

‘Recomposing’ Unpublished Chinese Folk Songs into New Australian Compositions for Pipa and Piano

Maria Grenfell and Shan Deng

In 2010, pianist Shan Deng, her father Wei Deng,¹ a *pipa* specialist, and composer Maria Grenfell embarked upon a musical project to amalgamate their practice-led research. Collaborating as composer and performers in the composition of *Five Songs from the East*—a new work for *pipa* and piano—using material sourced from some unpublished Chinese folk songs, the central aims of the project were to ‘recompose’ selected songs, write a composition that fused the composer’s current style with musical elements present in these folk songs, and combine a Western musical instrument with a Chinese instrument in a new work. The compositions were not conceived as appropriation of Chinese material; rather, the composer wished to create new Australian music directly informed by collaboration with Chinese musicians trained in both Western and Chinese performing traditions.

The aim of *Five Songs from the East* is twofold: to blend the use of both Chinese and Western instruments, as well as undertake a ‘recomposition’ of unpublished Chinese folk songs in a Western compositional language. This paper documents the approaches used to rehearse and perform the improvisation and rhythmic features demanded by this work, in order to chart

¹ Wei Deng and Shan Deng both use the Western convention of address with first name followed by last name.

the process of collaboration from conception and 'recomposition' through to rehearsal and performance and to demonstrate the methods involved in rehearsing and performing a new work that uses Eastern and Western musical elements. After a discussion of the composer's background and context, the concept of motivic 'recomposition' will be explored, along with an analysis of motives from each folksong and how they were used in *Five Songs from the East*. As an expansion on the ideas explored in a short article for the Australian Music Centre journal *Resonate*, which was published shortly after the premiere of *Five Songs from the East*,² this paper will also elaborate on the context of the project.

Compositional Approach

Composers bring to their work a plethora of influences and ideas from many sources. These characteristics evolve over time and are exhibited in their compositions, although most composers still find it difficult to summarise their compositional ethos or—that ubiquitous word—style. Music does not need to be programmatic in order to be influenced stylistically by other art forms, which may include poetry, visual arts, folk culture, stories, and trans-cultural sources. Grenfell's aim as a composer is to communicate with the audience and to create a sound world from which her musical ideas and statements can emerge. Malaysian-born, yet raised in New Zealand, she has always been particularly fascinated by Māori, Greek and Roman myths and legends. Since 1998, as a composer resident in Australia, she has called upon some of these cultural sources for inspiration in works such as her flute concerto *Maui Tikitiki a Taranga* (1998) and two orchestral pieces *Stealing Tutunui* (2000) and *Hinemoa* (2007). She has also written music influenced by poetry, including New Zealand poetry and the poems of Li Bo, arguably China's most important poet dating from the eighth century AD during the Tang Dynasty. In these works, it is not the texts that have been set to music; rather, the texts have inspired the creation of a sound world and an evolving musical voice through the amalgamation of musical motives, instrumentation choices, and titles.

Grenfell had never consciously chosen to pursue a distinctive Asian sound in her works by using Asian scales, timbres or instruments. However, when Shan Deng approached her with the suggestion to write pieces for piano and *pipa* based on unpublished Chinese folk songs for Duo Deng (Shan and her father Wei Deng), she viewed it as a unique compositional opportunity; it was the first time she had considered writing for a non-Western instrument, and working with a professional *pipa* player would provide a special insight into a new sound world. The opportunity to work closely with two experienced, conservatorium-trained performers was appealing to the composer, who valued the chance to be involved in the project from the initial stages of selecting inspiration material and writing a piece on her own terms, rather than fulfilling the specific parameters of a commission. Working with original unpublished folk songs was another appealing factor, suiting her interest in 'recomposing' existing works and incorporating ideas from folk music.

'Recomposition' is a concept that Grenfell had begun to investigate in 1994 while completing a Masters degree at the Eastman School of Music. The use of the term as a compositional device is explained by Edward T. Cone, who demonstrates Wagner's recomposition of a

²Shan Deng and Maria Grenfell, 'Insight: From Unpublished Chinese Folk Songs to New Australian Compositions: Stylistic Development and Performance Practice,' *Resonate*, 13 Dec. 2012, www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/article/insight-from-unpublished-chinese-folk-songs-to-new-australian-compositions.

melody from *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold*, describing the variations made to the melody across both operas, sung by two different characters, but exhibiting the same intervallic and melodic contour, even starting on the same pitch.³ Through an analysis of *Carol to St Stephen* by New Zealand composer Jack Body,⁴ Grenfell applied the concept of recomposition to the method of deconstructing melodic, rhythmic and harmonic aspects of a composition, and using the resulting fragments to create a new composition. Body's choral work itself deconstructs melodic and rhythmic motives from a fifteenth-century English carol,⁵ and reassembles them in a pseudo-minimalist style using separation of parts of original phrases and echo-like repetition of small rhythmic motives from the original carol. The technique is not arranging or appropriation; the new composition exhibits features that belong to the original, and may be transformed beyond obvious recognition. Some parts of the original work are recognisable, but it may be difficult for the listener to identify the original work because the compositional manipulation is hidden. The concept is akin to the development of a theme or motive, where the composer does not necessarily wish the listener to be aware of the compositional processes. In line with this concept, *Five Songs from the East* is a recomposition of Chinese folk songs, as will be demonstrated later in this article.

