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**The Chinese composer Tan Dun and
his compositions for harp**

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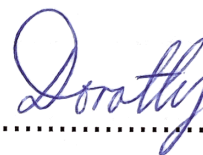
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Abstract

Regarded as one of leading composers of the Chinese "New Wave"- the generation of artists, writers and composers that came to international prominence in the early 1980s, Tan Dun's combination of Chinese ancient arts, contemporary compositional technique and modern media contributes to the uniqueness of his work.

This study examines three of Tan's compositions which are written for harp- "In Distance" (1987), "Circle with Four Trios, Conductor, and Audience" (1992) and "Nu Shu- the Secret Songs of Women" (2013). It explores how Tan rooted his music in his Chinese heritage and appeals to an international music audience at the same time. This study investigates how Tan draw inspirations from Chinese philosophical and cultural traditions, imitating Asian timbre and using familiar Asian musical features recognizable by international audience.

1. Introduction

1.1. Tan Dun: An overview of his life and his music

Born in 1957 in Changsha, Hunan Province, China, Tan Dun was 9 years old when the Cultural Revolution started. During 1966 to 1976, the Chairman of the Communist Party, Mao Zedong, launched a Cultural Revolution which aims to purge any capitalism and traditional elements from Chinese society, and to impose Mao as the dominant ideology in the Communist Party of China. The Revolution paralyzed the politics of China, damages its society and economy, and killed over a million people.^[1] Tan did not receive any education nor music training in his early childhood. He was raised by his grandmother, a farmer, who told him ghost stories, which fascinated him. During the Cultural Revolution, only propaganda music was allowed. All kinds of traditional music, including opera and folk music, were banned. Children of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including Tan, was forced to leave their family and was sent to work at collective farm in the country-side as a part of "re-education".^[2]

At that time, farmers who are experts in folk songs, could no longer perform their songs. However, by setting Maoist texts to the farmers' folk melodies, Tan enabled the farmers to continue singing and everyone enjoyed it. He became the village musician, composing folk songs, playing fiddle and anything he could find- a wok and even various agricultural tools. He was able to compose with anything on hands- a stone, a bowl of water, a sheet of paper. These experiences have given rise to his later organic compositions.^[2] Through arranging folk songs, he also became familiar with folk music around the Hunan area. Tan was keen on incorporating the sounds in his childhood memory growing up in China's remote village into his compositions. His "On Taoism" was written to commemorate his grandmother's death and to preserve the sounds of Chinese village music.^[3]

In 1976, Mao died two years after Tan started his "re-education". Tan was relatively lucky because Mao's death put an end to the Cultural Revolution. At that time, a boat carrying the travelling Peking Opera capsized, causing the death of many musicians. Tan was recruited to substitute as a fiddler and arranger for the Beijing Opera.^[2] After Mao's death, new regime under Den

^[1] Pye, Lucian W. "Reassessing the Cultural Revolution." *The China Quarterly*, no. 108, 1986, pp. 597–612. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/653530. Accessed 11 Apr. 2020.

^[2] Buruma I., "Tan Dun infuses Western music with Chinese traditions." 2008. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/arts/04iht-04dunt.12545838.html> in July 2019.

^[3] "On Taoism." Retrieved in July 2019 from <http://tandun.com/composition/on-taoism/>

musical activities were resumed.^[4] Although music is still under censorship by Xiaoping started economic reform. Schools and universities were reopened and the Communist Party, a group of young composers were exposed to Western contemporary music and started to explore with avant-garde compositional techniques. These composers are regarded as the "New Wave". Tan Dun, Chen Yi, Qu Xiaosong, Zhou Long, Zhang Xiaofu, Guo Wenjing, Sheng Zongliang are some of the best-known names of the "New Wave" composers. ^[5]

Following the re-opening of the Central Conservatory of Music, Tan was admitted to the conservatory where he studied composition with Zhao Xindao and Li Yin Hai. At the age of 19, Tan heard Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on the radio. It was his first time to get in touch with Western Music. Tan was introduced to a variety of international contemporary music by a number of visiting professors, including George Crumb, Toru Takemitsu, Hans Werner Henze, Alexander Goehr and Chou Wen-Chung. Among these visiting lecturers, Alexander Goehr, a British composer whose father was a Schoenberg's student, went to Beijing in 1980s and gave a lecture on Schoenberg and Debussy. The lecture has opened a completely new door for Tan. As he described himself, he has soon become "a slave of Western classical music by Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt." Tan composed his first Symphony, "Li Sao" in 1980 and with this composition, he won a prize in the First National Competition of Orchestra. ^[6]

During 1983, Tan's music was banned as "degenerate music" by the Chinese Communist Party. Performance of Tan's music was banned due to its political controversy. ^[7] Tan moved to New York in 1986. In 1993, he received a Doctor of Musical Arts at the Columbia University under the tutelage of Mario Davidovsky and Chou Wenchung, a student of Edgard Varese. ^[6] During his time in New York, Tan met John Cage who became his influential mentor. ^[6] Cage is one of the Western composers who adopted Asian philosophies in his composition. His piano piece "Music of Changes" applied "I Ching", a Chinese ancient "Book of Changes". He also assimilated Japanese Zen Buddhism in his composition.^[8] In 1993, Tan wrote "C-A-G-E" to commemorate the death of John Cage. The composition was played entirely inside the piano without using the keyboard and consists of only four pitches –C, A, G and E in all registers. Fingering techniques from pipa, a

^[4] Provine R., Tokumaru T., Lawrence Witzleben Routledge J., "The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: East Asia, China, Japan and Korea." 2002. Taylor & Francis

^[5] Lam, Joseph, "Chinese Music and its Globalized Past and Present." 2008 *Macalester International*, volume 21: *the Musical Imagination in the Epoch of Globalization*.

^[6] Zheng, Zhen, "Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor: Insights Into Performance." 2006. Retrieved from http://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1396 in July 2019.

^[7] "Tan Dun and his Composition." Retrieved from <https://composertd.weebly.com/> in July 2019.

^[8] Cage, John. 1961b. "Composition as Process I: Changes" (1958 Darmstadt lecture). In his *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 18–34. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Chinese plucked string instrument, were found in this piece. ^[9]

From 1990, Tan's work exhibited greater varieties and creativity in terms of form and the production of sound. He completed over 60 works by 2020, including a number of orchestral works, operas, organic music, oratorio, concerto and others. ^[9] As a conductor, Tan has led the top orchestras in the world such as Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra National de France, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra and many more. He has also received numerous honors and awards, including Italy's Gold Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement, Grammy Musical America's Composer of the Year, Glenn Gould International Protégé Award etc. ^[10]

1.2. Tan's compositions for harp

Tan has included harp in over half of his compositions, in which three of them feature harp as a solo or a major role in chamber music settings. They are "In Distance", "Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience" and "Nu Shu- The Secret Songs of Women".

