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Why do I compose? Music is a way for me to express feelings as well as a way to express concrete thoughts, like telling a story with sound. These are the two opposites of the spectrum. One is more spontaneous while the other requires more logic in organizational skills. One helps the other to achieve the maximum result. When they meet, the outcome is wonderful. Writing music is a very straightforward impulse for me and I cannot resist it.

I get excited when I write, although it's a constant struggle -- one keeps looking for a way to write better and hopes it will get easier. I suspect that when Stravinsky went neo-classical, he found a new way to write. If he had pursued the same route as *The Rite of Spring*, a truly original masterpiece, he probably would not have produced so many works. Unfortunately in my case, it only gets harder so it's very frustrating. But I'm also happy that I can do that and make a living.

The normal process for me is this: I think about the piece while taking walks. I start to hear sounds and I process them. I pick the music that excites me. This could be an interesting beginning of a piece, or a middle section, or an ending. Then I take more walks and hear more. Each time, in repeated hearings, I hear more details. Finally I figure everything out at the piano, note by note. I usually have a general shape before I sit down at the piano. That doesn't mean I won't change it, or make a detour. But I feel that having a map at least gives me a sense of where the work is going. However, I also have done the other way around when I had no premeditated route at all. That could also be an stimulating experience.

Sometimes I dream of the music. I don't think that's unusual -- a lot of composers do. Dreams sometimes help. It often happens that if I have a block, and I'm struggling, I go to bed and dream of the solution. I get excited, wake up, and write it down. Then when I look at it the next day, it is not usable. This has happened to me many times.

But dreaming can be helpful, too. I have just finished a four-movement work for the Seattle Symphony, entitled *China Dreams*. The title came because of a dream: I had finished the first three movements and I had an idea for the last movement, which is always the most difficult one since it has to "gel" the rest of the movements structurally.

I wasn't intensely thinking about it -- I was sort of relaxed. Then one night I had a dream in which I was at the first orchestral reading of this work. I didn't recognize the conductor and the orchestra, but for some reason I knew I was following the score of the fourth movement, in which all the materials that I had used in the previous movements were put together nicely. "A great idea", I thought. After for about five minutes, in the dream, the orchestra had to stop, because there were too many mistakes in the reading. I woke up and remembered how the music looked on the score -- an amazing experience! I

wrote down on a pad what I heard, in words and in notes, whatever happened to come out. I went back to sleep, thinking, "Tomorrow it's going to be like those other times, when nothing will be good." I looked at it the first thing in the morning and it still was exciting. The first five minutes of the movement are more or less what I heard in the dream.

Haydn prayed every day to get inspiration. And I do, too. I often think writing music is like having, say, an antiques shop. You have to keep the shop open everyday. Some days nobody comes but you still have to be there. Once in a while, somebody comes in and purchases a precious object for a large amount of money. If you are not there that day, you will not make the sale. It's very important that mentally you have to be ready to receive when the inspiration comes. Shostakovich said once that you have to write everyday, not so much to finish the piece, or to get to the end of the section, but to know where you are. Thus when you come back to it the next day, you can pick up easily.

How I came to be a composer and musician is a very odd story. It came out of the political circumstance in China, where I grew up during the Cultural Revolution [1966-1976]. During that time there was no high school or college, because one of Mao's missions was to demolish the education system and he believed that people knew more than he wanted them to -- so he just cut down the education level. The highest education during the Cultural Revolution on the surface was junior high, but he further devalued it to the fourth grade.

A problem arose when all these young people graduated from junior high at age fifteen and had nothing to do, a potential social problem. Moreover, in communist theory, in a socialist country the government is supposed to provide jobs so nobody will be unemployed. But there was no further education and the economy was poor because nobody was producing anything. To solve the problem, Mao sent every young student out to be farmers, to be "re-educated" by the peasants. So we all went to the countryside.

Everybody had to go -- it was mandatory. The only people who could get out of this were those who had some talent in performing arts, because Madame Mao, who wanted some credit for herself, was suddenly running the show. She gave more state funding to arts companies and encouraged them to bring in young people. Fortunately, I could play the piano, and I thought, this beats being a farmer!

I came from a traditional intellectual family that normally is against the idea of being in the music business -- they view music as part of "the show-biz". But under the special circumstance my father conceded.

I was sent to a remote province called Qing Hai on the Tibetan boarder and I was mostly a performer -- started as a pianist and percussionist and later conducted. After a while I began to arrange music. Retrospectively, there were two elements came out from that period which became very helpful to my later development.

