

The Dramatic Use of the Flute in Bright Sheng's *Melodies of a Flute and Flute Moon*

by  
Shanshan Wu

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Chair of Committee: Aaminah Durrani

Committee Member: Aralee Dorough

Committee Member: Paul Bertagnolli

Committee Member: Franz Krager

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## ABSTRACT

Bright Sheng (b. 1955), a Chinese-born American composer, has brought his traditional heritage to his adopted home by grafting a variety of Chinese art forms onto the language of modern Western music. Sheng creates a synthetic style that incorporates Chinese traditional materials, including folkloric traditions, legends, and poetry by employing Western musical genres and instruments. His cross-cultural approach, with its sense of balance between East and West, has garnered the attention of audiences and critics both at home and internationally.

This study explores Sheng's eclectic procedures with case studies of two of his representative cultural fusion works—*Flute Moon* (1999) and *Melodies of a Flute* (2012). It focuses on two aspects of his synthetic approach. First, the essay will discuss how Sheng evokes timbres and textures that are recognizably Chinese, but executed through the exclusive use of Western instruments. Of particular importance is the imitation of the sound of Chinese flute (*dizi*) by using members of the Western flute family and applying a variety of colors, timbres, and playing techniques. Second, the study examines how Sheng takes inspiration from the classic lyrical poetry of the Song dynasty (*songci*) and Chinese mythology. I provide an interpretation of poetic images and symbolism from these elements in the context of the poem's culture and history to afford performers a deeper understanding of Sheng's compositional style and performing practice.

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## Introduction

Over the five decades following the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, Chinese-born American composers have brought their traditional heritage to their adopted home by grafting a variety of Chinese folk-art forms onto the language of modern Western music. Among these composers is Bright Sheng (b.1955), who emigrated to the United States in 1982. Sheng typically develops traditional Chinese materials while employing Western musical genres, compositional techniques, and instruments. His cross-cultural approach, with its sense of balance between East and West, has garnered the attention of audiences and critics both at home and internationally.

This essay focuses on Sheng's eclectic procedures with case studies of two works—*Flute Moon* (1999) and *Melodies of a Flute* (2012). *Flute Moon* is a two-movement orchestral work scored for flute, piccolo, harp, piano, string orchestra, and percussion. His more recent *Melodies of a Flute* features a small chamber ensemble encompassing flute, alto flute, violin, cello and marimba. Evocations of Chinese mythological creatures and the poetry of the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE), present in both works, reveal his attachment to his Chinese literary heritage. Of particular interest to this study is his prominent use of the Western flute family, which summons the ethereal timbre of the traditional Chinese bamboo flute, the *dizi*. For performers, an appreciation of the cultural background and aesthetics guiding this work provides the opportunity for a more meaningful interpretation. To this end, my study will explore how Sheng brings to life the mythological characters and the sentiments of the poetry through a wide variety

of colors and special effects afforded by the flutes as part of his cross-cultural musical language in these two striking works.

### **Sheng's Life Experiences – A Musical Journey from East to West**

Sheng's musical language is a fusion of Western and Eastern cultures. Three life experiences influenced this approach to music composition: early introduction to music in childhood, exposure to Tibetan and Chinese folk traditions during a period of rustication, and the study of Western music techniques absorbed during his studies both in China and the United States.

Sheng's early years in China had a profound effect on his mature style. He was born into an intellectual family in Shanghai, China in 1955. His parents, both amateur musicians, laid the foundation of his eclectic compositional style by introducing their son to a broad spectrum of musical experiences. During his childhood, he became acquainted with the piano as well as a number of Chinese instruments. In particular, he developed a strong interest in playing the *dizi*. In the early period of the newly-founded Chinese republic—the 1950s through the early 1960s—the ideology of socialist realism prevailed in music, painting, and architecture. Under the philosophy of “socialist in content, national in form,” musicians were encouraged to compose using ethnic instruments and elements of Chinese tradition to extol the glory of socialism and the lives of the working class.<sup>1</sup> The ruling authorities promoted the cultivation of the *dizi* because of its easy accessibility to the general public and unique “Chinese-sounding” timbre. Sheng

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<sup>1</sup> Jiandong Liu, “论丰子恺的‘社会主义现实主义’音乐观” [Feng Zikai's Music and Socialist Realism], *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute*, no. 4 (December 2017): 99.

developed an instinctive understanding of the sonic capabilities and style of the instrument through his familiarity with its traditional repertoire.

Folkloric tradition has served as a great inspiration in Sheng's writing, in part because of his experience of rustication. The Cultural Revolution was a tumultuous time when an ultra-leftist political ideology dominated every aspect of Chinese life, including art. Any artwork that could be interpreted as bearing elements historically related to the aesthetics of the aristocratic or bourgeois classes became a political taboo. Nearly all art composition and performance stopped except for a few propaganda pieces. During that time, many young people with an urban-intellectual family background were rusticated in distant provinces. Sheng was sent to the remote Qinghai-Tibetan plateau in Northwest China in 1970 at the age of fifteen for "re-education." Fortunately, his musical skills allowed him to escape the hardships of farm labor. Instead, he was recruited as a pianist and percussionist by a Tibetan dance troupe that introduced him to traditional Tibetan songs.<sup>2</sup> His participation in a Chinese orchestra allowed him to further observe and study the sound effects and unique timbres of traditional instruments. This chance exposure to local folkloric traditions is manifest in Sheng's mature compositions. *Tibetan Dance* for clarinet, violin, and piano (2000) and *Tibetan Swing* for orchestra (2002) reflect this absorption of the music of this rural area and its local traditions.