1.2.1. "In Distance"

"In Distance" was written in 1987 for harp, piccolo and bass drum. The one-movement-work composition lasts for 10 minutes. It was premiered in 1989 in London by the Lontano Ensemble. This composition absorbs concepts from the Chinese philosophical tradition- Taoism (see chapter 2.1. Taoism).

There are four levels of meaning to the title "In Distance" of the composition. The first meaning of the "distance" is between the instruments in their timbre, register and dynamics. The second "distance" means the difference between the way these instruments usually sound and the way they actually sound in the piece. The harp part of this work is specially treated to imitate the sound of the Chinese instrument koto (see chapter 3.2.1. Imitating Asian instruments' timbres). The third distance lies in the texture of the music which is very open with lots of silence space. The final meaning can be heard in the incorporation of Western and Chinese musical elements. ^[11]

^[9] "C-A-G-E." Retrieved from <http://tandun.com/composition/c-a-g-e/> in July 2019.

^[10] tandun.com. Retrieved in July, 2019.

^[11] "In distance." Retrieved from <http://tandun.com/composition/in-distance/> in July 2019.

1.2.2. "Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience"

"Circle with Four Trios, Conductor, and Audience" (hereafter "Circle") was premiered in 1992 in Amsterdam by the Nieuw Ensemble and conductor Ed Spanjaar. It was also performed by Musica Sacra Chamber Orchestra (the United States), International Sejong Soloists (South Korea), De Doelen Ensemble (Netherlands) and others. ^[12] The work lasts for 14 minutes.

The piece was composed for four trios which are categorized as struck, plucked, bowed and blown instruments. Trio I consists of piano, percussion and double bass. Trio II consists of mandolin, guitar and harp; Trio III consists of violin, viola and cello; Trio IV consists of piccolo, oboe, and bass clarinet in Bb. It is a one-movement work in ABA form. ^[12] Concepts from Taoism (see chapter 2.1. Taoism) and Asian instrumentation (see chapter 3.2 Instrumentation) can also be found in this composition.

1.2.3. "Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women"

"Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women" (hereafter "Nu Shu") is a multimedia concerto for 13 microfilms, harp solo and orchestra. It was premiered on May 22, 2013 in Tokyo, Japan by NHK Symphony Orchestra, with Risako Hayakawa as the solo harpist and Tan Dun as the conductor. It was also performed by Philadelphia Orchestra with harpist Elizabeth Hanine, Concertgebouw Orchestra with harpist Petra van der Heide, New York Philharmonic with harpist Nancy Allen, Orchestre National de Lyon with harpist Eleanor Euler-Cabantous etc. This work was performed in the United States, China, Australia, Netherlands, Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland, France and Canada. ^[13]

Following the footsteps of Bela Bartok, Tan researched and captured the near-extinct Nu Shu culture and its ancient music through high-tech digital audiovisual. He spent five years filming, composing, researching and conceptualizing a new way to present the music. Each microfilm is filmed in one shot- 13 films in 13 shots. The visuals are screened across three projection screens simultaneously, making them into a 3D visual space. ^[13]

^[12] "Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience." Retrieved from <http://tandun.com/composition/circle-with-four-trios-conductor-and-audience/> in July 2019.

^[13] "Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women." Retrieve from <http://tandun.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/nushu4.pdf> in July 2019.

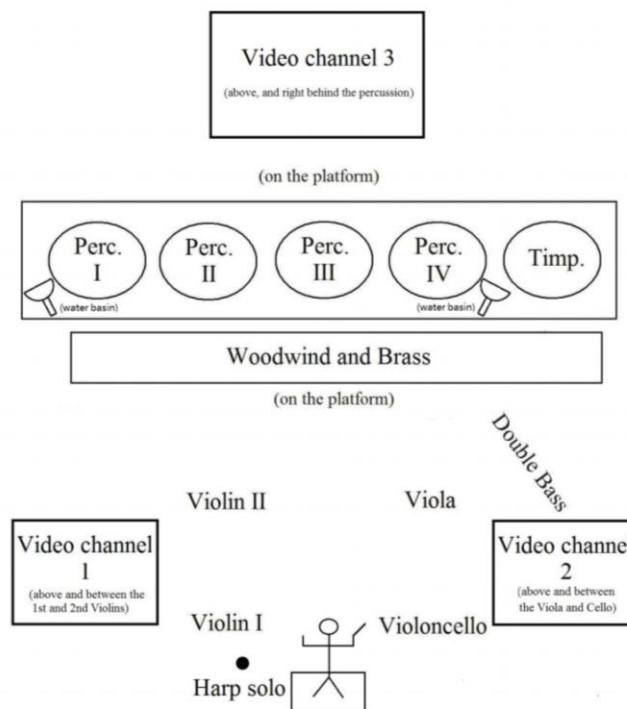


Figure 1. Performance position of “Nu Shu”^[14]

All songs captured in the microfilms are sung by local Hunan female villagers who speak the Nu Shu language. As shown in figure 1, the orchestra plays while the microfilms with videos and singing were shown on screen behind the orchestra.

“Nu Shu” consists of thirteen movements which are divided into 6 chapters. The first and last chapter serve as prologue and epilogue respectively. The fourth, fifth and sixth chapter convey the three most important roles and intimate relationships between women- mother, sister and daughter, while the third chapter talks about the origin and place of cultivation of the language- the Nu Shu Village. Table 1 exhibits the work’s chapters, movements and their libretto’s meaning.^[13] The Nu Shu songs recorded in microfilms are sung by women villaers He Jinghua, Pu Lijuan, Zhou Huijuan, He Yanxin, Jiang Shinu, Hu Xin, Mo Cuifen and He Meiyue.^[15]

^[14] Tan, “Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women.” Retrieve from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/nu_shu_48098 in July 2019.

^[15] “Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women.” Retrieve from <http://tandun.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/nushu4.pdf> in July 2019.