Shortly after I arrived in Qing Hai, I realized that I could not obtain an adequate music education as an instrumentalist there. I was the best pianist in

the province, and I was only fifteen. There was no one to teach me. So I became very used to being self-taught. I would watch and listen to other people when I visited other cities, and learned to grasp quickly whatever they were doing that might be helpful to me as a musician. This becomes a very good habit. One is always one's own best teacher.

The other wonderful experience was with the folk music. The province was in a very remote area with a special and beautiful type of music. I thought, "I will study this in stead." I started studying it on the side without knowing why, and without realizing that one day it would be a great resource of my inspiration. I was not thinking about being a composer, although I was sort of playing with the idea all the time.

I was in Qing Hai for seven years, almost to the age I was supposed to be graduating from college. Then the government changed and I took the admission's test offered by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the oldest music school in China. I auditioned for the composition department because I was tempted, as every instrumentalist is, at one time or other, to try either composing or conducting.

When I left China in 1982, after graduating from the Shanghai Conservatory, I thought I had a pretty good education in Western classical music, and that all I needed was 20th century technique to be well off. In my first two years in New York, I learned the basics of many techniques of the 20th century. I also realized that I could write in any style. But for a while I got stuck. I could not express freely with the styles I was writing -- I was not writing the way I wanted.

During those first two years I went to a great number of new music concerts, and many times I found myself walking out unsatisfied. I soon realized I would learn a lot more from a performance of Brahms or Beethoven. After meeting Bernstein at Tanglewood in 1985, I attended all his rehearsals I could. At the time he was recording the second cycle of Mahler symphonies. And I was so fortunate that he was rehearsing a great deal in New York City!

I enjoy working with great musicians because I learn endlessly from them. In the past six years, I've had three years in residence with a major opera house [Lyric Opera of Chicago] and three years with a major orchestra [Seattle Symphony]. For me, going to the rehearsals is like going to the kitchen to see how the chef make the dish I am fond of, whereas going to a concert is like to taste the dish.

So you learn from attending rehearsals and concerts of master's works. When the performance is great, you forget about the performer and you get into the music. When the performance is very good but is not at the highest level, you hear the performance, not the music. And then, when the performance is not so great, you hear the music again!

An important part of what I understand about composing comes from studying with Leonard Bernstein for five years. He had a special way of approaching things as a teacher. He made things easier to understand. He

made you believe that everything he was doing, you could do, too. You realize, yeah, I can do it, and you do! And when you keep working like that you don't realize how much you improve. I regret that I didn't know him earlier. But he set me up with a way of thinking in music composition that benefits every minute of my life.

As I mentioned earlier, in music composition, you can't rely completely on your intuitive spontaneity, and you can't rely only on logic, either. You need to keep a balance. Bernstein kept a very good balance between the extreme levels of both. He was also a well-rounded musician -- pianist, composer, conductor-- and it didn't make any difference whether he was playing or conducting or writing music. His musicianship was the same for all.

When he passed away, the New York Times asked me, what part of Bernstein is the biggest loss for us -- the conductor? I believe the biggest loss for the music world is that we lost a great composer and a great conductor in one person. There are few of them around. The last one we had was Mahler. As a matter of fact Bernstein himself said to me once that the reason that he was a good conductor was because he was first a good composer. Now he is gone and the world appreciates him as a composer more and more.

My break in composition happened gradually when I started to understand the insights of the masterpieces of tonal music. Music compositional styles may change through time, but most of the human feelings remains unchanged. So whether it is tonal or atonal, Asian or Western, the most important elements in music continues to be the same -- the means to express human expressions and emotions freely in music.

Compositionally, all the great composers from Bach to Bartok are my models. I study with them by analyzing their works, and when I write I am conscious of how they thought of music. Sometimes the weight of their achievements makes me feel inferior and miserable! It's a lot easier to think that we should forget about tradition. But you can't erase the history of music, which is one of the greatest human treasures.

I tell my students to study Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler -- these great composers often have answers to our questions in their scores -- we just need to find them. So they can study with the masters through my introduction. Every time I get stuck with a work, I put on a Mahler symphony -- any Mahler -- and I usually get an answer somehow. Of course taking a walk is very useful, too.

Talent becomes something only when you work very hard. It could mean nothing. Talent and individual voice are important, and so is technique. Many young composers ignore the need for technique. They think having an individual voice is *all* you need to be a great composer. I've seen people who really have both talent and an individual voice, but have never gone beyond that.