Engagement with Asian Music

Exploration of non-Western sources and collaborations with performers have been part of the foundation of Grenfell's compositional voice, but she is not the first Australian composer to have pioneered an Asian focus. Throughout the twentieth century, and subsequent to Asian migration following World War II, music in Australia began to demonstrate three types of engagement with the Asia-Pacific region. Aline Scott-Maxwell describes these as 'imagined' engagement, 'direct' engagement, and 'connective' engagement: 'composers referencing or transforming Asian musics, musical ideas or non-musical materials by means of various processes.'⁶

Connective engagement with Asian music generally falls under two categories: composers of European ancestry who have explored and absorbed Asian musical style, and other composers who may have performed Asian music on authentic instruments and sought to make Asian music a part of their compositional style. Yayoi Uno Everett describes compositional strategies for integrating Asian and Western musical resources in three distinct ways: (1) transference, (2) syncretism, and (3) synthesis.⁷ According to Everett, transference may 'draw on aesthetic principles or formal systems without iconic references to Asian sounds'; syncretism includes 'transplanting East Asian attributes of timbre, articulation, or scale system onto Western instruments ... and combin[ing] musical instruments and/or tuning systems of East Asian and Western musical ensembles'; and synthesis is defined as '[transforming] traditional music systems, form, and timbres into a distinctive synthesis of Western and Asian musical idioms.'⁸

³ Edward T. Cone, *Hearing and Knowing Music: The Unpublished Essays of Edward T. Cone* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 92.

⁴ Jack Body, *Carol to St Stephen* (Wellington: Wai-te-ata Music Press, 1975).

⁵ Edith Rickert, *Ancient English Christmas Carols: 1400-1700* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914), 122.

⁶ Aline Scott-Maxwell, 'Australia and Asia: Tracing Musical Representations, Encounters and Connections,' *Context* 35-36 (2010-2011): 87.

⁷ Yayoi Uno Everett, 'Intercultural Synthesis in Postwar Western Art Music,' Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau, *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 15.

⁸ Everett, 'Intercultural Synthesis,' 16.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, many East Asian composers have immigrated to the USA and achieved prominence by composing Asian-influenced music for Western audiences using Western instruments, or sometimes a combination of Western and Asian instruments.⁹ Such composers include Chou Wen-chung (b. 1923), Tan Dun (b. 1957), Zhou Long (b. 1953), Chen Yi (b. 1953), Chinary Ung (b. 1942), and Bright Sheng (b. 1955). The most important of these composers, Chou Wen-chung, immigrated to the USA in 1946 to study with Nicolas Slonimsky in Boston and Edgard Varèse and Otto Luening in New York. He became a protégé of Varèse and was the first Chinese composer to be recognised in the West.¹⁰ According to Peter Chang, his importance in the development of twentieth-century music is based on his 'compositional approach, which is a successful example of fusing Varèsean ideas of sound as moving masses and organic matter and concepts of serialism and traditional Chinese ideas.'¹¹ Many composers from East Asia who immigrated to the USA after the Cultural Revolution studied with Chou Wen-chung.

An increased visibility on the international musical scene has seen Chinese performers playing traditional instruments and performing in a Western musical context, sometimes with Western instruments such as piano. Virtuoso Chinese instrumentalists such as Liu Fang, Yang Jing (based in Zurich), Min Xiao-fen (New York), Wen Zhao (Toronto), Gao Hong (Minneapolis), and Wu Man—for whom Tan Dun wrote his *pipa* concerto in 1999¹²—perform frequently and are gaining in reputation amongst Western audiences.