Table 1. Chapters and movements and libretto's meaning in "Nu Shu"

Chapter	Movement and libretto's meaning
Prologue	<p>1. Secret Song In Nushu culture, women write the secret language on paper and fan to express love between daughters and mothers, and among sisters.</p>
Mother's Story	<p>2. Mother's Song The text in this movement is a holy scripture about wisdom on educating daughters. It is about cultural traditions on ethics, family, child-raising and what it means to be a woman.</p> <p>3. Dressing for the Wedding In the rural village, it is typical for girls to get married as early as the age of 15. Sisters help dress the bride with dazzling head piece and wedding gown. The song is about the bride's reluctant heart of leaving her home and farewelling with her family at a young age.</p> <p>4. Cry-Singing for the Marriage The wedding tradition includes three days of consecutive crying. The tear-soaked scarf is a symbol of connection between mother and daughters and between generations.</p>
Nu Shu Village	<p>5. Nu Shu Village There is a mother river of the Nu Shu village. It runs through generations since the Song Dynasty (960-1297). Women spend their lifetime beside the river nurturing the Nu Shu culture and language. It is a symbolic link between mother, daughter and sister.</p>
Sisters' Intimacy	<p>6. Longing for her Sister It talks about married woman singing songs with memories of sisters. This reminds the woman of her innocent, happy childhood and help her escape her loneliness.</p> <p>7. A Road without End From birth until death, life of a woman contains countless pathways, leading from household after household, gate after gate, river after river. The movement is about women's endless journey.</p> <p>8. Forever Sisters</p>

	Meeting with sisters get rid of all sorrows. It gives strength and support for married women to conquer hardship and difficulties.
Daughter's Story	<p>9. Daughter's River It talks about the "River of Women" which symbolizes the tears of mother, daughter and sister from generation to generation, and on which floats women's boat of dreams.</p> <p>10. Grandmother's Echo Gao Yinxian is one of the most important women in passing down the Nu Shu language. She died at the age of 88. The microfilm shows Gao's granddaughter hearing echoes of Nu Shu songs in Gao's former residence.</p> <p>11. The Book of Tears Mo Cuifen, a hunan villager, cries tears as she recalls memories of her wedding 50 years ago.</p> <p>12. Soul Bridge A bridge that a daughter walk pass to remember her mother.</p>
Epilogue	<p>13. Living in the Dream Every day, mothers, daughters and sisters gather to sing. The wonderful time that they shared create a "dreamlike reality".</p>

1.2.3.1. Harp part in "Nu Shu"

Tan chose harp as the solo instrument of the concerto because he regarded the harp as the most beautiful women's instrument. "The harp has always been used ornamentally to enhance music's tone color," Tan said, "yet this time I am using the instrument in a much more dramatic way, steeped in history, narrating, crying etc." ^[13] Tan has made the most of the diverse timbre and character of the harp in this composition.

Although there is no specific harp cadenza section, the harp plays short solo passages throughout the work. These passages usually appear between phrases or verses of the singing voice, and at the start and end of each movement. The harp fleshes out the content before and after the singing voice appears. It adds details and waves of undulation to each movement.

As this is a long composition of 40 minutes, it is important that the harpist identify and work on these small solo sections. The short solo section shown in figure 2 already explored various harp techniques- arpeggiations, glissando, tremolo, vibrato pitch bending (pressing string above tuning peg right after

playing). Other examples of solo passages are comprised of different techniques such as harmonics, octaves and chromatic scales (Figure 3 to 6).

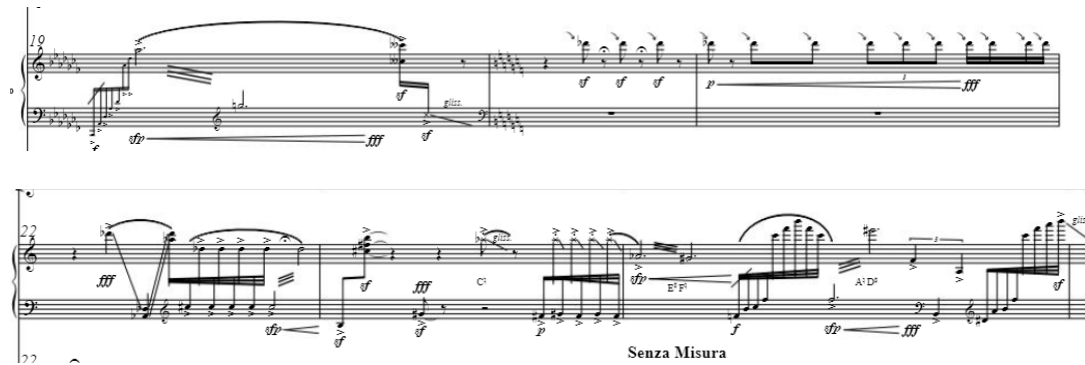


Figure 2. Harp solo section from "Nu Shu" the 1st movement "Secret Song"



Figure 3. Harp solo section from "Nu Shu" the 2nd movement "Mother's Song"



Figure 4. Harp solo section from "Nu Shu" the 3rd movement "Dressing for the Wedding"

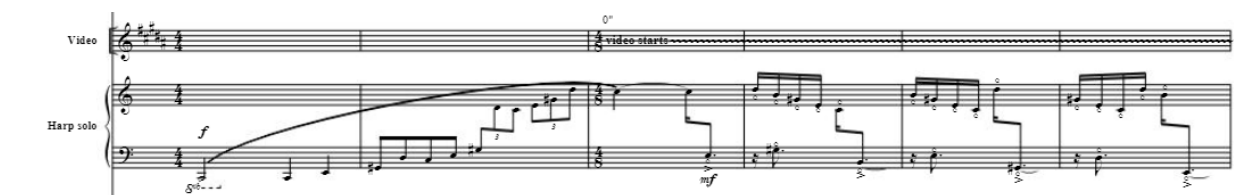


Figure 5. Harp solo section from "Nu Shu" the 4th movement "Cry singing for marriage"



Figure 6. Harp solo section from "Nu Shu" the 6th movement "Grandmother's echoes"

The musical score for "The Daughter" is presented in two staves. The top staff, labeled "Video", contains the vocal melody in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "女人 第一 要 守 贞 (Daughter) 给 声 女 儿 听 听 教 育 女 人 第一 要 守 贞。". The melody includes a ritardando (rit.) marking at the end. The bottom staff, labeled "Hp. solo", features a piano accompaniment. It begins with a 6-measure rest, followed by a series of chords and arpeggiated figures. A mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic marking is present. The piano part concludes with a final chord marked with a fermata.

