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Barbara Mittler. *Dangerous Tunes: The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China Since 1949*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997. 516 pp. ISBN 3-447-03920-5 (hardcover)

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Barbara Mittler. *Dangerous Tunes: The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China Since 1949*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997. 516 pp. ISBN 3-447-03920-5 (hardcover).

This book, based upon the author's doctoral dissertation (University of Heidelberg), is an exploration of the relationship between politics and music in China by tracing the early efforts of Chinese composers who blend pentatonic Chinese melodies with Western harmony. Mittler also studies the more current Chinese attempts in bringing Chinese musical elements and aesthetics together with twentieth-century Western instrumental and compositional techniques. In so doing, she joins the scholars such as Peter Chang and Eric Lai<sup>1</sup> in studying hybrid music; she is by no means a "solitary fighter" on "fragile ground" (p. 35).

The title of the book arouses much interest. Yet, defining the scope as a study of new Chinese music contradicts what the book title suggests. In equating Chinese music with "new Chinese music," Mittler underrates its wide-ranging nature and musical development within the timeframe the book specifies. Many composers, whose works are explored here, come from major metropolitan areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Hong Kong and Taipei. The majority of such composers has an academic conservatory background and has studied abroad. Many indeed studied with Zhou Wenzhong (Columbia University), one of the early Chinese composers of this form of hybrid music. Though Zhou's presence is acknowledged, the impact he had on the compositional styles of his students (who later become composers in the field) has not been evaluated. Neither have the socio-economic attributes of the composers been discussed. Homogenizing compositional styles in "all three parts of China" (China, Taiwan and Hong Kong) as the outcome of the "the forces of the market" (p. 266), underrates various socio-cultural and political factors at work in shaping this form of music.

The book consists of four chapters; new Chinese music as a politicized language is the overarching theme of Chapters 1 to 3. In Chapter 1, Mittler presents the music history of Chinese composers who pondered the path Chinese music was to take after having experienced a century of Western imperialism. Here the author provides useful background information of such composers and their efforts for non-Chinese readers. In Chapter 2, Mittler raises the question: How political is new Chinese music? Claiming to investigate the "non-semantic" power of music as social critique, she focuses on "instrumental, absolute music" (p. 16). Paradoxically, the majority of musical works scrutinized, such as *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961), the first model revolutionary works during the Cultural Revolution, and Hong Kong composer Doming Lam's *When the Winds Are Changing* (1990), either have lyrical titles or well-defined programs. On another tangent, claiming *The Red Detachment of Women* as new Chinese music at one point and denouncing it

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Chang, "Tan Dun's String Quartet *Feng-Ya-Song*: Some Ideological Issues," *Asian Music* XXII, no. 2 (1991): 127-57; Eric Lai, "Toward a Theory of Pitch Organization: The Early Music of Chou Wen-Chung," *Asian Music* XXV, no. 1-2 (1993-94): 177-207.

as falling outside the “Chinese convention” because it is “modeled very closely on Western archetypes” at another, is an incongruent argument. Further, the claim that all music in China “is political” because of the non-semantic nature of absolute, instrumental music (p. 125) is a reduction of the complex relationships that exist between various musical works and the discretely different socio-political contexts from which they stem.

In Chapter 3, Mittler raises the question: How new is China’s new music? She aptly points out that new music composers draw heavily from tradition. Unfortunately, her shifting reference to and interpretation of China’s “tradition” weaken both her argument and conclusion. Not only does she valorize “folk songs” as the articulations of peoples who live the “unchanging realities of the Chinese countryside” (p. 296, n. 130), but she also takes “folk” elements in musical compositions as immediate Chinese markers. In analyzing Tan Dun’s *Feng-Ya-Song* (a title that is rooted in the *Book of Songs* compiled by Confucius), for example, Mittler points out that a *Yao* (a minority group in southwest China) folk song is used. By casually interpreting the controversial presence of a folk song as a reflection of how “all culture serves someone’s interest” (p. 124), the author underrates the potential subversiveness of using a southern minority folk song as representative of a corpus of northern canonic literature. Additionally, she does not acknowledge the “new synthesis” that arises from “new wave” composers’ blending of sophisticated modal changes and accelerating tempos (a conventional practice in many classical Chinese instrumental pieces) with atonal compositional techniques.