Engagement with Asian music has been a feature of the Australian cultural landscape for over 150 years.¹³ Peter Sculthorpe was one of the first Australian composers to be explicit about the influence of non-Western musics—particularly those of Japanese and Balinese cultures—on his work, which amalgamated Asian pitch collections and timbres with Western compositional technique.¹⁴ His works, including the *Sun Music* series, particularly interested Grenfell because of his use of string glissandi and percussive techniques applied to string instruments of the symphony orchestra. For example, Grenfell identified with the way Sculthorpe used specific musical colours inspired by Balinese gamelan music in *Sun Music III* without actually intending to imitate the sound. As Sculthorpe explained:

In the central section of *Sun Music III*, the steady rhythm, the drones, the different kinds of musical punctuation and the florid melody were all suggested by the layered texture of *arja* music [gamelan music that accompanies popular Balinese plays]. I made no attempt to imitate the actual sound. The florid melody has the same freedom as the vocal music of *arja*, avoiding the beat as much as possible.¹⁵

Taking her lead from Sculthorpe's approach, Grenfell treated the Chinese folk songs in a similar fashion: incorporating features of Chinese music, but not necessarily imitating them.

⁹ Except for Chinary Ung and Bright Sheng, names of the Asian composers are presented in their widely-accepted format of family name first, followed by given name.

¹⁰ Peter M. Chang, *Chou Wen-Chung: The Life and Work of a Contemporary Chinese-Born American Composer* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 2.

¹¹ Chang, *Chou Wen-Chung*, 2.

¹² Tannenbaum, 'Tan Dun: "Pipa Concerto"; Takemitsu: "Nostalghia,"' *American Record Guide* 72.1 (2009): 161.

¹³ Scott-Maxwell, 'Australia and Asia,' 77.

¹⁴ Nicholas Vines, 'Australian Music as a Catalyst for Change,' *Resonate*, 1 Mar. 2008, www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/article/australian-music-as-a-catalyst-for-change.

¹⁵ Peter Sculthorpe, *Sun Music* (Sydney: ABC Books, 1999), 101.

Also influential in the domain of Australian engagement with Asian music are several Australian composers of Asian heritage. Melbourne-based composer Chu Wanghua was born in China in 1941 and immigrated to Australia in the late 1980s to pursue advanced studies in composition at the University of Melbourne. Renowned for his piano music and fusion of Eastern folk music with Western styles, he was particularly celebrated in China for his major role in the composition of *The Yellow River Concerto* (1969).¹⁶ Chu's younger compatriot, Julian Yu, was born in 1957 in Beijing, moved to Australia in 1985 and presently teaches at the University of Melbourne. From a younger generation, composer Liza Lim's early works focused on Chinese poetry and ritual culture; her more recent compositions, however, deal with Aboriginal culture, the notion of temporality and its presence as a feature of both the past and the present.¹⁷ Interestingly, these composers appear to eschew a more deliberate Asian influence on their work, perhaps because it is an inherent and 'assumed' part of their compositional armory. A concentrated focus on structure and sound world seems to be a recurring theme, rather than an overtly Asian sound. Is it possible, then, that the structure and sound world of Asian music might also help non-Asian composers to discover an individual voice?

Grenfell's only encounter with Chinese folk music has been through the songs with which she was provided to undertake this project, and through listening to and watching Wei Deng perform on his *pipa*. Being born in South-East Asia, and educated in New Zealand where in the 1990s there was a growing awareness of Asian music, particularly in universities, she has nevertheless always had an awareness of Asian timbres, colours, and contexts. She studied Asian music briefly during her graduate studies in the USA, and found that New Zealand composers who were immersed in Asian music were more influential on her music than Australian composers. Additionally, she undertook some research on the music of the Māori, focusing on the colours and timbres achieved by the *koauau* flute, in preparation for composing her flute concerto *Maui Tikitiki a Taranga* in 1998.

In *Five Songs from the East*, she wished to explore, for the first time, the timbral qualities of a Chinese instrument, and write a new work based on pre-existing sources through recomposition of the unpublished songs, creating a sound world for these specific pieces drawing from her colleagues' expertise and cultural heritage.

Beginning the Project

In 2010, during the initial stage of the project, Shan Deng travelled to China and was granted access to a closed collection of unpublished folk songs at the Chinese Music Research Institute, *Zhongguo yinyue yanjiusuo* in Beijing, which was founded by her grandfather Li Yuanqing. Upon her return to Australia, Deng provided Grenfell with a small collection of songs. This information was collected from various personal sources obtained by Shan Deng and Wei Deng during previous trips to China. The intention of the project was for Grenfell to use the songs as departure points for a new composition.

The Chinese Music Research Institute holds more than one thousand folk songs collected and transcribed into Western cipher notation and staff notation by Chinese musicians, teachers and scholars from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. After the Cultural Revolution,

¹⁶ Vivian Li, 'A Survey of Chu Wanghua's Piano Works (China),' (DMA thesis, University of Houston, 2005), 46–55.

¹⁷ Liza Lim, 'Bio,' <https://lizalimcomposer.wordpress.com>.