The end of the Cultural Revolution initiated another turning point in Sheng's career. His admission to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music to study composition in 1977 gave him the opportunity to advance along the path of formal music education and learn Western music theory and techniques. Sheng arrived in the United States in 1982 to

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<sup>2</sup> Lindsley Cameron, "At Home in Two Worlds," *The New York Times*, February 16, 1997. Accessed October 20, 2018.

continue his musical studies with George Perle at Queens College in New York City. He completed his DMA in 1993 at Columbia University. During this time in New York, he studied with Chou Wen-Chung, along with several other Chinese students, Tan Dun, Chen Yi, and Zhou Long. This group of Chou's students emerged on the American music scene and achieved recognition as “new wave” composers who write in a Western-derived modern musical language while maintaining their Eastern cultural identity.<sup>3</sup>

At Tanglewood Music Festival in 1985, Sheng met Leonard Bernstein. Until his death in 1990, Bernstein served as a mentor to the younger composer and exerted a profound influence on his musical growth. Sheng's training in America sharpened his skills in Western compositional techniques, but he did not leave his heritage behind. He later recalled a discussion with Bernstein about the possibilities of cultural fusion in contemporary music. Bernstein strongly supported Sheng's idea of synthesizing various ethnic sources and encouraged Sheng's search for his own musical identity.<sup>4</sup>

Following Bernstein's advice, Sheng quickly developed his own style and achieved wide recognition in the Western world. In 2001, he received the “Genius Grant” from the MacArthur Foundation for his innovative approaches that “merge diverse musical customs in works that transcend conventional aesthetic boundaries.”<sup>5</sup> He has served as composer for the New York City Ballet, Tanglewood Music Center, the Mannes College of Music, and Atlantic Center for the Arts. In 1995, he was appointed to

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<sup>3</sup>James Oestreich, “The Sound of New Music Is Often Chinese; A New Contingent of American Composers,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/01/arts/the-sound-of-new-music-is-often-chinese-a-new-contingent-of-american-composers.html?pagewanted=1> (accessed February 26, 2019) and

Hsien-Fang Hsieh, “The Influences of Eastern and Western Music in Chen Yi's ‘Percussion Concerto’,” (D.M.A. diss., University of Miami, 2016), 1.

<sup>4</sup>Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times Essential Library: Classical Music: A Critic's Guide to the 100 Most Important Recordings* (New York, Henry Holt, 2004), 318.

<sup>5</sup> Sheng, “Biography.” <http://brightsheng.com/bio.html> (accessed August 31, 2019).

a faculty position at the University of Michigan He currently serves in this capacity as the Leonard Bernstein Distinguished Professor of Composition. In addition to teaching, he continues to be an active composer.<sup>6</sup>

### **Sheng's Musical Style**

Sheng's years of study and experience in both China and the United States provided him with insight into both musical traditions and allow him to create a personal style that fuses the West and East. He considers the Chinese and American musical stimuli within his style as co-equal partners, observing: “Chinese and Asian music is unquestionably my mother tongue, while I consider Western music culture my father tongue.”<sup>7</sup>

Sheng likens his philosophy of musical style to that of Bartók, who sought to combine Hungarian and mainstream European elements into a synergy that engages the audience in “the highest strata of the Western musical thought.”<sup>8</sup> In a 1999 interview, Sheng observed:

Bartók’s music is very unique and important to me. I really feel that the so-called “roughness” of folk music is part of its beauty. Bartók believed that there were three ways you could use folk music in composition. One is that you can use the folk melody with accompaniment. The second is that you could write in imitation of the folk melody - in the folkloric style. The third is that you don't deliberately write in folk music style but your music comes out with the flavor of folk music. By then you have the spirit of folk music in your blood.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Shelly Smith, “Eastern and Western Aesthetics and Influences in the Twenty-first Century Flute Concerti of Chinese-born American Composers,” (D.M.A. diss., Florida State University, 2012), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>9</sup> Shelly Smith, “An Interview with Bright Sheng,” 1999. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0007.103> (Accessed May 10, 2019).

In *Three Chinese Love Songs* for soprano, viola, and piano (1988), Sheng uses Chinese folk tunes as thematic materials, and the Western method of development to vary them by changing dynamics, timbre, rhythm, and tempo.<sup>10</sup> However, Sheng believes most of his music falls somewhere between the last two types.<sup>11</sup> In many of his works, such as *China Dream* (1995) and *Postcards* (1997), he adopts Chinese folkloric elements with careful choices of Western instruments as surrogates to recreate a Chinese-sounding musical synthetic style. There are still other works, like his piano concerto, *Red Silk Dance* (1999), in which he intentionally eschews Chinese musical elements, such as folk melody or pentatonic scales. However, he expects the listener to perceive a sense of a synthesized musical style that crosses West and East.<sup>12</sup>

Sheng's cross-cultural style shows influence not only from folkloric tradition but also from other forms of Chinese materials. He shows a consistent interest in drawing inspiration from Chinese poetic genres such as *shi* and *ci*, which are representative of the high art of ancient China. In particular, he favors the lyrical poetry of the Song Dynasty (*songci*), and poems from that heritage, such as *Two Poems from the Sung Dynasty* for soprano and orchestra (1985), *Flute Moon* (1999), and *Melodies of a Flute* (2012), appear in several of his compositions. In the latter two works, Sheng explores a cross-cultural approach to evoke timbres that are recognizably Chinese, but executed through the exclusive use of Western instruments, and enriched by allusions to *songci* symbolism and Chinese myth. While employing Western instruments and genres that reference Chinese

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<sup>10</sup> Ting-ju Lai, "A Perspective on Ethnic Synthesis in Twentieth Century Art Music with a Focus on Analysis of String Quartet No.3 by Bright Sheng," (D.M.A. diss., University of California at Los Angeles), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Yi Zhang, "Yi Zhang's Interview with Bright Sheng," in "When East Meets West: A Stylistic Analysis of Bright Sheng's Piano Works" (D.M.A. diss., University of Houston, 2010), 94.

musical traditions, Sheng's works tend to emphasize melodic development through embellishment, favoring the linear line over harmonic support.<sup>13</sup> The synthesis of Western and Eastern traditions present in *Flute Moon* and *Melodies of a Flute* are the subject of the remainder of this study.

## **Review of Research**

Because Sheng is primarily known for his synthesis of the East and West, current scholarship on his compositions has mostly focused on the composer's cross-cultural approach and the folkloric elements in fusion works. Several studies offer overviews of Sheng's cross-cultural composition and discuss important aspects of his synthetic style.