The harp part accompanies the singing voice in various patterns. For instance, a group of rushing 16th-note arpeggiations in the 3rd movement (Figure 8), downward sequence in the 6th movement (Figure 9) and as bass voice in the 9th movement (Figure 10).



The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff, labeled 'Video', is in 4/4 time and features a melody with notes and rests. It includes dynamic markings *p* and *f*, and a tempo change to '(faster)' indicated by a right-pointing arrow. The bottom staff, labeled 'Harp solo', is in 4/4 time and features a continuous arpeggiated pattern. It includes dynamic markings *ppp*, *pp*, and *p*.

The musical score for 'Video' and 'Hp. solo' is presented on two staves. The 'Video' staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a 'rit.' (ritardando) marking. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some measures containing beamed eighth notes. The 'Hp. solo' staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. It features a series of sustained notes, primarily half notes and quarter notes, with some measures containing beamed eighth notes. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, with some measures containing repeat signs.

In the 13rd movement, the harp part doubles the singing voice melody. This is the only movement where the harp part and the singing voice plays in unison. This movement is also the climax of the whole work (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Excerpt from "Nu Shu" the 13rd movement "Living in the Dream"

The harp part is also treated in a way so that it blends with the singing voice contours. For example, in the 4th movement, the harp rises and falls in dynamics to accompany the fluctuation of mother's crying. At the climax of mother's crying, Tan added a series of dramatic and splashing pedal slides in the harp part which suits perfectly with the high point in the singing voice (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Excerpt from "Nu Shu" the 4th movement "Cry singing for marriage"

In the 5th movement "Nu Shu village", there is no singing voice but only recording of river sound. The harp part consists of shimmering of ethereal glissando. Its dynamics goes up and down gently which sounds like word-painting that imitating flowing of water from afar and away from the Nu Shu village (Figure 13).

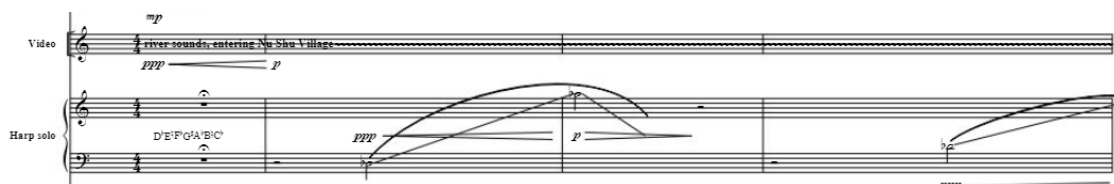


Figure 13. Excerpt from "Nu Shu" the 5th movement "Nu Shu Village"

1 Philosophical and cultural traditions

In Chinese tradition, there is an idealism of philosopher-composer. Composers wrote about nature and larger issues, rather than their mere personal emotions.^[16] As an internationally acclaimed avant-garde composer, Tan sought to root his innovation in the base of the tradition from his hometown. "At first I mistakenly thought that innovation is established on the basis of reconstruction which smashed all traditions and even showed great anti-traditional", said Tan, "later, however, I gradually found that the tradition is a great asset and can absorb more nutrients for innovation. Innovation' is built on the development of the traditions."^[17]

2.1. Taoism

Originated between the sixth and second centuries BC, Taoism is a long-standing native Chinese philosophical tradition.^[18] Tan's birthplace, Hunan, is a place of Taoist culture. All kinds of Taoist funeral rites and folk rites were essential parts of the villagers' everyday life. "I always wanted to be a (Taoist) shaman," said Tan.^[19] Taoism has a profound effect on the thought and practice of arts and music. It addresses "issues of life that bores on the individual and nature, our minds and our physical selves, our vitality, creativity, and longevity".^[18] In Taoism, music is seen as a communicative link between human and nature. Hence, music is a tool that bring us closer to the nature.

2.1.1. Silence

Silence is a critical factor of Taoism. It believes that meditative silence can heal a person physically, emotionally and psychologically as inner peace helps people to live in the moment and appreciate the surroundings in the universe.^[20]

^[16] Chou, Wen-chung, "Whither Chinese Composers." *Contemporary Music Review*, 2007. volume.26 no.5-6.

^[17] Zhang, Nan, "Neo-Orientalism in the Operas of Tan Dun." 2015. P.64 Retrieved from <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/NEO-ORIENTALISM-IN-THE-OPERAS-OF-TAN-DUN-Dun%E2%80%99s-Polo/3b9dc2eb146aa53c0716e999b1d147bc0a118257> in July 2019.

^[18] Provine R., Tokumaru T., Lawrence Witzleben Routledge J., "The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: East Asia, China, Japan and Korea." 2002. P.97, Taylor& Francis.

^[19] Kan, Nate, "An Hour with Tan Dun- Master Composer and Force of Culture". Retrieved from <https://maekan.com/article/tan-dun-master-composer-and-force-of-culture/> in February 2020.

^[20] Guthrie, Steve. "Silence, Stillness and the Sage: On the Daoist Practices of Qigong and Taiji and The Buddhist Principals of Right Mindfulness and Right Action". Retrieved from <http://januasophia.cs.edinboro.edu/articles/2015/JS%20GUTHRIE%20FINAL%20EDIT.pdf> in February 2020.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the opening passage of "Circle". The score is written in 4/4 time with a tempo of 58 bpm. It includes staves for Piano, Percussion, Double Bass, Mandolin, Guitar, Harp, Violin, Viola, Cello, Flute, Oboe, and Bassoon. The music is marked with "Ritually (♩=58)" and includes various dynamics (sf, p, pp, mp, mf, f) and articulations (accents, slurs). Breathouts are indicated with "[breathout]" and "Ha" markings. The score is divided into four systems, each corresponding to a different ensemble: Trio I (Piano, Perc., D. Bass), Trio II (Mandolin, Guitar, Harp), Trio III (Violin, Viola, Cello), and Trio IV (Flute, Oboe, Bassoon). The Audience part is also included at the bottom.

Figure 15. Opening passage of "Circle"[23]

2.1.2. Interconnection

The concept of Taoism can also be observed from other perspectives. In Taoism, "the human being is a microcosm of the whole universe at its fullest expression, living in harmony with nature and the cosmos".^[24] It focuses on connection because everything in the universe is interconnected.

[23] Tan, "Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience." Retrieved from

https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/circle_with_four_trios_33547 in July 2019.

[24] Provine R., Tokumaru T., Lawrence Witzleben Routledge J., "The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: East Asia, China, Japan and Korea." 2002. P.97, Taylor& Francis.

