writing music, I have a feeling whether something works or not, especially writing for piano keyboard. If I notate something one way, it may not be good, but if it's notated with almost the same notes but in a different way, it will work. A shape can develop your visual ideas and stimulate the intellectual part of the mind. A certain type of music will reflect a certain type of visual impact. For example, I can flash one page of Mozart, for maybe one second, and you'll know it's Mozart. Another interesting example is if you make a piano reduction of a Brahms orchestral work, the reduction looks very similar to one of his piano works. There's some sort of link. There's a certain type of music, a certain shape, that is there from the start. You can see this with many composers, Schoenberg, Bartók. All the good music, all the masters from the last few centuries, are very impressive visually. So it's a very important goal to achieve a score that looks like an art work.

² Laurie Whiffin, 'Julian Yu,' *Sound Ideas*, ed. Brenton Broadstock (Sydney: Australian Music Centre, 1995) 337-38.

Example 1: Julian Yu, *Wu Yu* for orchestra, bars 98–102. © Universal Edition (London).
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This image displays a page of a musical score for Julian Yu's *Wu Yu*, specifically bars 98 through 102. The score is written for a full orchestra and is presented in a traditional score format with multiple staves. The top staff is the first violin (V. I.), and the bottom staff is the double bass (C.). The score is divided into systems, with each system containing multiple staves for different instruments. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, beams, and slurs, indicating complex rhythmic and melodic patterns. The page number '92' is visible in the top left corner of the score area.

LIST OF PRINCIPAL WORKS**Stage**

The White Snake Op. 19 (1989)

Fresh Ghosts (1997)

Orchestra/Ensemble

Wu-Yu Op. 14 (1987)

Great Ornamented Fuga Canonica Op. 17 (1988)

First Australian Suite Op. 22 (1990)

Hsiang-Wen: Filigree Clouds Op. 23 (1990–91)

Hsiang-Chi Op. 23a (1990)

Three Symphonic Poems Op. 31 (1994)

Philopentatonica Op. 32 (1994)

Sinfonia Passacagliissima Op. 35 (1995)

Pentatonicophilia Op. 33 (1995)

Concerto for Marimba and Small Orchestra Op. 38 (1996)

Lyrical Concerto for Flute and Orchestra Op. 39 (1997)

Ballade Concertante for Zheng and Orchestra (1999)

Chamber Music

Scintillation II Op. 12 (1987)

Scintillation III Op. 13 (1987)

Medium Ornamented Fuga Canonica Op. 16 (1988)

Reclaimed Prefu Op. 18 (1989)

Let Me Sing Sonya's Lullaby Op. 25 (1991)

Quartet for Two Marimbas, Xylophone and Timpani Op. 28 (1992)

Piano Quartet Op. 26 (1992)

Piano Trio Op. 26a (1994)

Passacagliissima Op. 35a (1994)

Variations on a Theme of Paganini Op. 37 (1995)

Atanos Op. 36 (1996)

The Lamentation of Micius (1998)

Vocal and Choral

Three Haiku Op. 15 (1987)

In the Sunshine of Bach Op. 20 (1990)

Reclaimed Prefu II Op. 21 (1990)

Four Haiku Op. 27 (1992)

Oneness-Sky, Fulness-Sun Op. 34 (1995)

Solo Instrument*Impromptu* Op. 9 (1982–86)*Crossing* Op. 10 (1986)*Scintillation I* Op. 11 (1987)*Magic Bamboo Flute: Improvisation for Piano* Op. 30 (1993)

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