Shelly Smith's dissertation on twenty-first century flute repertoire by three Chinese-born American composers provides a survey of the presence of Chinese philosophical thinking and aesthetic concepts such as change, balance, allusiveness and symbolism, silence and simplicity, and the symbiotic nature of art and language. Smith explored the influence of Eastern and Western aesthetics on their representative orchestral works by these composers, including Sheng's *Flute Moon*.<sup>14</sup>

Peter Chang provided comments on eleven works representative of Sheng's style before 2007. He analyzed the cross-cultural synthesis using the concept of "musical syncretism." It refers to an acculturation process in which the music composer adopts compatible elements from new culture in musical fusion with elements from their old culture. Chang further compared his fusion approach with that of Chou Wen-Chung.<sup>15</sup> In

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<sup>13</sup> Lai, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Peter M. Chang, "The Music of Bright Sheng: Expressions of Cross-cultural Experience," *Bright Sheng: Composer, Conductor, and Pianist*, March 5, 2006.

another paper, Chang investigated Sheng's approach by examining the motivic, contrapuntal, and tonal treatment of a single Chinese folk tune, "The Stream Flows," used in three of his works.<sup>16</sup>

Two papers that discuss the reception of Bartók on Bright Sheng's composition include Sheng's own writing on Bartók and Wong's study of Bartók's influence on two American Chinese composers. Sheng discussed Bartók's approach and how it relates to Chinese music composition, which I will discuss below.<sup>17</sup> Wong further explored the social-cultural factors that fostered this influence in the historical context.<sup>18</sup>

Other studies examine Sheng's use of folkloric traditions—particularly the incorporation of Qinghai/Tibetan folk songs in his fusion works and Sheng's retention of the characteristics of folklore overlaid with Western musical language. Four doctoral or master's dissertations of this type focus on the analysis of individual pieces by Sheng. Ting-ju Lai provides an analysis of String Quartet No. 3(1993), which was composed based on Sheng memories of Tibetan dance and folk music. He summarized the compositional techniques and ethnic influences in this piece.<sup>19</sup> Chiao-Hsuan Kang analyzed Sheng's work for cello solo, *Seven Tunes Heard in China* (1995), with a focus on issues of performance practice. Sheng chose melodies that originate from different

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[http://www.brightsheng.com/Sheng\\_essay/Peter%20Chang-Music%20of%20BS.pdf](http://www.brightsheng.com/Sheng_essay/Peter%20Chang-Music%20of%20BS.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> The three works in question are *Three Chinese Love Songs for Soprano, Viola, and Piano* (1988), *The Stream Flows* (solo violin, 1990), and *China Dreams* (string orchestra, 1995), see Peter Chang, "Bright Sheng's Music: An Expression of Cross-cultural Experience—Illustrated through the Motivic, Contrapuntal and Tonal Treatment of the Chinese Folk Song *The Stream Flows*," *Contemporary Music Review* 26, no. 5-6 (October-December 2007): 619-33.

<sup>17</sup> Bright Sheng, "巴托克与现代中国音乐," [Bartók and Modern Chinese Music], *Art of Music, Journal of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music*, no. 4 (April 1998): 55-56.

<sup>18</sup> Hoi-Yan Wong, "Bartók's Influence on Chinese New Music in the Post-Cultural Revolution Era," *Studia Musicologica* 48, no. 1-2 (March 2007): 237-43.

<sup>19</sup> Ting-ju Lai, "A Perspective on Ethnic Synthesis in Twentieth Century Art Music with a Focus on Analysis of String Quartet No. 3 by Bright Sheng," (D.M.A diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2001), 9.



regions of China, including one from Qinghai and another from Tibet.<sup>20</sup> Hsuan-Yu Lee provides an analysis of the compositional techniques employed in *Postcards* and discusses performance issues of concern to conductors and performers with regard to the work's rhythmic complexity, string harmonics, and atmosphere.<sup>21</sup> Xue's conducted a study on the pitch structure on Sheng's solo piano *My Song* (1989) and discussed the use of pentatonic scale, Western musical techniques, and ethnic characteristics in this piece.<sup>22</sup>

However, the traditional poetry of the Tang and Song dynasties, from which Sheng draws significant inspiration, are less discussed. Traditional Chinese poetry employs sophisticated language that differs substantially from oral tradition. The images and symbolism in the poetry need to be interpreted in the context of the poets' life circumstances and historical events. Though there is a substantial body of research on these poets and the poetry of these eras, study of Chinese poetry in Western music so far has been limited.

Sheng uses Western instruments as surrogates to evoke the timbre of the Chinese instrument and allude to the symbolism in poetry. The cross-cultural approach to orchestration in Sheng's compositions warrants further discussion. Although Smith provides a brief discussion of references to the *dizi* tradition and Chinese poetry in Sheng's work *Flute Moon*, an improved interpretation of these works requires adequate knowledge of Chinese poetry, history, and instruments—a significant barrier for Western audiences.

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<sup>20</sup> Chiao-Hsuan Kang, "Understanding of Authentic Performance Practice in Bright Sheng's Seven Tunes Heard in China for Solo Cello," (D.M.A. diss., University of Cincinnati, 2016), 14.

<sup>21</sup> Hsuan-Yu Lee, "A Study on Hybrid Style and Orchestration in Bright Sheng's *Postcards*," (D.M.A. diss., University of North Texas, 2015), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Yifan Xue, "钢琴套曲《我的歌》音高结构研究" [Study on the Pitch Structure of Piano Divertimento "My Song"], Master's thesis, Yanshan University (2016), 15.

To fill gaps in the understanding of Sheng's music, my study will focus on two of flute works from different decades: *Flute Moon* (1999) and *Melodies of a Flute* (2012). These two pieces are representative of his cross-cultural compositional approach that fuses the traditional Chinese poetry within the language of modern Western music. I begin my interpretation of these two works with an introduction to the important background information: *dizi* flute, Song dynasty, lyrical poetry of *songci*, and the lives of two poets, Li Qingzhao and Jiang Kui. I will explore how Sheng draws inspiration from the poetry and the important role orchestration plays in the compositional processes in fusion works in which Sheng employs Western instruments to represent Chinese timbres. I will further discuss Sheng's musical treatment of poetic allusions and symbolism in these two pieces.