This applies to the participants in "Circle". Not only the musicians, but also the conductors and audiences participate to perform the work. In addition, the four trios' seats are spread through the entire hall, connecting the space physically. Hence, all participants form a circle that surround the entire hall. ^[25]

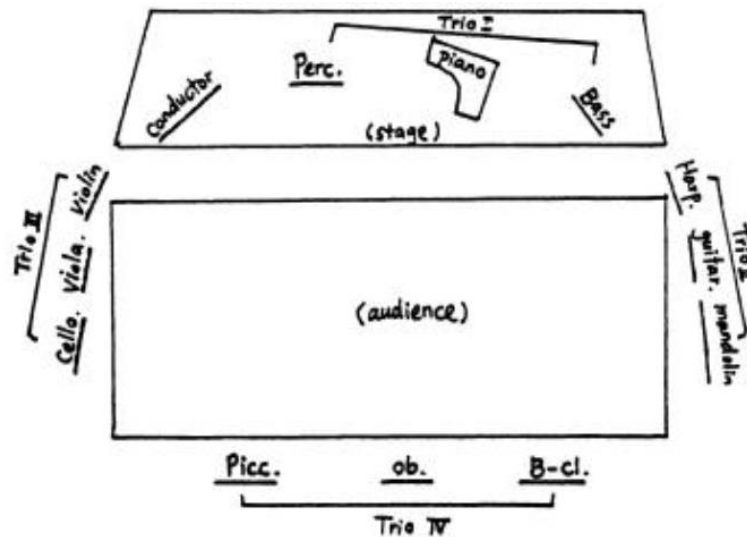


Figure 16. Position of musicians in "Circle"^[26]

Figure 16 shows the position of musicians. Trio I and conductor are placed on the stage, while Trio II and Trio II are positioned at the right- and left-hand side of the hall respectively. As instructed on the score, Trio IV is placed in the first row of the balcony or at the back of the hall if there is no balcony.^[26]

Regarding the audience participation, the conductor rehearses with the audience and set a method of cuing before the performance starts. The audience are invited to perform with vocalization at three sections in the composition. Firstly, after the conductor's text "Did you see the sound?", the audience responds with a breath-out sound "haaaa". Secondly, after the conductor's text, "Can you write it on the sky", the audience responds again the breath-out sound. Thirdly, during the climax (rehearsal number 13), the audience vocalize for around 10 seconds in from "twittering", growing to "gossiping", and finally to "shouting". Together with the musicians, the audience gradually increases in dynamic and pitch, reaching climax at the first beat of rehearsal number 14.^[26]

^[25] "Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience." Retrieved from <http://tandun.com/composition/circle-with-four-trios-conductor-and-audience/in July 2019>.

^[26] Tan, "Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience." Retrieved from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/circle_with_four_trios_33547 in July 2019.

2.1.3. Organic instruments

Taoism is also a belief that embraces nature and focuses on harmony with nature. While many contemporary composers are seeking new ways of sound production by all sort of electronic and electrical means, Tan stepped back to the nature for sources of sound material. The use of organic instruments is found in many of his other works such as "Water Concerto" for Water Percussion and Orchestra (1998), "Water Passion After St. Matthew" (2000), "Paper Concerto" for Paper Percussion and Orchestra (2008), and "Earth Concerto" for Stone and Ceramic Percussion with Orchestra (2009).^[27]

Tan described his use of organic music, "it concerns both matters of everyday life and matters of the heart, these ideas find their origin in the animistic notion that material objects have spirits residing in them, an idea ever-present in the old village where I grew up in China. Paper can talk to the violin, the violin to water. Water can communicate with trees, and trees with the moon, and so on. In other words, every little thing in the totality of things, the entire universe, has a life and a soul."^[28] As said by John Cage, "What is very little heard in European or Western music is the presence of sound as the voice of nature. So that we are led to hear in our music human beings talking only to themselves. It is clear in the music of Tan Dun that sounds are sound central to the nature in which we live but to which we have too long not listened."^[29]

The organic component, water and stones, are used in both "Circle" and "Nu Shu".



Figure 17. Use of water gong in "Circle"^[30]

^[27] Retrieved from tandun.com in July 2019.

^[28] Retrieved from <http://tandun.com/visualmusic/> in July 2019.

^[29] Hesmonfhalgh D., Born G., "Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music." 2000. P.179. University of California Press.

^[30] Tan, "Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience." Retrieved from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/circle_with_four_trios_33547 in July 2019.

Water gong refers to a gong that, after being struck, is immediately immersers in water halfway underneath. The gong is hold with a thread secured on a shelf and can be easily slide down to a basket of water underneath. The water produces a glissando effect as pitches slide down (Figure 17).



Figure 18. Use of stones in "Nu Shu Village", "Nu Shu"^[31]



Figure 19. Use of water drips in "Nu Shu Village", "Nu Shu"^[32]



Figure 20. Use of water basins in "Living in the Dream", "Nu Shu"^[33]

As shown in Figure 18-20, percussionist uses water strainer and water basin to create tranquil or thrashing sounds, while stones are also used to create an organic percussion sound.

[31][32][33] Tan, "Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women." Retrieve from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/nu_shu_48098 in July 2019.

2.2. The Nu Shu culture

Just as the philosophical tradition Taoism serves as a concept behind “In Distance” and “Circle”, “Nu Shu” is written based on a Chinese cultural tradition- the Nu Shu culture.

Tan Dun read a document on Nu Shu which fascinate him to write the composition. Nu Shu is an ancient language developed by women for over a hundred years in China. At that time, only men could receive formal education while women in rural area were kept literate. Because women were deprived of education, they gathered and invented their own languages. Nu Shu is the only known language that is gender-specific. It was passed from mothers to daughters and is only used and understood by women.^[34]

In 1950s just after the People Republic of China is established, a group of women went to Beijing requesting to see Chairman Mao. However, they spoke a language so strange that nobody understood them. Linguists are called to interpret their languages but even linguists are confused by the language. The police threw the women into psychiatric wards. The news reached UNESCO which spread through the linguists to research this matter. It is found that the language is originated from Jiangyong, Hunan Province (Tan’s hometown) and is the only existing language in the world that was only created by and passed on among women. Later during Cultural Revolution, most writings of Nu Shu were burnt and those who could sing in NuShu were killed, resulting in the languages near extinction.^[35]



Figure 21. Nu Shu text sewn on women’s object^[36]

[34][35][36] “Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women.” Retrieve from <http://tandun.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/nushu4.pdf> in July 2019.