In the same chapter, Mittler introduces the notion of a “paradigmatic composer,” and creates three variations of the paradigm to “fit” the three different geo-political regions, China (fifty-two composers), Taiwan (twenty-five composers) and Hong Kong (twenty-two composers). Germane works such as Luo Zhongrong’s *Shejiang Cai Furong* (a piece for soprano and piano, 1979) and Lu Yan’s *Fantasy for Orchestra I* (1987) are some examples studied in the chapter. Without clarifying what separates the generations, the author seems to suggest the chronological evolution of new Chinese music compositions from pentatonic romanticism to more innovative forms of hybrid music (Chinese and twentieth-century Western). The importance of “being Chinese” forms one of the criteria the author uses for the paradigms. The quantitative rating she uses, however, does not allow the composers to express how they feel being Chinese or what “Chineseness” means. Not altogether useful, these paradigms are presented but never engaged in the author’s study of the composers and their works.

In Chapter 4 the author addresses the question of *minzuxing* which she translates as “Chineseness.” This chapter consists of two parts. In the first part, she outlines four “categories of assimilation,” a term introduced to describe the progressive changes composers make as they move from one category to another (p. 303). Using the composers and their works cited in the previous chapter, Mittler suggests these categories cut across time, a notion that runs counter to what was previously presented. Nevertheless, she provides cursory analyses of the radical Chinese deployment of time, Chinese rhythm, melody,

form, single sound, silence, speech voice, instruments, philosophy, religion, ritual, literature, calligraphy and painting in this hybrid musical form, techniques that have given the genre its innovative Chinese stamp (pp. 325–77).

The second part of Chapter 4 is potentially important and enlightening. Here Mittler considers the reception of these “categories” of new Chinese music *vis-à-vis* what she considers to be emic and etic perspectives. In her categorization, “five Chinese intellectuals, not in the field of music” (p. 379) represent the emic views while “five Westerners, some musicians, some sinologists” (*ibid.*) represent the etic perspectives. Beyond the fact that here the listener’s body remains quite amorphous, the *a priori* assumption that emic and etic perspectives necessarily come respectively from Chinese and Westerners (with backgrounds both in music and sinology) is problematic. A simplistic approach and casual analytical methodology lead to simplistic findings. Non-musician Chinese listeners identify the pieces as Chinese compositions by the presence of Chinese instruments. Westerners with music/sinology tend either to applaud or denounce such pieces by finding parallels between what they hear and what seems to resonate (positively or negatively) with Western musical elements. The conclusion that some Chinese composers (those who engage romantic pentatonicism in particular) invent “the death of its own folk tradition” (p. 313) and others (who engage “mythological conceptualization” in particular) “were able to find a most authentic traditional voice” (p. 324), warrants much rethinking. The implication that Chinese “authenticity” is to be located amidst Western compositional techniques and musical forms is provocative, and her remark that “[t]he confrontation with a single body—Western music—triggered off a single response from composers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China” (p. 390), is largely reductionist.

Technical and editorial errors abound in this text. Xian Xinghai is misnamed as the composer of the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* and *zou xikou* is misinterpreted as “a Mongolian vocal genre.” Frequent changes in font size are a challenge to the reader and quotes in French, German, Italian and some transliterated Chinese phrases are not translated. The distinction between the interpretation of the author and the voices of the composers is not always clear due to the citation format. The year of publication is not always included in initial citation. Casual statements such as “Chinatown only provides an (often strange) selection of the breadth of China’s cultural heritage” (p. 9) and Hong Kong is “culturally stagnant” (p. 238) need more careful consideration. Finally, the claim that “even today, ... anything to do with love and sexual relations, be it literature, art or music, is habitually banned” in all parts of China (p. 131) is inaccurate.

Overall, this book contains rich contents pertaining to a very specific form of hybrid music that comes from the urban areas of various parts of China. Nevertheless, much care is required for a meaningful read along the lines of argument it offers.

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