### ***Flute Moon and Melodies of a Flute***

*Flute Moon* is a two-movement orchestral work for piccolo/flute, harp, piano, strings, and percussion, dedicated to and commissioned by the Houston Symphony Orchestra and its former director Christoph Eschenbach. It premiered on May 22, 1999 with the use of manuscript and score that were not published by G. Schirmer until 2004. Since the premiere, two well-received recordings have been made of this work. The earlier recording features flutist Sharon Bezaly with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, released in 2000, and the more recent one features Danish recorder player Michala Petri with the Copenhagen Philharmonic Orchestra, released in 2010.<sup>23</sup> This musical work,

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<sup>23</sup>Bright Sheng, *Flute Moon / China Dreams / Postcards*. Sharon Bezaly with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Lan Shui, BIS recordings, 2000, CD; Bright Sheng, *East Meets West: Chinese Recorder Concertos*. Michala Petri with the Copenhagen Philharmonic, conducted by Lan Shui, OUR recordings, 2010, CD.

although orchestral, nevertheless features a prominent display of flute. During the premiere, Sheng asked the principal flutist Aralee Dorough to stand in front of the orchestra, explaining to the audience that she was the featured soloist for the music.<sup>24</sup>

The two movements of *Flute Moon* draw inspiration from two different sources: Chinese mythology and poetry. In the first movement, Sheng creates ties to Chinese tradition by evoking mythological elements in his music. He recalls the Chi-Lin, a mythical creature in Asian culture, and makes use of the flute to render the female side of the Chi-Lin. Sheng bases the second movement on “Evanescent Fragrances,” a lyrical poem (*songci*) composed by Song-dynasty poet Jiang Kui. Sheng employs Western flutes and adopts a variety of colors, timbres, and playing techniques to create “dizi-esque” sounds that evoke Chinese traditions. Moreover, each movement depicts the character of the programmatic associations through a combination of Chinese melodic materials and Western chromatic harmony.<sup>25</sup>

Sheng’s recent chamber work, *Melodies of a Flute*, written for alto flute, C flute, violin, cello, and marimba, parallels *Flute Moon* with poetic allusion and use of the flute. It premiered on April 10, 2012, at Huntington Library of San Marino, California, in a performance by Camerata Pacifica. This work consists of two moments, each inspired by a *songci* poem: *To the tune: Memories of a Flute on the Phoenix Terrace*; and *To the tune: Like a Dream*. Both poems were composed by the same author, Li Qingzhao, who is one of the great female poets in Chinese history. Sheng adopts poetic imagery and symbolism from the poetic texts of two poems. Sheng’s adaptation of a traditional Chinese soundscape and orchestral practice to Western instrumentation is of primary

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<sup>24</sup> Bright Sheng, Interviewed by Aralee Dorough, 1999. Jones Hall, Houston, Texas.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, 55.

interest for this piece. Sheng employs C flute and alto flute to evoke the playing of *dizi* flutes and the combination of violin and cello to imitate *yangqin* and *guqin*, two-stringed Chinese instruments.

## **Background**

Sheng's allusions to Chinese cultural artifacts—traditional instruments, poetry and mythology—play important roles in the two works discussed in this study, *Flute Moon* and *Melodies of a Flute*. This approach places demands on musicians working towards a convincing performance of Sheng's music, but who may be unfamiliar with the legacy of his inherited traditions. The remainder of this section is intended to provide a brief window into the composer's world. I begin my discussion with the Chinese instruments referenced in these two works, followed by an overview of the poetry and mythology that inspired them.

### **Traditional Chinese Instruments**

The term “*dizi*” is a collective name for a family of similarly-constructed transverse flutes that differ in dimensions, range, and resulting timbre. *Dizi* intended for professional performance are constructed from the whole bamboo stem. It is also possible to find *dizi* in antiquity or even modern times built from other materials like bone, jade, or stone. The oldest archaeological evidence of musical instruments in China is bone flutes unearthed in the Jiahu Neolithic site dating back to circa 6000 BCE. Jade *dizi* often appear in Chinese poetry and mythology as a symbol of beauty and elegance and are

popular among collectors. However, its primary purpose is decorative rather than professional performance.

The earliest records of bamboo flutes appear in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng (circa 433 BCE) in Hubei, China. The tomb housed two bamboo flutes and many other musical instruments for ceremonial use.<sup>26</sup> The bamboo *dizi* has maintained its status as the mainstream *dizi* type for two millennia and continues to be one of the most popular traditional instruments today.

The traditional *dizi* has six to ten equidistantly-spaced fingerholes, resulting in the imperfect tuning system common among instruments of the pre-industrial age. The standardized fully-chromatic *dizi*, as known as *xindi* (“新笛”, literally “new flute”) was an adaptation invented for performance in modern Chinese orchestras. In the 1930s, the placement of fingerholes was altered to allow an accurate tuning of semitones in equal temperament.<sup>27</sup> One of the most distinctive features of *dizi* construction is the use of a membrane, a thinly-layered, and transparent substance attached to the membrane hole (*mokong*, “膜孔”), and placed between the embouchure and finger holes. When the performer blows through the membrane, the instrument produces its characteristic reedy timbre.<sup>28</sup>

The *dizi* family is classified into two geographical categories: Northern *dizi* (*bangdi*, “梆笛”) and Southern *dizi* (*qudi*, “曲笛”). Northern and southern *dizi* differ in dimensions. The Northern *dizi*, generally the shorter of the two types, usually 44 to 56

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<sup>26</sup> Keren Lin, “中国萧笛史” [History of the Chinese dizi] (Shanghai: Jiaotong University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>27</sup> Kai-Wing Chow, *Beyond the May Fourth Paradigm: In Search of Chinese Modernity* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008), 212.

<sup>28</sup> Alan R. Thrasher, *The Transverse Flute in Traditional Chinese Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 96.

cm, contrasts with the Southern *dizi*, which reaches 66 to 70 cm. Prior to the twentieth century, both types of *dizi* were restricted primarily to their respective areas of origin: Northern China or Southern China, as their names suggest. Because of their geographical isolation, two distinct playing styles evolved. The style in the North is called *beipai*, “北派” and, in the South, the style is known as *nanpai*, “南派.”<sup>29</sup> Northern *bangdi* music in the *beipai* style is commonly forceful or angular. The southern *qudi* music in the *nanpai* style is slow and lyrical.

Figure 1 provides a comparison of the sounding ranges of the two *dizi* types with the three Western flutes. It specifies their sounding ranges because the piccolo and alto flute are both transposing instruments—the piccolo sounds an octave higher than written, and the alto flute sounds a perfect fourth lower than written.