I realized this when I started teaching. Sometimes a student would ignore the technical part of it and think it's irrelevant. They see examples of composers who became famous even though they avoided these aspects. And they think they can do that, too. But any interesting musical composition always has great

many good surprises. And we have a great repertoire before us. The Chinese have a saying, "You will know which is better when you compare them." It's a bad translation, but I think there is something meaningful here.

I used to doubt whether I have any talent, or if I'm in the right profession. I still have doubt, but it's different. At least now, if a work is good, I know it in myself. Doubt can be positive if you use it positively, especially for work in progress.

It helps when people tell you they like your music, and they play your music beautifully. But success is really more within yourself. If a performance of my work is adequate and I like the work myself, then I'm really happy. And in a way I care less what the review says. However, if the work is not that good, but I receive a good reception, I would still not be content. The constant question is, "Did I do my best?"

I revise constantly. Mahler used to say that ideally, he would like all of his symphonies to be re-published in every five years. That means he was revising all the time. Bernstein at the end of his life was still revising his early works, like, *West Side Story*. Now I have learned to let it go more often at a certain point.

There are three categories for my works. The first category is, How Could I Have Written This Piece? The second is, This Piece Is Not Bad -- it has some good ideas in it, but because of a shortage of talent I didn't pull it off so well. And then there are the Pieces I Truly, Passionately Love. I try to abandon the first category. But if I only keep the third one, there would be only a few works left.

I still get a lot of inspiration by going to concerts, but I also like to be isolated, at the time I choose. Again, to be productive, the shop needs to be open 24 hours. I like to have the freedom to work whenever I like. I also need access to listen to music. If I'm isolated in the woods for three months, I need a lot of CDs and a piano. But when I'm actually writing, I need completely quiet surroundings to work effectively.

My perfect day would be to get up early in the morning, work the whole day and going to a concert in the evening. Although it doesn't always work out that way.

A stable mood is good for work, but sometimes very sad or happy condition of the mind also helps to write music. One summer when I was in Maine I was misdiagnosed lymphoma. For a few days I thought I only had a few months to live.

Before this, I had read stories about writers or composers who were terminally ill and worked desperately to finish their last works before they died. And I thought, If that were me, I'd travel all over with the time I had left. But as I waited for my correct diagnosis (it turned out I was OK) I suddenly realized that maybe it is not so much that these people wanted to finish the work, but that working helped them forget that they were dying, a very powerful and

overwhelming thought which does not go away. I worked very well for these few days.

Presently my biggest challenge in writing is the direction I am taking in fusing Asian and Western cultures -- a very old problem of cultural identity but also always very new.

Over the years I have grappled with this question: what defines cultural identity? The land you grew up in? The musical language you speak? Or your current nationality? Deep inside, I have never felt anything but Chinese and no matter what I do, people consider me Chinese because of my cultural background and the fact my music has a very strong Asian influence. Half of me -- maybe the whole of me -- truly appreciates the Western culture. I have lived in the United States since my mid-20s. The other "whole" of me is an authentic, idiomatic Chinese who grew up in China and whose outlook was formed there, in school and while working in Qing Hai Province and in Tibet. I understand how the Chinese mind thinks. So I am a mixture -- why shouldn't my music reflect that. People acknowledge "artistic license"; I embrace "cultural license" -- the right to reflect my appreciation and understanding of both cultures in my work.

Of course, the easiest way is to sacrifice a bit of both sides and come up with a "Chinoiserie". But that is like mixing the best beer with the best wine. I am not sure about the result.

I mentioned Bartok as one my models, especially the way he fuses East European folk music with "the high cultured" Germanic musical traditions. Using folk or secular elements in a composition started at the beginning of Western history. But what makes Bartok's music great is that he managed to *keep* the primitiveness and savageness of these folk elements as well as the "refined" quality in the classical tradition. The result enriches both. So the listener realizes that both are *equally* great, one doesn't borrow from the other.

And that is not easy to do. One must understand both sides in great profundity and then when these two seemingly opposites meet at their most original end, a true transformation occurs.

This is the very goal I am striving to achieve. But I think less and less about whether some element I am using is Chinese or Western. I write whatever excites me while continuing to study both cultures, hoping that Western audiences don't feel they need to understand Chinese music in order to appreciate me, and Chinese audiences that they need to understand Western music.

When I was small, I was told a story about a garden of treasure with a secret entrance. So everyone searched and searched for this garden, until, after a very long time, the door finally opened itself and there is no treasure in the garden! But the experience of search has taught people lessons about life. I like this story because writing music is like to search for the garden of treasure. In the end, maybe the purpose for the search is search itself, through which we learn about composing.

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