

If any good can be said to have come from China's decade-long campaign of terror euphemistically known as the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), it was in its introduction of an entire generation of Chinese to their own people. Though the rise in primary schooling and the enforced "relocation" of the educated classes to the countryside hardly compensates for the violence both actual and metaphorical done to the rest of society, at least on one level Chairman Mao's campaign succeeded: For once, the shared experiences of that generation truly embraced the full diversity of China's expansive culture. Among the composers of the "Class of '78"—the first students admitted to China's newly reopened conservatories—there is perhaps only a single unifying principle. Whether these composers remained in China or relocated to the West, they have wholly rejected the concept of an "international" style. Theirs is a modernism inconceivable without a distinct point of origin.

Much like Chinese calligraphy, the lives of American-based composers such as Chen Yi, Tan Dun, Zhou Long, and Bright Sheng have followed the same broad strokes. Each was uprooted from an urban childhood and shipped to a far-flung region of the country. Each was awakened by the possibilities of music at conservatory just as China itself was coming to terms with its own recent past. And each came to America in the mid-1980s, ostensibly studying at Columbia University with professor Chou Wen-chung but later discovering a Western compositional world increasingly awakened to a frame of reference outside itself.

But much as calligraphy is distinguished by a personal flourish, each of these artists has developed a notably distinct voice owing in large part to the particular details of their upbringing. Chen Yi was born in 1953, the middle child of two medical doctors in Guangzhou, a southern city rich in regional culture as well as an active port with a rare history of exchange with the West. Her musical studies began at age three on the violin and piano, continuing for another twelve years until her education was brutally interrupted, with each family member being sent to a different region. In the countryside, in between bouts of backbreaking labor, the young violinist found herself entertaining peasants and soldiers by spicing revolutionary songs (the only music still allowed) with Paganini-like embellishments.

"It was during that period," she recalls, "that I found my roots, my motherland, and really grew to appreciate the simple people on Earth. They spoke my native language, which I soon discovered was directly connected to Chinese music. It made me listen to the Western musical language I had studied in an entirely different way." Two years later, when she was sent back home to Guangzhou at age seventeen as concertmistress of a local Peking Opera troupe, this Western-trained violinist became most acutely aware of China's national art form, where the boundaries between composer and performer often blur.

At China's Central Conservatory of Music, where Chen was among two hundred students initially accepted, she finally had to choose between violin and composition. Picking the latter, she studied an extensive range of Western music, primarily with Wu Zuqiang and visiting professor Alexander Goehr. Even then, however, she was still immersed in her native culture. Chinese music, both instrumental and vocal, was an inherent part of the curriculum, as were regular research trips in the manner of Bartók to study and collect folk materials from various regions. Her first such experience was a twenty-day trip to Guangxi in the southwest, near the border of Vietnam. There, she still recalls, her group walked into the mountains to hear village singing, nearly thirty miles from the nearest bus stop.

Shades of those experiences are still audible in *Sound of the Five* (1998), where the distinctive sounds of Chinese instruments are filtered through a Western post-tonal sensibility and scored for string quartet with additional cello. “At some level, all the instruments of the world divide into wind, percussion, or strings, either bowed or plucked,” the composer says. “When I write a piece like this for Western instruments, my first goal is to find the similarities. The *erhu*, for example, is just a vertical violin. Once you establish that, you create techniques where one instrument can imitate another.” That said, each of the movements in *Sound of the Five* requires bridging significant gaps in culture as well as in musical style.

“Lusheng Ensemble” refers to the bamboo mouth organ typical of the Miao and Dong ethnicities in China’s southwest. Ranging in size from less than twelve inches to more than twelve feet, the *lusheng* is nearly always played in groups as a communal village activity. Chen’s incarnation largely diffuses the stylistic reliance on rhythm (performers generally swing their instruments from side to side while playing), focusing instead on the genre’s modal motivic writing and layered texture, where a leading voice plays atop bagpipe-like drones. “Echoes of the Set Bells” re-creates the ritual sounds of Tang Dynasty *bianzhong* through pizzicati and harmonics. “Romance of Hsiao and Ch’in” imitates the sound of a vertical flute (the *hsiao*, or *xiao* in pinyin Romanization) with the seven-string zither (the *ch’in*, or *qin*), a musical combination that Chinese literati have long held as a model of balance between sonority and timbre. Pitch and tone color finally take a back seat in “Flower Drums in Dance” which, true to its title, focuses primarily on rhythm as the steady pulse brings the piece barreling to a close. *Sound of the Five* was originally commissioned by the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester for the cellist Mimi Hwang and the Ying Quartet through the generosity of Dr. Henry Hwang and the Far East National Bank of Los Angeles.