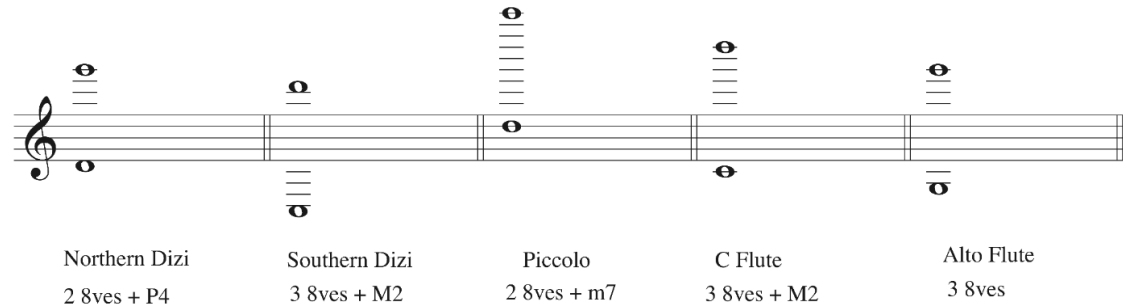
Figure 1 shows that the Northern *dizi* and Western piccolo share similar ranges. Both are relatively high in pitch and feature a reedy, piercing tone quality. The range of the Southern *dizi* is lower and approximates that of the Western alto flute, and both produce a dark, mellow tone.<sup>30</sup> The range of the Western C flute overlaps that of the other four instruments, including portions of both Northern and Southern *dizi*. The C flute produces a bright sound in higher ranges and darker sound in lower ranges.

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<sup>29</sup> Chow, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Frederick Lau, *Music in China: Experiencing Music, Experiencing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 44.

**Figure 1.** Sounding ranges of *dizi* and Western flute family.



Among the most attractive features idiosyncratic to the *dizi* are its clear, distinctive articulations and the variety of expressions that dramatically enrich the performance. The playing techniques of the *dizi* and Western flute families are strikingly similar. The techniques employed in the two pieces under discussion include techniques understood in both Eastern and Western traditions—tremolo, trills, glissandi, pitch bends, grace notes, and vibrato.

Tremolos and trills produce similar sound effects by using a technique of rapid finger tapping between two pitches. However, tremolos create a fluttering sound between two notes separated by a large interval, while trills alternate between pitches a half or whole step apart. In Chinese traditional music, the *dizi* produces a sweeping gesture with glissandi technique when it is in a lower range of sound, especially when trills are applied.<sup>31</sup> Pitch bending is a technique produced by rolling the headjoint (the top section of the flute including embouchure) inward or outward to create a small pitch alteration. Its use in Chinese music often creates a mournful mood or image.

<sup>31</sup> Lin, 45.

Grace notes appear most often in the fast tempo melodies of the Northern style. They are expressed as ornamental notes of variable length that temporarily displace, and resolve to, a principal note.<sup>32</sup> The performer produces grace notes with a fast and sudden movement of the fingers and stroke of the tongue. Because *dizi* performance rarely employs tongue articulation, these appoggiatura-like divisions create separation within slurred passages and are particularly common between repeated pitches.<sup>33</sup> Vibrato as an ornament is most often applied to dramatic moments to express certain intense emotions in both Northern and Southern *dizi* music. It can be produced on the *dizi* in two ways: *fuzhenyin* (“腹振音”) and *zhizhenyin* (“指振音”). For *fuzhenyin*, the performer blows deeply from the diaphragm by manipulating the air column with regulated air speed, a technique also used for Western flutes. This type of vibrato is generally used in slow, somber, and narrative songs typical of the Southern *dizi* style. For *zhizhenyin*, the performer produces the vibrato by lightly tapping a finger over open holes. *Zhizhenyin* often appears in combination with air vibrato, generally in light and joyful music, especially that of Northern *dizi* playing.<sup>34</sup>

Other Chinese instruments that make an appearance in *Melodies of a Flute* are the *yangqin* and *guqin*. Sheng scores marimba as a surrogate for the *yangqin*. There are some similarities of construction between Chinese *yangqin* and marimba since both instruments are chromatic, capable of a range of slightly over four octaves. The *yanquin* is usually played with two bamboo hammers made with rubber or leather heads. The percussive yet resonating tone of the marimba evokes a sound we identify with Chinese music.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>34</sup> In-Sung Kim, “Use of East Asian Traditional Flute Techniques in Works by Chou Weng-Chung, Isang Yun and Toru Takemitsu” (D.M.A. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2004), 25.



Chinese *guqin* is a zither instrument made of catalpa or camphor wood with seven silk strings that are plucked. In *Melodies of a Flute*, Sheng chooses to represent the *guqin* by the combination of violin and cello. He acknowledges the characteristic pizzicato and glissandi of the *guqin* by exploiting those same capabilities of his Western instruments.

The two pieces under discussion exemplify Sheng's adaption of traditional Chinese soundscape to Western instrumentation by the imitation of *dizi* flutes and two stringed Chinese instruments. I will demonstrate how Sheng evokes the unique sounds and techniques of Northern and Southern *dizi* and their respective styles using the C flute, piccolo, and alto flute. The awareness of the timbre and orchestration of the *dizi* will allow performers to apply authentic performing techniques to create a convincing cultural interpretation of these works.

### ***Songci***

Sheng is a great admirer of the poetry of the Song dynasty, which has served as an important source of inspiration for several of his compositions, including *Two Poems from the Sung Dynasty* (1985), *Postcards* (1997), as well as *Flute Moon* (1999) and *Melodies of a Flute* (2011). Sheng adopts poetic imagery and symbolism from a lyrical genre of Chinese poetry known as *ci*, or *Song-ci* if the poem was written during the Song dynasty. To place this important genre of poetry and the poets who cultivated it in their cultural context, I begin with a brief historical overview of the Song Dynasty.

Table 1 presents a chronology of China between the Tang and Yuan dynasties. Following a decline that had lasted for several centuries, China underwent a cultural revival from the seventh through the thirteenth centuries. Characterized by an economic

prosperity and cultural richness unprecedented and unmatched in pre-industrial China, this golden age peaked during the Song dynasty (960 – 1151 CE).<sup>35</sup> The high culture of the Song dynasty, with its achievements in porcelain, calligraphy, painting, poetry, and architecture, represents the pinnacle of ancient Chinese civilization. The Song dynasty falls into two phases: Northern Song and Southern Song. The Northern Song dynasty experienced a major foreign invasion and military defeat in 1127, after which the Song dynasty was reconstructed in the South.

