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Musical Composition in the Context of Globalization: New Perspectives on Music History of the 20th and 21st Century, by Christian Utz

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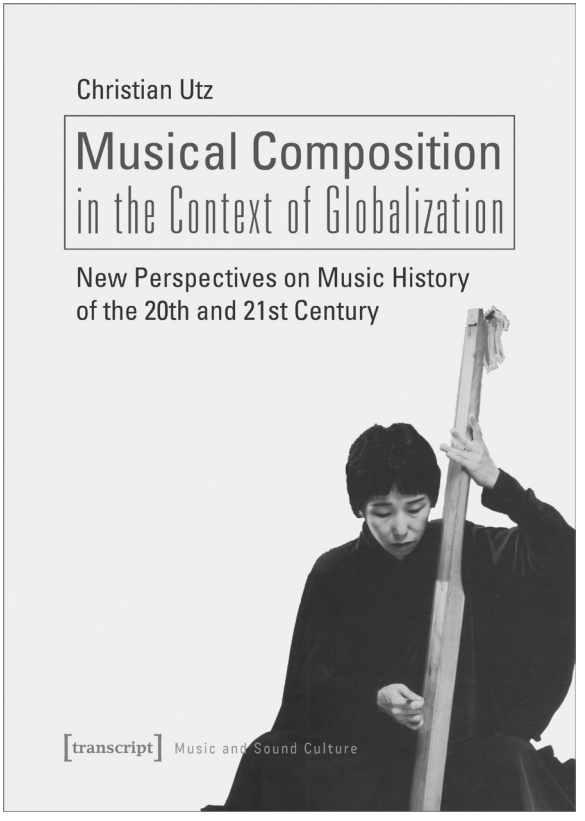
Robert Hasegawa[1]

The increasingly global character of contemporary composition is impossible to deny. For many young composers, travel and study abroad is a central part of their musical education, and the COVID-19 crisis of the past two years has added new levels of interconnectedness through the availability of Zoom lectures and live-streamed concerts from around the globe. Christian Utz's *Musical Composition in the Context of Globalization: New Perspectives on Music History of the 20th and 21st Century*, newly available in an excellent open-access English translation by Laurence Sinclair Willis,[2] takes on the task of putting the current practice of contemporary art music into a truly global context. The book focuses particularly on interactions between East Asia and Europe—one of Utz's main areas of specialization, though he is also active in analytical studies of contemporary music and as a composer of works for mixed ensembles including East Asian and European instruments. While Utz warns that these "perspectives" are "selected, disparate snapshots of the tightly interwoven music histories of the West and East Asia" (p. 10), they nonetheless offer



a prismatic and suggestive range of viewpoints and methods for addressing the complexity of contemporary intercultural exchanges.

The focus of the book is the concept of "a global art music," admitting an intentional distancing from popular music while acknowledging that this may represent a "(too) strong tendency to exclusion" (p. 28). "Music as an art form," in Utz's formulation, need not be limited to Western concepts of the artwork or any culturally specific kind of score notation or presentation venue. Centres of new music such as the Darmstadt Summer Course have become increasingly international—Utz cites an increase in the percentage of non-German participants from 4.3 percent in 1948 to 70.4 percent in 1961 (p. 65)—and more recent DARMSTADT programs reflect a conscious effort toward extending participation and representation beyond Europe. While this increasing diversity is something to be celebrated, it should be observed that in many respects contemporary music still lags behind in terms of equity. A study by Ashley Fure and Georgina Born notes that out of 4,750 pieces programmed between 1946 and 2014 at Darmstadt, only 334, or 7%, were composed by women. George Lewis observes further that "of those same 4,750 compositions, just two works by a non-white Afrodiasporic composer were performed at Darmstadt," a vanishingly small percentage of 0.04%.[3] Given that the globalization of new music is undeniable, we might well ask how relationships between Europe and the rest of the world play out in the musical sphere. Utz notes that "there are unmistakably clear tendencies toward a worldwide standardization of compositional practice according to Western criteria, seemingly continuing the effects of colonial power structures to the present day" (p. 10). Non-Western composers who seek to avoid the dynamics of colonialization often find themselves trapped in a "insider/outsider dichotomy" (p. 12, quoting ethnomusicologist Hilary Finchum-Sung), with aspects of their identities essentialized and reduced to an exoticized otherness.