Li Yuanqing, the founder and director (1950–1979) of the Institute, identified the completion of three reference works as urgent tasks for Chinese scholars: *Dictionary of Chinese Music* (中国音乐词典), *Complete Works of Chinese Folk Songs* (中国民间歌曲集成) and *Outline of Ancient Chinese Music History* (中国古代音乐史稿).¹⁸

From these closed collections, Shan Deng chose a selection of Chinese folk songs for Grenfell to use in their project. The five folk songs that Grenfell chose were originally collected from Jiangsu Province by Chinese scholars in the 1950s, and printed as mimeographed music scores in the 1960s by the Chinese Music Research Institute.¹⁹ Jiangsu Province is located in the eastern coastal centre of China, near the Yellow Sea, adjacent to Zhejiang Province and Shanghai in the southeast, Anhui Province in the west, and Shandong Province in the north. The five songs are described in detail in Table 1.

The music provided to Grenfell was in Western notation. Since the lyrics were not initially supplied with the songs, they did not influence the composition, but the general mood and ‘topic’ of each song was discussed with Shan Deng before Grenfell commenced work.

During a period of preparation and research prior to the compositional process, Grenfell had to learn how to write for *pipa*. As part of the process, she was also able to develop ideas about her intended sound world for the work and subsequent compositional techniques to incorporate. The most significant factor in Grenfell’s exposure to *pipa* was watching Wei Deng perform for her at his home in Brisbane.²⁰ He described the two primary styles of *pipa* music: martial music (*wuqu*) and lyrical music (*wenqu*).²¹ Demonstrating these two styles in performance, he provided Grenfell with an initial understanding of *pipa* technique. Additionally, through reading his PhD dissertation, Grenfell was able to gradually absorb the basics of sound production and variation, as well as notational idiosyncrasies for producing specific tone colours.

During Wei Deng and Grenfell’s initial discussion about the scope of the project, Deng strongly urged Grenfell to avoid making the works ‘copies’ of Chinese music; rather, he encouraged her to use her own musical language to create unique compositions that would not give the impression of transcribed folk songs, and Grenfell agreed that this was the ideal approach. The pair also discussed right and left hand techniques, variations of pitch and how they could be achieved. Some of these techniques are outlined in Table 2. While working with Wei Deng over a two-day period, Grenfell was able to write some short sample passages and hear them played back, thus enabling her to workshop many of the various techniques and experiment with the timbral and technical possibilities of the *pipa*.

¹⁸ *Dictionary of Chinese Music* (Beijing: Renmin yinyue chubanshe [People’s Music Publishing Co.], 1984); Jiangsu Editorial Board, *Complete Works of Chinese Folk Music* (Beijing: Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 1998); Yang Yinliu, *Outline of Ancient Chinese Music History 1-2* (Beijing: Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 1981).

¹⁹ Cao Anhe, conversation with Wei Deng, Beijing, 1991.

²⁰ For recent English-language sources on the *pipa*, see Wei Deng, ‘Historical and Stylistic Development in the Chinese Four-stringed Lute *Pipa* and in *Pipa* Music from 1800 to 1995: With Particular Reference to “Spring River”’ (PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 1996). See also John Myers, *The Way of the Pipa: Structure and Imagery in Chinese Lute Music* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1992); John Myers, ‘Nanbei Erpai Miben Pipapu Zhenquan: A Critical Study of a Nineteenth-century Handbook for the Chinese *Pipa* Lute’ (PhD thesis, University of Maryland, 1987); T.M.Liu, ‘Development of the Chinese Two-stringed Bowed Lute *Erhu* Following the New Culture Movement (c. 1915-1985)’ (PhD thesis, Kent State University, 1988); J. Stock, ‘A Phoenix Crying at Sunrise,’ *Journal of Chime Newsletter* 3 (1991): 20–31.

²¹ Wei Deng, ‘Historical and Stylistic Development,’ 55.