**Table 1.** A chronology of the ruling Chinese dynasties between Seventh-Fourteenth Century.

Dates	Period	Dates	Note
618 - 907	Tang Dynasty		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-unification of China and the beginning of golden age</li> <li>• Blossoming of <i>Shi</i> Poetry</li> </ul>
907 - 960	Five Dynasties		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political fragmentation period after the collapse of Tang</li> </ul>
960-1127	Northern Song Dynasty	1084 1127	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blossoming of <i>Ci</i> Poetry</li> <li>• Birth of Li Qingzhao</li> <li>• Fall of Kaifeng</li> </ul>
1127 – 1279	Southern Song Dynasty	1151 1155 1209	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death of Li Qingzhao</li> <li>• Birth of Jiang Kui</li> <li>• Death of Jiang Kui</li> </ul>
1279 - 1368	Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of golden age</li> </ul>

Poetry during the Song dynasty experienced the blossoming of a lyrical genre known as *ci*. Early *ci* were simple poetic texts invented to fit pre-existing folk tunes. Their

<sup>35</sup> Frederick W. Mote, *Imperial China: 900–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 324-25.

titles, or *cipai* (“词牌”), retained the names of the melodies upon which they were based. *Ci* that evolved during the Song dynasty continued the tradition of retaining the rhythms, number and length of lines, and rhyme scheme of their source melodies.<sup>36</sup> These mature art-poems signal their folk tune origins by formulaic titles that attach their *cipai* to the phrase “To the tune.” The two poems that inspired Sheng's *Melodies of a Flute, To the tune: Memories of a Flute on the Phoenix Terrace* and *To the tune: Like a Dream*, are immediately recognizable as *songci*.

Compared with the earlier genre of poetry, *shi* of the Tang dynasty, *songci* are less rigid in structure, but more diverse in subject matter with a tendency to express personal feelings. The common subject matter of *ci* in its early period of development, cultivated in the Northern Song, focused on love, sadness, desire, solitude, and nostalgia.<sup>37</sup> The shifting zeitgeist of the Southern Song dynasty, following the fall of the Northern capital of Kaifeng in 1127, reflected a preoccupation with poems devoted to admonition, patriotic aspiration, or longing for peace.<sup>38</sup> The poets whose *ci* inspired Sheng's composition, Li Qingzhao and Jiang Kui, are both representative figures of *songci*. Although Li's career spanned both North and South Song dynasties, the two poems depicted in *Melodies of a Flute* were written in her early age in the North Song dynasty and thus fall into the first type. As a poet of the South Song dynasty, Jiang's poem *Evanescence Fragrances in Flute Moon* falls in the second type. A later section of this essay provides an interpretation of these poems in the context of Sheng's music.

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<sup>36</sup> Chia-ying Yeh, “论词之起源” [On the Origin of Ci], *Social Science in China*, no. 6 (1984): 171-85.

<sup>37</sup> Gu Zi, *China and West: Comparative Poetics and Translatology* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>38</sup> Shuen-fu Lin, “論南宋詞所展現的‘物趣’、‘夢境’與‘空間邏輯’的文化意義” [On the Cultural Significance of ‘Taste of Things,’ ‘Dream-scape,’ and ‘Logic of Space’ Shown in the *Ci* Poetry of the Southern Song], *Lingnan Journal of Chinese Studies*, no. 1 (2015): 33-83.

## *Mythology*

Chinese mythology has a long history that dates back to the beginning of Chinese civilization, if not earlier. It features a menagerie of divine creatures which are constant thematic materials of Chinese folk traditions, literature, and visual arts. The appearances of these mythological beings are combinations of physical traits of real-life animals. Among them, the Chinese dragon (*long*, “龙”) is the one most familiar to the Western world. Many other mythological beings make frequent appearances in Chinese culture, albeit known to the West to a lesser degree. *Melodies of a Flute* and *Flute Moon* borrow images of two mythological creatures: the Chinese phoenix (or simply phoenix, *Fenghuang*, “凤凰”) and *Chi-Lin* (“麒麟”), the characters and cultural symbolism of which are interpreted in both pieces.

Over the millennia, Chinese mythological creatures have evolved into cultural symbols with specific meanings. The Chinese phoenix resembles the peacock in physical appearance. It is often juxtaposed with the masculine Chinese dragon as a feminine parallel. While the Chinese dragon symbolizes power, the phoenix embodies female virtues such as beauty and charm, and represents a happy union of male and female.<sup>39</sup> *Chi-Lin* is a unicorn-like character having two genders: the male *Chi* and female *Lin*. Its appearance combines physical features of several distinctive animals and is often depicted as having a dragon-like head, the body of a musk deer, the hooves of a horse, and the scales of a fish. Despite its fearsome appearance, *Chi-Lin* frequents both Chinese

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<sup>39</sup> Luo Zhu Feng, “汉语大词典”[*Modern Chinese Dictionary*], no. 12, Beijing: Chinese Dictionary Publishing House, (2011), 1064.

written literature and oral art forms as a symbol of benevolence, rectitude, and justice.<sup>40</sup>

Chinese folk tradition and literature associate its rare appearance with the era of prosperity and the reign of a good ruler.<sup>41</sup> The Dragon, phoenix, *Chi-Lin*, and divine tortoise together are the four spiritual creatures in Chinese mythology.<sup>42</sup>

### *Melodies of a Flute*

Poetry of the Song dynasty is an important source of the traditional Chinese materials that Sheng incorporates into his compositions. For *Melodies of a Flute*, He chose two early *ci*-poems by poet Li Qingzhao, arguably the greatest female poet in Chinese history, and certainly the most prominent of her time.<sup>43</sup> His interpretations of *To the tune: Memories of a Flute on the Phoenix Terrace* and *To the tune: Like a Dream*, bring a depth of expressivity to the music of the first and second movements respectively.

A review of Table 1 indicates that Li lived through the political turmoil in the transition between the Northern and Southern Song dynasties. For Li personally, the change of ruling dynasty meant a loss of fortune, privilege, and family. Born into a Northern aristocratic household, she achieved fame as a poet at an early age.<sup>44</sup> She married her soulmate, Zhao Mingcheng, who shared her interest in poetry and art

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<sup>40</sup> Bright Sheng, Composer's notes for *Flute Moon*, (New York: Schirmer, 2004) and Kathleen Sheetz, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015).  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mohism> (accessed August 22, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Kathleen Sheetz, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015).  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mohism> (accessed September 2, 2019).

<sup>42</sup> Feng, 774.

<sup>43</sup> Zumei Chen, “李清照作品赏析集”[Review of Li Qingzhao's Poems], Chengdu: Bashu Books (2009), 82.

<sup>44</sup> Ronald Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 55.

collections. Years later, she lost both wealth and her husband during her years in the South. Li's personal experiences and intimate feelings became great inspirational sources to her works.