Utz approvingly cites musicologist Yang Chien-Chang, who argues for an avoidance of this "East-West binary opposition, so that a more entangled web of the history can be revealed" (p. 12).[4] The drive to reframe the naïve East-West binary is central to Utz's argument for an approach which is *intercultural* as opposed to *multicultural*. An intercultural approach is based not on dialogue or mere coexistence of distinct entities, but rather addresses the active and ongoing interaction between cultures (conceived as hybrid and permeable) in such a way that their boundaries are blurred. In a globalized context, Utz notes, we are all engaged with "multiple attachments and identities." His essential mode of intercultural discourse draws on noted Egyptologist Jan Assmann's *hypolepsis*: "the transformative continuation of texts within the configuration of (inter)cultural memories" (p. 38). Hypolepsis—in classical rhetoric, "taking over from the words of the previous speaker and continuing them freely"—allows for the preservation (rather than papering over) of conflicts and critiques, and a "sharpened perception of contradictions." Hypolepsis is an ongoing process of approximation, a "space for free, transformative, critical variation" (p. 41–42).[5]

Within the East-West dichotomy, Utz observes, many Western authors recognize only Western culture as having a history and a path for progressive development, while non-Western cultures are "credited with musical *traditions*" (p. 50). This framing of the West as modern and the East as traditional has been a dominant narrative, often with the endorsement of East Asian composers as they position themselves with respect to the West—this attitude was particularly characteristic of pioneering figures of the 1960s like Isang Yun, who emphasized the collision of Asian traditional musics and European modernism. Such thinking is often linked to a "culturally essentialist" (p. 78)

way of conceiving Asian musical style characteristics: for example, Yun's notion of the tone in Korean music as "infinitely long, [a] vessel of vividly flowing feeling, articulated in naive joy, stylized according to the rules of a pronounced decorative sense of art, [a] lively brush stroke of ink painting" (quoted by Utz on p. 208). The West does not have a monopoly on artistic innovation or experimentation: two figures that emerge in Utz's book as particularly striking trailblazers of a global modernism are Filipino composer José Maceda (1917–2004) and Japanese composer-pianist Yūji Takahashi (1938-). Maceda's work with sound masses in motion (pp. 215–23) and Takahashi's hybrid notations and deconstructions of the score-performer relationship (pp. 225–33) are relatively unknown to Western musicians and listeners. These composers' œuvres are unimaginable except as intercultural creations, each engaging in "an intensive examination of the relationship between music and society" (p. 234) in their specific contexts.

The two essential principles of Utz's methodology are *multiple modernities* and *entangled history* (p. 57). In a sense, these two principles oppose one another (p. 112–13): if multiple modernities imply the independence of different strands of contemporary experience, entanglement reminds us of the myriad intersections between them. A "naïve 'back to the origins' movement" is in Utz's view an inadequate response to the complexities of contemporary intercultural existence; rather, in his "snapshots" he seeks to "investigate how specific, locally focused concepts of musical culture can be understood within the tensions between national essentialism and global standardization" (p. 75). Utz's exploration of relationships between music in Asia and Europe reaches back to the late 19th century—with considerations of how "conservatory style" in China was shaped by "an appropriation of Western virtuosity" and "an integration of Chinese sound resources into an almost entirely European nineteenth-century idiom" (p. 165)—before digging into a consideration of "modernist reception of Japanese and Indian traditional music" in compositions by Maurice Delage, Henry Cowell, Shūkichi Mitsukuri and Fumio Hayasaka between 1910 and 1945. Utz's snapshots continue with stories of individual musicians' trajectories between cultures, detailing (to take one example) the influential musical activities of Wolfgang Fraenkel as a composer, conductor and pedagogue in Shanghai in 1939–47 after his flight from the Third Reich. He touches on the equally peripatetic travels of musical ideas and melodies, exemplified by the crossings between Europe and Asia of the song *Molihua/Xianhua*, quoted in both Puccini's *Turandot* (1924) and Tan Dun's *Symphony 1997* (1997), an intercultural history that begins in the late 18th century.