Chen’s personal affinity for the violin comes to the fore most prominently in *YangKo* (2000/2004), originally the second movement of her *Chinese Folk Dance Suite* for violin and orchestra. Based on a folk dance form in the northeastern provinces where the lead performer alternates between reciting and singing, *YangKo* features a solo violinist alternating between virtuosic and lyrical playing, suggesting (in the composer’s words) “a beautiful country girl singing a sweet melody.” Two percussionists, in addition to playing a range of cymbals, gongs, and temple blocks, recite non-pitched syllables imitating the sounds of the drums, creating a shifting rhythmic underpinning as if marching in a remote background. Originally commissioned in its orchestral form by the Koussevitsky Foundation and premiered by Terrie Baune and the Women’s Philharmonic, *YangKo* was revised as a chamber piece under the auspices of the Philadelphia Music Project and premiered at the Network for New Music’s dance program in 2005.

Another composer entirely is at work in *Sprout* (1982/1986), the earliest piece in this collection and the only work whose roots lie solely in China. Originating as a double canon written as a homework assignment at the Central Conservatory, the material first resurfaced in a revised form as the second movement of Chen’s first string quartet, which won a prize in a conservatory-wide competition. Chen herself usually cites her musical “coming of age” with *Duo Ye*, a solo piano piece which won the 1985 China National Composition Competition, and *Duo Ye* No. 2, an orchestral reworking two years later that became her ticket to study in America. She likens both versions to “speaking in Chinese, but writing in a Western idiom,” but much the same can be said of *Sprout*, a 1986 revision of the same material—this time with an added double-bass line—where the germ of the mature composer is everywhere apparent. Though she cites her inspiration as the *qin* (the favorite instrument of the literati), Chen virtually ignores any references to the *qin*’s plucking techniques, focusing instead on establishing the underlying mood of ancient *qin* music. Using pitch material—though no actual melodies—from classical repertory, she spins an expansive, abstract sonority that remains hauntingly poetic, fully imbued with the energy of a composer newly confident of her own creative voice.

From there we turn to *Burning* (2002), a piece with little if any reference to China. If after living for fifteen years in the United States, accepting an endowed professorship of composition at the University of Missouri, and receiving the Charles Ives Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters granting her the luxury of composing full time for three years, Chen still harbored any doubts about being fully accepted in her adopted homeland, those qualms were dashed in the aftermath of 9/11, when she received four separate commissions the week of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York. Of those four pieces, *Burning* for string quartet became the most immediate.

Commissioned by the Elements Quartet and premiered by that ensemble in 2003 at New York's Merkin Concert Hall, *Burning* explodes in a tortured outpour worthy of Shostakovich and Penderecki at their most anguished. Thick chordal textures saw away at the nerves until, after about three minutes, the voices come together and drift upwardly away. Chen returned to the same general theme and emotional state on a bigger canvas in *Tu* (Chinese for "burning" or "fiery") for the Women's Philharmonic and the American Composers Orchestra, which she dedicated to the New York firefighters who lost their lives in the attacks (a theme she continued in miniature with *Know You How Many Petals Falling*, a short mixed choral setting of a Tang Dynasty poem on fallen heroes for the 6th World Symposium of Choral Music in St Paul, Minnesota). She later borrowed not only the same emotional state but also some of the actual musical material from *Burning* in a piece for a "Pierrot" instrumentation of flute, violin, clarinet, cello, and piano entitled . . . *as like a raging fire* . . . for Philadelphia's Network for New Music, commissioned with funds from Meet the Composer. The difference in sonorities, textures, and playing techniques of the string quartet and Pierrot ensemble resulted in substantially different works, the composer maintains. "Each of these pieces is on different levels of depth, but *Burning* is the piece where I initially tried to get all my feelings out," she says. "It was the most direct emotional response to the tragedy."

*Tibetan Tunes* for violin, cello, and piano (2007) harks back to Chen's days at Central Conservatory, where folk songs were a key part of musical education. "During the Cultural Revolution, many of these songs were still around, but they had been turned into revolutionary songs with lyrics about Chairman Mao," she says. "By the time we were at conservatory, we could go back to some of our original texts." Unlike *Sound of the Five*, or even *YangKo*, neither of which quotes literally from folk material, *Tibetan Tunes* is inspired by actual tunes. The first movement, "Du Mu," is named for a goddess, captured here in a particularly serene mood. "Dui Xie" is the Chinese term both for a type of Tibetan folk dance and the music that accompanies it, generally played by an ensemble consisting of a bamboo flute, a plucked six-string lute called the *dramyen* (or *zhamunie* in Chinese), and a Tibetan bowed fiddle comparable to the Chinese *erhu*. The melodic materials are based on the Tibetan folk song "Amaliehue." *Tibetan Tunes* was commissioned by the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition at Brigham Young University, and premiered by the New Pacific Trio at the Conservatory of Music at the University of the Pacific in January 2007.