Noted for her great emotional intensity, Li is a representative figure of the genre of *ci* writers who reflected on personal experiences and intimate feelings.<sup>45</sup> Her early works, composed during Northern Song dynasty and including the two pieces associated with *Melodies of a Flute*, were written as a maiden and newlywed and focus on love, sadness, desire, solitude, and nostalgia.<sup>46</sup> Her own losses during her years in the South and her melancholy are reflected in the somber tone of the poetry from her final years.

### **First Movement- “Flute and Phoenix”**

Below is a translation of Li Qingzhao's poem, *To the Tune: Memories of a Flute on the Phoenix Terrace*. Li composed this heartfelt lament on the eve of her husband's departure to a remote location for a political assignment. In medieval China, women were generally discouraged from expressing themselves in writing, although subjects such as wifely devotion and longing for an absent husband were considered acceptable. Overt expression of affection was regarded as a social taboo. Instead, symbolic descriptions of objects and allusions to classical literature conveyed these sentiments metaphorically.<sup>47</sup>

#### *To the Tune: Memories of a Flute on the Phoenix Terrace*

No more incense smoke from the gilt lion burner;  
Quilts in the bed: a riot of crimson waves.  
A night of unrestful sleep,

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<sup>45</sup> Zongqi Cai, *How to Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press: 2008), 4.

<sup>46</sup> Zi, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Egan, 22.

And I am in no mood to comb my hair,  
Heedless that my jeweled make-up set is covered with dust,  
And the morning sun peeping above the curtain-hooks.

So much sadness of separation I am terrified to endure,  
Yet I hesitate on the verge of utterance  
For fear of bitterness.  
Of late I've been growing thin,  
Not for over-drinking,  
Nor from lament for autumn.

This is it! This is it!  
Ten thousand Songs of Farewell failed to detain  
The loved one - now gone far away  
To **Wuling Blossom Springs**.  
Here alone in this mist-locked **Qin chamber**  
I sit brooding the livelong day,  
With only the limpid stream showing me sympathy  
As it glides quietly past the terrace.  
A fresh wave of regret floods my heart  
Where I gaze.<sup>48</sup>

In the second stanza of *Memories of a Flute on the Phoenix Terrace*, two such images, highlighted in the translation by bold print, enhance the affective meaning of the poem. “Wuling Blossom Springs” alludes to a well-known fifth-century poem by Chinese poet Tao Yuanming, based on the theme of the sorrow of parting. The image of “Qin chamber” evokes the folk tale “Phoenix and Flute,” which relates the romance between Nongyu, a princess of the Qin Kingdom, and a virtuoso jade *dizi* player, Xiaoshi. The pair fall in love, and Xiaoshi plays flute music for his beloved on an idyllic phoenix terrace decorated with the likenesses of these mythical creatures. One day, the music attracts the attention of a phoenix. The phoenix, a symbol of love and fidelity, descends and carries them away to heaven.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jiaosheng Wang, “The Complete *Ci*-Poems of Li Qingzhao: A New English Translation,” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 13 (1989): 151. Edited by Shanshan Wu.

<sup>49</sup> Chen, 82; See also Egan, 31.

Sheng explains that his work endeavored to capture the poet's mood of longing as her husband prepared for his journey.<sup>50</sup> He uses both alto- and C-flute timbres to evoke the melancholy image of Xiaoshi's *dizi* heard from the phoenix terrace. Sheng chose to open the movement with the alto flute. Example 1 shows the flute cadenza reminiscent of the rhythmically free solo passages common in traditional *dizi* music.<sup>51</sup> The *fortissimo* statements in the first and second octaves of the alto flute exploit the mellow sound of the instrument and paint a vivid portrait of the “jade flute” in the title of the movement.

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<sup>50</sup> Bright Sheng, Composer's score notes for *Melodies of a Flute* (New York: G. Schirmer, 2012), 1.

<sup>51</sup> Lau, 43.



**Example 1.** *Melodies of a Flute*, “Flute and Phoenix,” flute, marimba, violin and cello, mm. 1-9. Alto flute solo.

The musical score is written for four instruments: Flute (Alto Flute), Marimba, Violin, and Violoncello. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into three systems, each containing four staves.

- System 1 (Measures 1-3):** The Flute (Alto Flute) part begins with a melodic line featuring ornaments and triplets, marked *ff sempre espr.*. The Marimba, Violin, and Violoncello parts are silent, with the Violin and Violoncello staves marked *al sord.*
- System 2 (Measures 4-6):** The Flute continues its melodic line. The Marimba part enters in measure 4 with a rhythmic pattern, marked *(heavy med. hard mallets)* and *f sempre espr.*. The Violin and Violoncello parts remain silent.
- System 3 (Measures 7-9):** The Flute continues its melodic line. The Marimba part continues its rhythmic pattern. The Violin and Violoncello parts remain silent.

In m. 6, Sheng creates a musical dialogue between the alto flute and marimba in which the marimba follows in canon-like imitation. Recall that the alto flute is a transposing instrument that sounds a perfect fourth below the written notation. With that

in mind, the example shows that the marimba follows the flute an octave below. Sheng's instrumentation in this passage is purposeful. The alto flute captures the low-pitched and haunting sound of the Southern *dizi*, or *qudi*, as it depicts the voice of the mythological phoenix.<sup>52</sup> As the marimba joins in, imagine the presence of the hammered-string *yangqin*.

For timbral contrast, Sheng switches from alto to C flute at measure 36 (see example 2). The overall timbre becomes brighter and lighter in this passage, as a contrast to the mellow and darker sound of the alto flute heard in the previous example. The tempo is slow and expressive, in imitation of the lyrical Southern-style *qudi*. This section perhaps corresponds to the lament in the verse from the first stanza, “so much sadness of separation I am terrified to endure...”<sup>53</sup> The performer should strive to capture Li’s melancholy and longing through the use of soft dynamics and the slow, expressive tempo of the Southern style.

**Example 2.** *Melodies of a flute*, “Flute and Phoenix,” mm. 36-39. C flute imitation of the Southern *qudi*.



Example 3 illustrates another dramatic moment created by Sheng’s striking orchestration, in which we hear the sound of Chinese music through the medium of Western instruments (see Example 3). Sheng suggests the sound of the *guqin* with a

<sup>52</sup> Sheng, Score notes, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Wang, 151.

pizzicato and glissando duet for violin and cello. As a nod to Chinese practice, Sheng has reduced the texture to flute and strings in compliance with the typical pairing of *guqin* and *dizi* in traditional Chinese music.<sup>54</sup>

**Example 3.** *Melodies of a Flute*, “Flute and Phoenix,” flute, marimba, violin and cello, mm. 63-68. C flute imitation of *dizi*; string imitation of *guqin*.