The language consists of around seven hundred characters, in which some are derived from the Chinese language and specific embroidery stitches. The Nu Shu language is sewn or written on women's most beautiful and intimate objects such as silk, handkerchiefs, fans, belts and journals (Figure 21). It also exists in many forms such as in music and calligraphy.^[36]

NuShu (女書) literarily means "Women's writing" or "Women's book". Yet, this language is created to be sung, instead of spoken. NuShu does not only refer to the unique writings and language, it is more importantly "Women's Song". This is because not all of the women can read or write Nushu but singing NuShu is common to all local women. Therefore, both the writings and songs make two indispensable components of the NuShu language.

3. Asian musical features

During his study in New York, Tan's unique musical character emerged in his combination of Chinese national elements and Western contemporary compositional techniques. "Tan's music is one we need as the East and West come together as our home,"^[37] said John Cage. His first work after settling in New York was a String Quartet, "Eight Colors", composed in 1986. It was his first time to utilize the Second Viennese School serial compositional method.^[38]

"In distance" is regarded as a free atonal composition instead of a serial work. As said by Tan, "although at the beginning I wanted to write a piece very much in twelve-tone style, with a row, I couldn't do it. Psychologically, culturally, it just [went] against myself... I thought this piece reflected a distance that existed between me [and the twelve-tone music tradition.]" Tan said, "In fact, in other words, those things that I had had [before], that I had preferred most, were against something forced [upon] me."^[39]

In "Circle", Tan used a composition technique regarded as tone-color melody ("Klangfarbenmelodie" in German) in which a melody line is splitted between instruments, hence adding different texture to one single musical line. This musical term derives from Schoenberg's "Theory of Harmony" (1922) and has been applied in Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra op.16 and Webern's Symphony op.21.^[40] In Figure 22, the use of tone-color melody results in the transformation and interplay of timbres of harp, mandoline and guitar into one big instruments of three different colors and resonance.

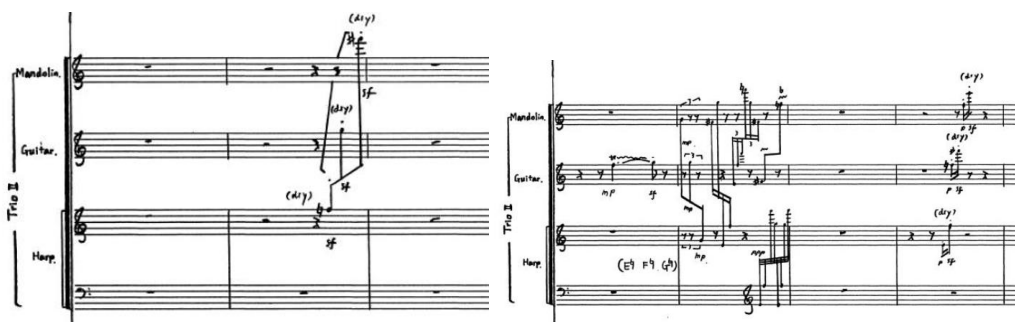


Figure 22. Excerpt from "Circle"

^[37] Retallack Jo., "Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music." 1996. P. 187. Wesleyan University Press.

^[38] Chen, B., "Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor, Op.1: Strategies for Pianists and a Version Comparison", 2016. Retrieved from https://etd.ohiolink.edu/etd.send_file?accession=osu1468502200&disposition=inline in February, 2020.

^[39] Zheng S., "Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/ Chinese America." 2010. P.259. Oxford University Press.

^[40] Schoenberg A., "Theory of Harmony". 1978. translated by Roy E. Carter. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

^[40] Provine R., Tokumaru T., Lawrence Witzleben Routledge J., "The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: East Asia, China, Japan and Korea." 2002. Taylor & Francis

In spite of the fact that Tan wrote some serial compositions after he got exposure to the Second Viennese School, he finally rejected it after some struggles and returns to spiritual and ancient folk music of his homeland for musical inspirations.

3.1. Pentatonic scale

The composition of “Nu Shu” is based entirely on Chinese folk songs (table 2). These folk songs are made up of the pentatonic scale which consists of only 5 pitches- d r m s l, corresponding to the five most important degrees in Chinese music- kung 宫, shang 商, chiao 角, chih 徵, yu 羽 (kung).^[41]

Table 2. Melody pitches of folk songs in “Nu Shu”

Movement	Melody pitches
1. Secret Fan	No singing
2. Mother’s Song	yu, chiao, chih
3. Dressing for the wedding	kung, chiao, chih, yu
4. Cry- singing for Marriage	yu, chiao, kung
5. Nu Shu Village	No singing
6. Longing for her sister	chiao, shang, kung, yu, chih
7. Road without end	No singing
8. Forever sisters	No singing
9. Daughter’s River	kung, yu, shang, chiao, chih
10. Grandmother’s echo	chih, kung, chiao, yu
11. The Book of Tears	yu, kung, chiao
12. Soul Bridge	No singing
13. Living in the dream	kung, yu, shih, chiao, shang

^[41] Tan, “Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women.” Retrieve from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/nu_shu_48098 in July 2019.

Figure 22. Excerpt of “Longing for her Sister”, “Nu Shu”^[41]

For instance, in movement 6 “Longing for her Sister”, the folk song is made up of all five notes from the pentatonic scale (Figure 22).

Figure 23. Excerpt of “Dressing for the wedding”, “Nu Shu”^[41]

In movement 3 “Dressing for the wedding”, both the folk song melody and the harp part are made up of pentatonic scale (Figure 23).

3.2. Instrumentation

Tan’s music is characterized by its diversification of timbres. While keeping the use of Western instruments in his compositions, Tan likes adding Eastern percussions for exotic and special sound effect.

Composition	Instruments	Percussions
“In Distance”	Harp, piccolo, bass drum	
“Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience”	I: piano, percussion, double bass II: mandolin, guitar, harp III. violin, viola, cello IV: piccolo, oboe, bass clarinet	Slapsticks, congas, bongos, bass drum, water gong, tam tam, cowbells
“Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women”	Solo harp, strings, piccolo, flutes, alto flute, oboes English horn, clarinets, bass clarinet in,	Timpani, cymbal, Tibetan singing bowl, Chinese cymbals, marimba, Chinese

	bassoons, contrabassoon, horns, trumpets, trombones, tuba	finger bells, triangle, stones, water strainer, water basin, tam tam and snare drum, stones
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Table 3. Instrumentation of “In Distance”, “Circle” and “Nu Shu”

As shown in table 3, “Circle” includes Eastern percussions- congas (Cuba single-headed drum) and bongos (pairs of Afro-Cuban drums).