Finally, we arrive at *Happy Rain on a Spring Night* (2004), a piece for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano which has been described variously as "nocturnal musical painting," "Chinese impressionism," and "the musical equivalent of magical realism." Although Chen often merely evokes the mood of her poetic sources, *Happy Rain* is in fact a highly compressed line-by-line musical reflection of the Tang Dynasty poet Tu Fu's poem of the same title. Chen Yi offers her own translation from the original Chinese:

Happy rain comes in time  
When spring is in its prime  
With night breeze it will fall  
And quietly moisten all  
Clouds darken wild roads  
Light brightens a little boat  
Saturated at dawn  
With flowers blooming the town

The first 41 measures (up to 2:10 on the track counter) represent the first four lines of the poem, with woodwinds responding to the rustling of fast-moving notes on muted string triplets, decorated by metallic-sounding high piano gestures. Measures 42 to 87 (ending at 4:53) reflect the next two lines, as breathy, mysterious key slaps on the flute create a dialogue with other instruments and cello glissandi “recite” the poem following the melodic contours of the tones of spoken Mandarin. From there, the “bloom” in the final two lines opens as a toccata led by the piano, which paints an increasingly vivid scene right up to the end of the piece. *Happy Rain on a Spring Night* was commissioned in 2002 by Music from Copland House, with public funds from the Composer Commissions program of the New York State Council on the Arts. It was premiered by the Music from Copland House ensemble in 2004 at Merkin Concert Hall.

—Ken Smith

*Ken Smith divides his time between New York, where he’s a writer and critic for Gramophone magazine, and Hong Kong where he’s the Asian performing arts critic for the Financial Times.*

Recipient of the prestigious Charles Ives Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, **Chen Yi** has served as a Distinguished Professor in Music Composition at the Conservatory of the University of Missouri-Kansas City since 1998. Born in 1953 in Guangzhou, China, Ms. Chen has received music degrees from the Beijing Central Conservatory and Columbia University in the City of New York (DMA). Ms. Chen’s major composition teachers included Professors Chou Wen-chung, Mario Davidovsky, Wu Zu-qiang, and Alexander Goehr.

Ms. Chen has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the Lieberson Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has received major commissions from the Koussevitzky, Fromm, Ford, Roche, and Rockefeller foundations, Meet The Composer, Chamber Music America, the BBC Proms, the China National Center for the Performing Arts, the Lincoln Center Festival, and Carnegie Hall. Commissioning ensembles and soloists include the Cleveland Orchestra, Mira Wang and the Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden, the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, the Seattle Symphony, Yo-Yo Ma and the Pacific Symphony, Evelyn Glennie and the Singapore Symphony, the Women’s Philharmonic, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

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*Momentum*. Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Lan Shui, conductor. Bis 1352.

*The Music of Chen Yi*. Bay Area Women's Philharmonic, Chanticleer, JoAnn Falletta, conductor. New Albion Records NA 090.

*Sparkle*. New Music Consort, Music from China, Manhattan String Quartet, New York New Music Ensemble. New World/CRI NWCR 804.

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CHEN YI (b. 1953)  
*SOUND OF THE FIVE*

THIRD ANGLE NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE  
RON BLESSINGER, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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*Sound of the Five* (1998) 17:35

1. Lusheng Ensemble 4:19

2. Echoes of the Set Bells 3:21

3. Romance of Hsiao and Ch'in 3:23

4. Flower Drums in Dance 6:15

Hamilton Cheifetz, solo cello; Ron Blessinger, violin; Peter Frajola, violin; Brian Quincey, viola;  
Adam Esbensen, cello

5. *Yangko* (2000/2004) 4:37

Ron Blessinger, violin; Neil DePonte, percussion; Gordon Rencher, percussion

6. *Sprout* (1982/1986) 7:02

Ron Blessinger, violin; Greg Ewer, violin; Brian Quincey, viola; Hamilton Cheifetz, cello

7. *Burning* (2002) 3:23

Ron Blessinger, violin; Greg Ewer, violin; Brian Quincey, viola; Hamilton Cheifetz, cello

*Tibetan Tunes* (2007) 10:41

8. Du Mu 4:55

9. Dui Xie 5:46

Ron Blessinger, violin; Hamilton Cheifetz, cello; Susan Smith, piano

10. *Happy Rain on a Spring Night* (2004) 11:00

Ron Blessinger, violin; Hamilton Cheifetz, cello; Todd Kuhns, clarinet; Georgeanne Ries, flute; Susan  
Smith, piano

TT: 54:45

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