Particularly relevant to this themed issue of *Circuit* are two sections of the book dedicated to works by composers from Asian and European backgrounds that include the Chinese mouth organ *sheng* (pp. 147–54) and its Japanese relative *shō* (chapter IV, pp. 289–336). The section on the *sheng* focuses on composers outside China who have written for the instrument in combination with other instruments or electronics, including pieces by Heinz Reber, Jorge Sánchez-Chiong, Sandeep Bhagwati, Simeon Pironkoff, and Wolfgang Suppan. True to Utz's hypoleptic approach, the analysis of these works does not seek to generalize about the relation of Europe-trained composers to non-Western instruments, rather it explores how the instrument's "aura" of traditional meaning interacts interculturally with contrasting materials and aesthetic principles. Utz's summary of *Teatro Shanghai—Bühnenmusik* (2000) by Sánchez-Chiong—"a Vienna-based composer [...] born in Venezuela (1969) to a Cuban-Chinese family"—is particularly compelling. In his work's virtuosity, theatrical framing, and use of Cuban *descarga* elements, Utz writes, "Sánchez-Chiong certainly does little to evoke an atmosphere

of authenticity or archaic mythology. It is obvious in many cases that those composers who have experienced merging, hybridity, and anti-purism as a daily reality of life rebel against any thought of cultural 'authenticity' in a most pronounced manner" (p. 148).

Chapter IV of the book, "The *shō* Context," takes a similar course through different approaches to writing for the instrument in contemporary contexts, drawing from both Japanese and Western composers. The *shō* arguably has a still more auratic and mythical quality than the *sheng*, owing to its restricted role as a harmonic instrument in *tōgaku* music, its delicate construction and non-linear finger positions, and its traditional limitation to a constrained palette of just eleven *aitake* chords. Utz draws a conceptual line between composers who embrace the "symbolic connotative elements of the *shō*, what we could call the myth of the instrument" (Toshio Hosokawa) to those who critique or challenge this myth (Klaus Huber, Gerhard Stäbler, Chaya Czernowin, John Cage, Yūji Takahashi), working against its classical sound, ensemble role, and traditional modes of playing. Czernowin describes how in her piece *Die Kreuzung* (1995) for double bass, alto saxophone, and *ū* (a bass variant of the *shō*),

> the three instruments attempt to melt into one, but it is a fragile unity. The three attempt to hold their new identity together, but keep falling back into their old separated musical personalities. The whole piece is a struggle between the force that pushes the three to become one and the force that pushes each back, to be itself, true to its origin, alone.[6]

Utz's analysis of the piece points to the density and virtuosity of the writing for the *ū*, which like the double bass and saxophone undergoes a "complete anti-idiomaticization" (p. 303). The attempt to "melt into one" requires a reduction of the cultural identities of the three instruments (including the *ū*'s mythic aura) to the point of fusion into a "super-instrument," however provisional and unstable. The two works by Yūji Takahashi presented here are strikingly original in their demythologizing strategies: *Mimi no ho* (1994) for *shō*, viola, and speaker plays on the unique physical layout of the *shō*, transferring aspects of the sliding of the player's fingers over its holes to the left-hand writing for the viola. *Sōjō rinzetsu* (1997) is the product of a deep historical study of the instrument, drawing on its archaic history before the development of the courtly *togaku* style (p. 304-07). Neither taking on the *shō* "myth" unquestioningly nor reducing the instrument to a neutral source of exotic sounds, Takahashi's music perhaps best exemplifies Utz's idea of a reflexive approach which can "critically take up the myth of the *shō* but neither negate its cultural historicity nor absolutize it aesthetically" (p. 308).