Table 1. Description and lyrics of folk songs used in *Five Songs from the East*

Name	Description	Lyrics	English translation
Drive Birds Away (赶鸟山歌)	Folk song from Suzhou, sung by an unknown female singer. Transcribed by Cao Anhe into cipher notation without lyrics in 1961.*		
Green Willow (杨柳青)	Folk song from Yangzhou; collector and transcriber unknown. An early version of the song can be seen as a mimeographed music score in the library of the Chinese Music Research Institute.	早啊晨，下啊田，露啊水多娜， 啍啍依啍啍啍点点露水润麦苗啊。 杨柳叶子青啊娜，七搭七呢啍啊 娜，杨柳石子松啊娜，松又松 娜，啍又啍娜，松松么青又青 娜，哥哥杨柳叶子，青啊娜。	In the early morning / Going to the fields Covered in dew / Nourishing the wheat seedlings The willow leaves are green The willow stones are light Light, bouncy, and green Brother, the willow leaves are so green
Plucked Luchai Flower (拔根芦柴花)	Folk song popular in Yangzhou, sung by farmers to ease the heavy work. Earliest recorded version was performed by two singers, Huang Fenyang and Shi Dengying, in Jiangdu during an active period of folk song collection arranged by the Jiangsu Musicians Association in 1952.	叫呀我这么里呀我呀就的来了。 拔根芦柴花花，清香那个玫瑰玉 兰花儿开。蝴蝶那个恋花牵姐那 个看呀，鸳鸯那个戏水娶郎猜。 小小的郎儿哎，月下芙蓉牡丹花 儿开了。	You call me and I come. / Plucked Luchai flower, As fragrant as the blossoming rose and magnolia flowers The butterfly loves the flowers, Sister looks beautiful, The mandarin ducks play in the water, Who will be the bridegroom? / Little lover, hibiscus and peony are flowering in the moonlight
Old Huang Tune (老黄调)	Sung by an unknown female singer. Cao Anhe transcribed the tune into cipher notation without lyrics in 1961. Used either in drama of <i>Xijiu</i> opera, or sung as a folk song. <i>Xijiu</i> opera gradually gained popularity around the city of Wuxi in the early nineteenth century.		
Gaoyou North- west Township (高邮西北乡)	Popular in Gaoyou. Collector and transcriber unknown. An early version of the song can be seen as a mimeographed musical score in the library of the Chinese Music Research Institute. The lyrics consist of three sentences and an additional short sentence; this format is called 'three and a half' by some Chinese scholars.†	我家呀那个住在高邮西北乡 啊， 六里庄上尽东头门前有个塘啊哎 呀喂子， 家里呀有二老还有我的兄长啊， 小日子过得强啊。	My home is in North-western Gaoyou township By a pond before the eastern gate of Six Mile Village At home are my parents and my elder brother We live very well

* Cao Anhe, conversation with Wei Deng, Beijing, 1991.

† Fen Zhiquan, 'Suzhou shanggedde yinyue tese,' *Suzhou keji xueyuan xuebao* 31.5 (2014): 98–102.

Table 2. The use of *pipa* techniques in *Five Songs from the East*

<i>Pipa</i> technique	Use in the composition	Bar
Pulling strings sideways with left hand to bend pitch	'Little Bird' 'Lao Yo West Song'	Bar 15 Bar 73
Harmonics—available on all the notes of the instrument, but requiring time to achieve correct placement	Not specified, but used during improvisatory sections, particularly in 'Blossom' which indicates 'ornamentation ad lib'	
Left hand vibrato and glissandi	'Little Bird'	Bar 40
Left hand chords	'Conversation' 'Lao Yo West Song'	Bar 16 Bar 5
Sul ponticello (right hand)	'Blossom'	
<i>Lun</i> , left hand tremolo	'Little Bird'	Bar 7
<i>Fu</i> , silencing the strings	Used throughout improvisatory sections, discussed in rehearsal ('Lao Yo West Song' percussive opening chords)	
<i>Fo</i> , where the thumb or right hand plucks all four strings from left to right, producing a four-note block chord	'Lao Yo West Song'	Bar 5
<i>Changlun</i> , continuous right hand tremolo	Throughout, e.g. 'Conversation'	Bars 72–4

Recomposing the Folk Songs

The second task, that of selecting which folk songs to recompose, was undertaken over a longer period of time. The order in which the songs were used is shown in Table 3. Melodic and rhythmic features of all the folk song melodies chosen for recomposition are featured in all the movements in *Five Songs from the East*.

Table 3. Order of folk songs as used in *Five Songs from the East*

Grenfell movement titles	Original folksong titles	Characters	Approximate translation
Little Bird	Gan Niao Shan'ge	赶鸟山歌	Driving Birds Away
Tree Song	Yangliu Qing	杨柳青	Green Willow
Blossom	Ba Gen Lu Chai Hua	拔根芦柴花	Plucked Luchai Flower
Conversation	Lao Huang Diao	老簧调	Old Huang Tune
Lao Yo West Song	Gaoyou Xibei Ge	高邮西北歌	Gaoyou North-west Township

Grenfell's compositional method began with taking short fragments of the original folk songs, and keeping aspects of their pitch contours and rhythmic profiles but creating a new melodic idea. In the examples below, extracts from the original melodies are shown first, followed by the recomposition of the fragment, with an explanation of the compositional technique applied to the original melody.