“Nu Shu” puts together Chinese musical themes and Western orchestration. The Hunan songs recorded in the microfilms are accompanied by a Western orchestra with strings, brass and winds. In addition, Chinese percussion instruments such as Chinese cymbals, Chinese finger bells and Tibetan singing bowl are combined with the use of Western percussion instruments including marimba, triangle, tam tam and snare drum. The varieties of percussion instruments achieve a rich and diverse timbre and color.

3.2.1. Imitating Asian instruments’ timbres

In spite of the usual adoption of exclusively Western instrumentation, Tan still manages to create unique and characteristic colors by using Asian performance techniques. In “In Distance”, Tan transforms the Western instruments- harp, piccolo and bass drum into Eastern instruments- koto, bamboo flute and Indian drum respectively. Thus, making the instruments sound very differently.^[42]



Figure 24. Japanese instrument koto ^[43]



Figure 25. Koto played with ivory finger plectra ^[44]

^[42]“In distance.” Retrieved from http://tandun.com/composition/in-distance/in_July_2019.

^[43] Retrieved from <https://world4.eu/koto/> in January 2020.

^[44] Retrieved from <https://japanesegarden.org/2018/05/04/the-music-of-koto/> in January 2020.

Koto is a Japanese instrument which was imported from China in the ninth century (In Chinese: zheng). As shown in Figure 24, The instrument contains a long and slender wooden body with thirteen strings attached to it. The strings are plucked with bamboo, bone or ivory finger plectra (figure 25).

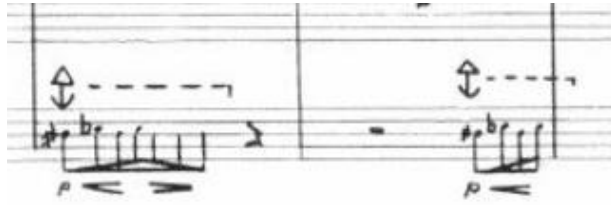


Figure 26. muting strings and playing with fingernails in "In Distance"^[45]

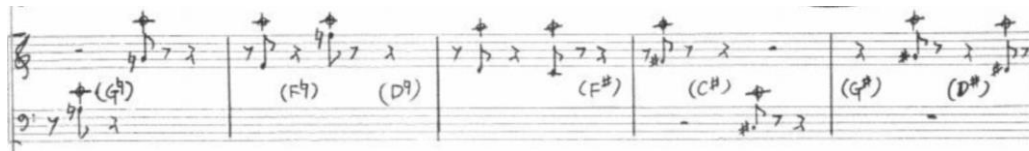


Figure 27. Imitating dry sound of koto by damping string immediately after playing ("In Distance")^[46]

In "In Distance", the harp is often played to imitate the sound of a koto and zheng. For example, pitches are bent by pressing the string above the tuning peg and then releasing the note. As shown in Figure 26, some notes are muted and played with fingernails. There are also places when the harpist imitates dry sound of koto by damping string immediately after playing (Figure 27).

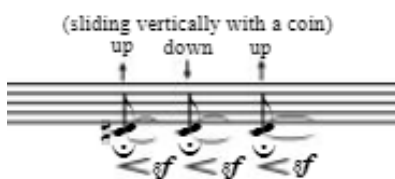


Figure 28. Harp part imitating zheng glissando effect in "Grandmother's echoes", "Nu Shu" ^[47]

^{[45][46]} Tan, "In Distance." Retrieve from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/in_distance_33562 on July 2019.

^[47] Tan, "Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women." Retrieve from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/nu_shu_48098 in July 2019.

In "Nu Shu", harp also produces very sharp glissando sounds by smashing the strings with ivory finger plectra to imitate the sound of Chinese zheng. (Figure 28).

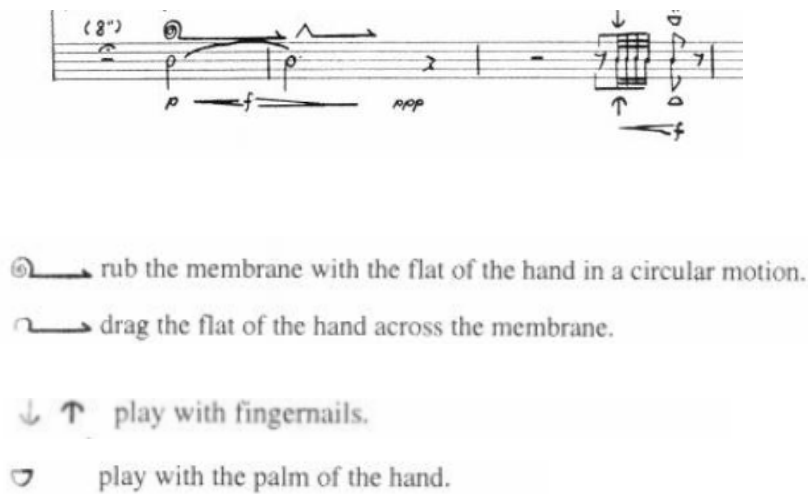


Figure 29. Bass drum imitating sound of Indian drum^[48]

The bass drum is played with palm and finger most of the time, imitating the sound of Indian drum (Figure 29).

3.3. Ornamentation

Apart from imitating Asian performance technique, Tan also incorporates lots of Chinese ornamentation method into his works.

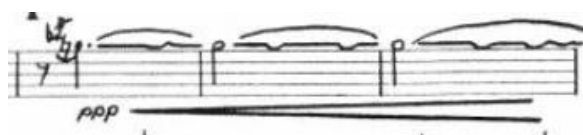


Figure 30. Extended trills played by piccolo in "In Distance"^[49]

Figure 30 shows extended trills played by piccolo which is a characteristics of many Chinese wind instruments such as dizi (笛子) and xiao (簫).

[48][49] Tan, "In Distance." Retrieve from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/in_distance_33562 on July 2019.

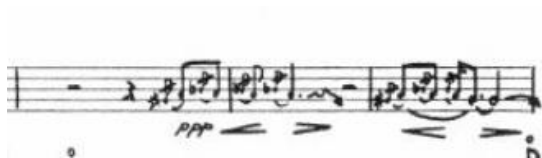


Figure 31. Abundant use of grace notes in piccolo part of "In Distance"^[50]

In Chinese music, an abundant use of ornaments including trills, turns, slides and vibrato are adopted to embellish the melody. Pitches are sustained through ornamentation and microtonal shadings, which are indispensable elements in traditional Chinese music (Figure 31 and 32).