Utz's dual approach to interculturality—through the linked concepts of entangled history and multiple modernities—has powerful resonances with George E. Lewis's recent writing on creolity or Creoleness (*créolité*): the movement emerging from the French-speaking Caribbean in the 1980s and led by the three authors of *Éloge de la créolité* (1989), Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant. "Creoleness is the world diffracted but recomposed […] Creoleness is an annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and of purity," they write, a model that preserves rather than flattens difference, with recognizable echoes in Utz's intercultural vision.[7] Through interculturality and creolity, Utz and Lewis maintain a certain optimism about the future, building a foundation for future development, acknowledging the cultural multiplicity of the present day (and our recent globalized history) and fashioning a new, creolized "usable past." Lewis asks: "Can the field and its curators explore, recognize and even posit a multicultural, multiethnic base for new music, with a variety of perspectives, histories, traditions, and methods?" (Lewis, p. 18). Such a base could offer an approach to embracing globalism without extending or reinforcing colonialism.

It would be founded on the "the circulation of sounds, culture, histories and ideas" (Lewis, p. 18). It would recognize that "all music is in a fundamental sense intercultural," demanding "new perspectives that challenge and discard long-held stereotypes and canonized thinking" (Utz, p. 13). Elsewhere, composer Du Yun has described the role of creators and curators of new music shaping this ongoing process: "What you hear and see is exactly the heritage of a future. What we are making is a lineage for the present. And this present, however challenging in all its splendor and all its agony, is our honor for many generations to come."[8]

Perhaps, as Chaya Czernowin suggests in "The Other Tiger," the state of being a nomad and a visitor in other cultures is not incidental to the practice of new music but an essential condition: composers are emissaries, "report[ing] subjectively on the state of the world at this point in time."[9] She goes further: "a mental digestive tract, a type of an enlarged subconscious, where difficulties or contradictory material are worked out by way of dreams, deliberated upon, as a preparation for the future."[10] If part of composition is about coming to terms with identity, the diverse and multiple-sourced materials of contemporary music offer particularly meaningful contradictions to be unraveled and "digested." Like the three coalescing and diverging instruments in Czernowin's trio *Die Kreuzung*, innovative musicians in an intercultural world are continually dealing with the interaction and negotiation of deep-rooted ideas of identity, belonging, multiplicity and difference.

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2. Originally published as *Komponieren im Kontext der Globalisierung. Perspektiven für eine Musikgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2014. The book is available as a free, open-access PDF (www.transcript-publishing.com/978-3-8376-5095-2), though a few copyrighted score excerpts do not appear in this digital version. The book's cover shows Kazuko Takada playing a reconstructed five-string ancient Chinese zither in Yūji Takahashi's 1992 work *Unebiyama* (photo by Takashi Kijima).

3. George E. Lewis, "A Small Act of Curation," *OnCurating,* vol. 44, 2020, pp. 11–22. The study by Fure and Born is available online: https://griddarmstadt.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/grid_gender_research_in_darmstadt.pdf.

4. Yang Chien-Chang (2017), "Technologies of Tradition in Post-War Musical Avant-Gardism: A Theoretical Reflection," *The World of Music* (new series), vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 41–58.

5. Jan Assmann (2011), *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 262.

6. Chaya Czernowin, "The Other Tiger," (p. 2) lecture given during the Réseau Varèse Conference in cooperation with MaerzMusik, March 17, 2007. Published in Franklin Cox, Dániel Péter Biró, Alexander Sigman and Steven Kazuo Takasugi (ed.) (2011), *The Second Century of New Music*, Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press, pp. 182–189. French translation in Nicolas Donin (ed.) (2019), *Un siècle d'écrits réflexifs sur la composition musicale: anthologie d'auto-analyses de Janáček à nos jours*, Geneva, Droz/Haute école de musique de Genève.

7. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant (1990), "In Praise of Creoleness," translated by Mohamed B. Taleb Khyar, *Callaloo,* vol. 13, pp. 886–909.

8. Du Yun (2020), "Who Owns Asian Culture? Not Me," *OnCurating*, vol. 44, pp. 44–50.

9. Czernowin, "The Other Tiger," pp. 4–5.

10. *Ibid.*