Example 1 shows the opening of 'Driving Birds Away' in its original form, with Example 2 showing the subsequent *pipa* part in 'Little Bird.' The folk song's original dotted rhythm is

elongated in the new composition on the repeated A rather than beginning on G, and the scale pattern is maintained from C to G (bar 11) but extends up to the A rather than dropping down to the D as in bar 2 in the original. The interval of a perfect fourth remains and this interval is present in an extension of the melody starting on A^b (bar 14 of Ex. 2).

Example 1. 'Driving Birds Away,' bb. 1–4



Example 2. 'Little Bird,' *pipa* part, bb. 7–15



A further example of the opening folk melody can be seen at the end of the composition, with the tonal centre moved to E^b. The rise of a major second (B^b to C) and then a descent of a perfect fourth (C to G), and the stepwise movement to F and E^b in bars 98–9 are clearly extracted from Example 1. The scale in bar 100 of Example 3 comes from the second bar of Example 1. Recomposition techniques here show that the original intervallic structure of the melody is reworked with new rhythm, articulation, and key. The players are asked to perform a very short improvisatory moment in the *pipa* part to conclude the piece, and the interval pattern provided in the box takes its range from bars 1–2 of Example 1.

Example 3. 'Little Bird,' *pipa* part, bb. 98–104



In 'Blossom,' the original opening melody of the folk song is presented almost in its original form (compare Ex. 4 with Ex. 5).

Example 4. 'Pulling a Luchai Flower,' bb. 1–6



Example 5. 'Blossom,' opening, *pipa* and piano with plucking inside strings

$\text{♩} = c. 84$
with rubato, expressively, ornamentation ad lib

Pipa

mp

pizz inside piano strings, freely with rubato (not in time with pipa)

Piano

mp

Then, later in 'Blossom,' when the piano enters with flowing arpeggiation, the melody is still detectable in the *pipa* part, taking C as the tonic note, and the upper notes of the right hand piano part: C–D–D–C–A–G (see Ex. 6).

Example 6. 'Blossom,' bb. 43–8

$\text{♩} = c. 84$ *a tempo*
together

Pipa

f *p*

Pno.

f *p*

ped. * *ped.* *

The melody, in close to its original format, returns in the right hand of the piano part at the end, accompanied by the piano introducing a flattened sixth chromatic note into the harmonic material (Ex. 7).

Example 7. 'Blossom,' bb. 85–91

Pipa

mf *pp*

rit.

Pno.

mf *pp*

The movement 'Conversation' is comprised of various motivic ideas that are drawn together in a 'conversational' manner, hence the title. The motives are extracted from the original folk song 'Old Huang Tune' (Ex. 8) and the movement also incorporates a certain amount of improvisation in both piano and *pipa* parts (see Ex. 9). This folk song consists of bars of varied lengths, which was unusual amongst this collection of folk songs. A dotted motive is presented explicitly and is expanded upon while given a timbral treatment consisting of plucking pedal tones inside the piano (the interval of a descending perfect fifth is clearly extracted from the range and intervallic structure of the original melody).

Example 8. 'Old Huang Tune,' b. 11



Example 9. 'Conversation,' b. 1

In Example 11, the opening motive from the folk song (Ex. 10) is given a more metrical recomposition, with 'question and answer' phrases between instruments, referencing the conversational element of the music.

Example 10. 'Old Huang Tune,' bb. 1-2



Example 11. 'Conversation,' bb. 14–17

The final movement, 'Lao Yo West Song,' is very rhythmical and lively. The original folk song is almost percussive (see Ex. 12).

Example 12. 'Lao Yo West Song,' bb. 1–2

The recomposition, however, is very different in melodic concept to the original, treating the opening motif of the original folk song as a secondary melody rather than the primary opening melody. Like the original, this final movement in the set of pieces is also rhythmical and staccato, with a bouncing accompaniment in the piano part. The original key of G Major has been transposed to F Major. There is a great deal of interplay between *pipa* and piano, with continuous 'question and answer' statements throughout while maintaining the rhythmic momentum. A very brief tempo 'pause' occurs before a modulation to A Mixolydian, and then a return to F Major at bar 102, with arpeggiation and the quaver-two-semiquaver rhythm from bar 1 of the original folk melody propelling the music to a bright and virtuosic conclusion.

Example 13. 'Lao Yo West Song,' bb. 14–16

Performance Practice and Collaboration

As part of the process of recomposition, *Five Songs from the East* incorporates not only a great deal of rhythmic material derived from the original folk songs, but also the concept of improvisation that Grenfell discovered was a typical part of traditional solo *pipa* music. This improvisatory practice was part of Wei Deng's Chinese conservatorium training. However, requesting a Western classically-trained musician to improvise proved to be one of the performance challenges in this new work.