Chinese music ornamentations can be generally divided into real ornament and superficial ornaments. For real ornaments, notes are played individually. This kind of ornamentation is used in plucked instruments such as Zheng (箏) and pipa (琵琶).^[51]

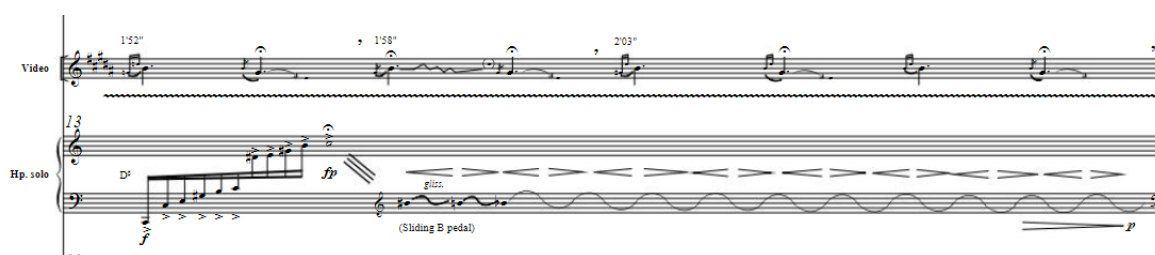


Figure 33. Harp part imitating zheng vibrato effect in "Cry-singing for the Marriage", "Nu Shu"^[52]

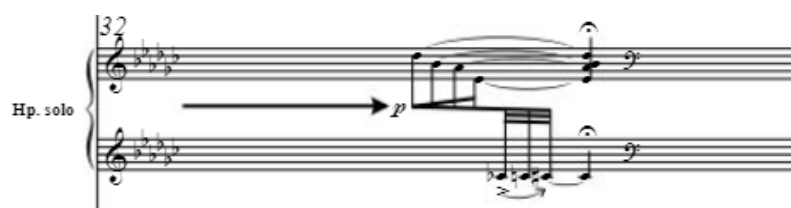


Figure 34. Harp part imitating zheng vibrato effect in "Grandmother's echoes", "Nu Shu"^[53]

^[50] Tan, "In Distance." Retrieve from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/in_distance_33562 on July 2019.

^[51] Zheng, Z., "Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor: Insights Into Performance." 2006. Retrieved from http://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1396 in July 2019.

^{[52][53]} Tan, "Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women." Retrieve from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/nu_shu_48098 in July 2019.

On the other hand, notes of superficial ornamentation are not individually played. For example, for wind instruments, microtones can be created through slight shifts of fingers on the finger holes. For plucked instruments such as Zeng (箏), pitches can be produced by plucking a particular string on its right portion while vibrating the same string on its left portion.^[54] Hence, microtonal shading is produced by only playing one string (Figure 33 and 34).

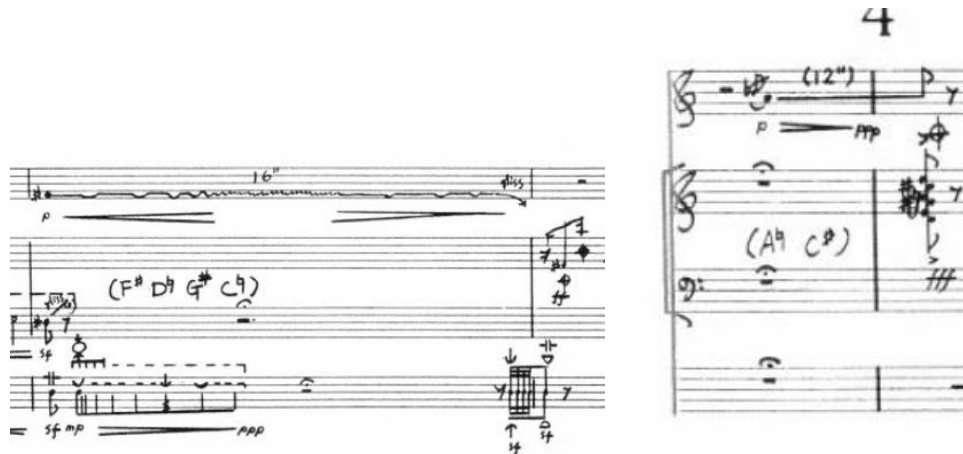


Figure 35. Free ornamentation in "In Distance"^[55]

In addition, instead of writing ornamentation out strictly, performers for Chinese music have more freedom to improvise the ornaments. The ornament changes with the person performing because these techniques are usually taught aurally instead of notated.^[56] As shown Figure 35, ornaments are written without exact instructions and are counted in seconds without beat. Performers are allowed to improvise. Free ornamentation showcases the Chinese music characteristics of fluid linear movement rather than steady metric pulse in Western music.

^[54] Zheng, Z., "Tan Dun's Eight Memories in Watercolor: Insights Into Performance." 2006. Retrieved from http://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1396 in July 2019.

^[55] Tan, "In Distance." Retrieve from https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/in_distance_33562 in July 2019.

^[56] Volk, Terese M, "Music, Education, and Multiculturalism: Foundations and Principles", 1998. p.183. Oxford University Press.

4. Conclusions

This study has investigated how Tan rooted his music in his Chinese heritage and appeals to an international music audience at the same time by examining his three compositions for harp- "In Distance", "Circle with Four Trios, Conductor and Audience" and "Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women".

My analysis has demonstrated Tan's incorporation of the Chinese philosophical tradition, Taoism, including its concept of silence and interconnection, as well as the use of natural sound from organic instruments. It also explained the origins of Nu Shu- the Chinese cultural traditions of women language, and how Tan composed "Nu Shu" to re-present the culture. This study has summarized Tan's use of Asian musical features, including the use of pentatonic scales in "Nu Shu". "In Distance" and "Nu Shu" also exhibit Tan's approach in using Western instrumentation to create exotic Asian timbres through imitating Asian performance techniques. On the other hand, the analysis has demonstrated Tan's incorporation of Chinese ornamentations in "Circle" and "Nu Shu".

The analysis has shown how Tan combines Chinese ancient arts, contemporary compositional techniques and modern media, which contribute to the uniqueness of his work.

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