Improvisation was an uncommon Western compositional technique in the first half of the twentieth century in classical music. As Bruno Nettl notes, 'In 1938 Ernst Ferand published what continues to be the only large, scholarly book on the subject of musical improvisation' within Western art music.²² After the 1950s, composers like John Cage reintroduced the concept but it is still not a very common practice among classical musicians. Traditional Chinese music was commonly performed formally in concert houses, or informally on the streets or tea houses, with performers sometimes busking for an audience. As Jonathan Stock explains:

In such a context ... this encouraged the musician to use a stock of freely compatible and interchangeable phrases and sections, providing opportunities for the music to be spun out whilst a crowd was still being attracted, its mood altered rapidly to maintain audience interest and the performance to be curtailed effectively at short notice once interest finally waned.²³

Wei Deng found improvising easy and natural, having been trained in the Chinese oral tradition, as well as learning traditional Chinese repertoire. He showed Grenfell some of his music scores, which contained minimal information, most commonly just the notes with no rhythmic, dynamic or phrasing indications. He described his own education in Chinese traditional music thus: 'Students learn by listening and copying their teachers. A master player's creative role is equal to or greater than that of the composer, placing huge emphasis on technical virtuosity and the ability to improvise.'²⁴ Reflecting on this tradition, he has stated, 'Many players learned a similar musical work in very different ways, and no one played a musical work in exactly the same way during one's study, performing and teaching.'²⁵ Many of the traditional Chinese repertoire pieces were fully notated, but they were at times so virtuosic that they appeared improvisatory.

²² Bruno Nettl, 'Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach,' *The Musical Quarterly* 60.1 (1974): 1.

²³ Jonathan Stock, 'Three "Erhu" Pieces by Abing: An Analysis of Improvisational Processes in Chinese Traditional Instrumental Music,' *Asian Music* 25.1-2 (1994): 147.

²⁴ Wei Deng, conversation with the author, 2010.

²⁵ Wei Deng, 'Historical and Stylistic Development,' 297.

Five Songs from the East includes many examples of improvisation. The first is bars 44 to 54 of 'Conversation' (see Ex. 9). The score is marked 'ad lib freely until pause.' This was a challenging concept for Shan Deng, who is not trained in traditional Chinese performance, but in Western classical piano technique, with a high degree of virtuosity focusing on the canon of Western piano music. After many attempts, her approach to the section was to recreate the sound of another Chinese instrument, the *guzheng* (a twenty-one-stringed zither), which has a harp-like glissando and arpeggio effect. The second challenge was to bring the duo back together after a period of five or ten seconds following the improvised section. Both players used aural cues in order to end together on a harmonically coherent tone. This process took many rehearsals and live performance experiences to bring together.

The second example is from bars 1–34 of 'Blossom' (see Ex. 5). The score is marked: 'with rubato, expressively, ornamentation ad lib' for the *pipa*, and 'pizz. inside piano strings, freely with rubato (not in time with pipa)' for the piano. The *pipa* has the melodic line and Wei Deng was able to add slides, plucking, harmonics and other improvisatory techniques to enhance the expression. By instructing the piano player to pluck the counter melody inside the piano, Grenfell wanted to create the tonal effect of two *pipas* playing together, yet remaining rhythmically independent. The performers experimented with various improvisations to obtain the effect of not playing in time with one another but more often than not, the two parts ended up together. Implied improvisation was also used in sections of unmeasured notation, for example in 'Tree Song' (bars 1–12), 'Conversation' (bars 1–6) and 'Blossom' (bars 1–34). The unmeasured notation primarily gave the performer freedom with rhythm, but also with ornamentation and phrasing.

Rhythm with a regular pattern and strong pulse is one of the basic building blocks of Western music. When rubato is used, it has very specific stylistic implications that are widely understood and shared by practising musicians. In Chinese music, works are performed with great rhythmic freedom and improvisation. As Wei Deng notes:

Unmeasured phrases are also referred to as *houpijin* (猴皮筋) by Chinese players. The term *houpijin* can be translated to 'rubber band' in English. An unmeasured phrase with rapid tempo changes is analogous to a rubber band being pulled and loosened frequently: played flexibly, with rubato, the time varied for effect or expression.²⁶

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century, when Chinese music began to be influenced by Western art music initially through revolutionary songs of the 'school song' type from 1911,²⁷ that measured rhythm became a more dominant element in Chinese performance and composition.

'Little Bird,' the first movement in *Five Songs from the East*, has irregular and continuous accompaniment figures in the piano part where the strong beat falls on different notes of the pattern. In contrast, the *pipa* melody has rests and syncopations and is more sparse than the piano part. This created quite a challenge in putting the two parts together. Wei Deng wanted more freedom and rubato, but this did not fit with the strong beat of the piano part. Metronome practice proved useful and eventually the performers found enough aural cues to feel the piece together.

Another challenge with performing and recording this collection of pieces involves the

²⁶ Wei Deng, 'Historical and Stylistic Development,' 305.

²⁷ Jingzhi Liu, *A Critical History of New Music in China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010), 77.

balance between piano and *pipa* in terms of volume, dynamics and tone colour. The *pipa* is a quiet instrument with subtle dynamic contrasts, similar to a guitar. Although the modern *pipa* has steel strings (instead of silk) and modern-day performers use false fingernails (which are stronger than natural ones), the piano is a massive instrument with a strong projection that can easily overwhelm the *pipa*. Furthermore, the piano's timbre envelops the *pipa*'s more delicate texture, especially when the two instruments play in the same register.

As discussed above, Wei Deng and Grenfell were able to collaborate in person at the beginning of the project. As each movement was completed, Shan Deng and Wei Deng learnt their parts independently. However, once the entire work was completed, it was rehearsed in Brisbane without the presence of the composer, and questions were noted for the composer upon Shan Deng's return to Hobart, where she and Grenfell spent time working on interpretation and issues of tempo and timbre, and playing recordings of the Brisbane rehearsals. By the time the premiere date approached, the performers had had many opportunities to communicate with the composer, who was then present in final rehearsals before the work's premiere and recording in Hobart (Fig. 1). This arrangement worked well because much of the rehearsal process involved working on ensemble and on the performers' approaches to improvisation, for which the composer did not need to be present.

Figure 1. Portrait of Shan Deng and Wei Deng preparing for the premiere; photograph by Mark Cowles (reproduced with permission).



The balance of dynamics was most difficult in 'Lao Yo West Song,' the final movement. It is the climax of the work where both instruments share the drive and crescendo to the end. Duo Deng had to find the right balance between sonic equilibrium and emotional expression.

The piano needed to maintain a sense of excitement through the use of dynamics without overpowering the *pipa*. Some of the pianistic techniques used were focused finger tips and short articulations to create a projected but thinner sound to equalise the two instruments.

The process of learning, rehearsing and performing Grenfell's *Five Songs from the East* helped Duo Deng gain insights into the differences between performance practices of Western and Chinese music. Western musical practice is traditionally centred on learning every note, phrase marking and articulation in detail, and adding expression and interpretation without altering the score. The performers had to strike an amenable balance between the two different approaches. The work itself presented the performers with unique challenges due to its fusion of Western and Chinese influences. Through the investigation of improvisation, rhythm and balance, Duo Deng was able to create new performance practices that complemented the composition.

Conclusion

Recomposing unpublished Chinese folk songs proved to be a highly rewarding project in many ways. The performers and composer were able to investigate a small closed collection of unpublished music from the Chinese Music Research Institute, and examine it as a musical basis for a new composition. The composer was introduced not only to the folk songs, but also to ways of composing for a non-Western instrument. Creating musical ideas for such an instrument was a major learning experience that developed her sense of cross-cultural sound possibilities when combining a Chinese instrument with a Western instrument. The process also taught her how to explore new timbres and techniques to create a unique sound world in which to experiment with rare musical sources. Additionally, it provided a rich canvas on which to exercise the compositional techniques involved in the concept of musical recomposition, which continues to interest the composer, further developing her compositional craft.

The creation of a new work for *pipa* and piano has added to the sparse catalogue of compositions for this combination of instruments, contributing a large multi-movement piece that is *not* a folk song arrangement or transcription. This is clearly of benefit to the growing number of *pipa* players resident in Western countries. The collaboration between Duo Deng and Grenfell provided the performers with the opportunity to work on a composition that was a unique experience for both of them. In learning the new work, they were able to explore the techniques and ensemble challenges posed by the piece, and work on timbral nuances in a way that other repertoire (such as arrangements of Chinese folk songs for *pipa* and piano) does not always allow. The collaboration of pianist and *pipa* player also sparked a series of performance opportunities and a CD release, generating an additional contribution to recorded Australian music. *Five Songs from the East* has made an important contribution to the repertoire of Australian composition enriched by Chinese influences.

About the Authors

Composer Maria Grenfell studied at the Eastman School of Music and the University of Southern California. She has had works commissioned by most Australian and New Zealand orchestras, and her chamber music has been performed internationally. She is Head of the Conservatorium of Music at the University of Tasmania in Hobart.

Winner of the Sydney International Piano Competition's Best Australian Pianist Prize, Shan Deng has been Lecturer in piano and co-ordinator of keyboard at the University of Tasmania since 2001. She is a Churchill and Fulbright fellow and winner of the Australian Big Ben Award for outstanding Chinese Youth.