The musical score for "Melodies of a Flute" (Example 3) spans measures 63 to 68. It is arranged for four instruments: Flute, Marimba, Violin, and Cello. The score is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 63-68) shows the Flute part with a tempo marking of quarter note = 44-45, dynamic markings of *mf* and *pp*, and a triplet of eighth notes. The Marimba part begins at measure 63 with a *ppp* marking. The Violin part includes a *pizz(Con sord.)* marking. The Cello part includes a *p gliss* marking. The second system (measures 69-74) continues the Flute part with a *mf* marking. The Marimba part remains silent. The Violin part includes a *pizz(Con sord.)* marking and a *gliss* marking. The Cello part includes a *mf* marking and a *f* marking.

<sup>54</sup> Lin, 56.

To increase the dramatic action of this first movement, Sheng provides rapid flute passages that become increasingly more intense (see Example 4). One such passage is the transitional bridge in m. 86 that leads to the following passage. Notice the rhythmic complexity of the marimba's fast-running sextuplets and septuplets against quintuplets in the strings, which illustrates the forceful or angular *beipai* style of Northern *dizi* performance that is associated with heightened expressivity. This sudden transition depicts a struggle in Li's inner world: a longing mood prior to her husband's departure evolves into the agony of missing her already-absent husband. These accentuated rapid articulations within scale-like patterns in the flute passage add to the expressive timbral quality as the beginning of the third stanza in the poem exclaims, "This is it! This is it! Ten thousand Songs of Farewell failed to detain, the loved one - now gone far away" as the intensity of her feelings increases.<sup>55</sup>

**Example 4.** *Melodies of a Flute*, "Flute and Phoenix," flute, marimba, violin and cello, mm. 86. Transition.

The musical score for Example 4 shows a transition in measures 86. It features four staves: Flute, Marimba, Violin, and Cello. The Flute part has a rapid, ascending scale-like pattern with a sextuplet and a septuplet. The Marimba part has a fast, descending scale-like pattern with a sextuplet and a septuplet. The Violin and Cello parts have a slower, more melodic line with quintuplets. The tempo is marked 'mf' and the dynamics are 'mf' and 'ff'.

<sup>55</sup> Sheng, Score notes, 2.

## Second movement- “Lotus Flowers”

The images of the second movement, “Lotus Flowers” come from *To the Tune:*

*Like a Dream*. Below is an English translation for this poem.

*To the Tune: Like a Dream*

I often recall one **sunset in the pavilion by the river**.  
We were exulted but exhausted, too tipsy to remember our way home.  
Exhausted with pleasure, I turn my boat back at dusk,  
But by mistake drifted into **lotus blossoms**.

Row! Row!

**I startled a whole sandbar of egrets into flight.**<sup>56</sup>

Li Qingzhao wrote this poem at the age of seventeen as a carefree maiden. It was usual for aristocratic women to boat as a social event with other women of their social standing, and boating activities were a frequent theme in Li's poetry. In this poem, however, there is nothing to suggest that Li has a fellow traveler; rather the wording is more deliberate to emphasize the poet's solitary state, with nature as her only companion.<sup>57</sup>

The poem describes the end of a day-long idyll in the countryside that provided spiritual fulfillment and an escape from care. The main focus of the poem, however, is not the afternoon of enjoyment, but rather the events of the journey home. Of particular importance is Li's vivid aquatic images that reflect the spontaneous joy of the poet: sunset in glittering water, serendipitous encounter with lotus blossoms, and egrets flying from water ford, illustrated in examples 5, 6, and 7.

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<sup>56</sup> Egan, 337.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

In this movement, Sheng uses the C flute exclusively as he creates a joyful and carefree atmosphere. The excerpts in examples 5 and 6 illustrate how he employs reiterations of grace notes as musical elaborations, the important technique in Northern *dizi* music I discussed earlier, implying the delightful and exciting ambiance described in the poem.

The grace notes first appear in the beginning of the movement and constantly change between high and middle registers during the course of the movement (see Example 5). It employs the high range of the flute with a bright and shrill timbre that adds sparkle to the texture. Perhaps Sheng aims to evoke the imagery of the glittering water as Li describes the reflection on the water of “Sunset in the pavilion by the river” (see Example 6). Imagine, too, that the rapid grace notes figurations and the strings imitate the strokes of the oars in the water while the marimba portrays the lapping of the waves.

**Example 5.** *Melodies of a Flute*, “Lotus Flowers,” flute, marimba, violin and cello, mm. 1-4. Grace notes.



**Example 6.** *Melodies of a Flute*, “Lotus Flowers,” flute, marimba, violin and cello, m. 109. Grace notes.

The image shows a musical score for measures 109 and 110 of the piece "Melodies of a Flute" (Lotus Flowers). The score is for four instruments: Flute, Marimba, Violin, and Cello. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The Flute part features a melodic line with grace notes. The Marimba part is marked *fff* and includes a glissando. The Violin and Cello parts are also marked *fff* and play a rhythmic accompaniment.

Sheng employs both vibrato and tremolo techniques congruent with performance skills of both Northern and Southern styles. In the first movement, he asks for a lyrical style of playing with a wide vibrato (see Example 7). In the given vivid and animated tempo markings, a type of vibrato with faster air column is required for long notes, particularly for matching the highly rhythmic marimba figures. Its application enhances an exciting sound and resonates with the image of the poem “...by mistake drifted into lotus blossoms.”

**Example 7.** *Melodies of a Flute*, “Lotus Flowers,” flute, marimba, violin and cello, mm. 30-33. Vibrato on C flute with accompaniment.

The musical score for Example 7, measures 30-33, is in 3/4 time. It features four staves: Flute, Marimba, Violin, and Cello. The Flute part has a long note with a vibrato line and a decrescendo hairpin, ending with a trill. The Marimba part has a decrescendo hairpin and a melodic line. The Violin and Cello parts have a decrescendo hairpin and a rhythmic accompaniment. Dynamics include *p*, *mp*, and *f*.

At the end of the movement, Sheng uses tremolos to illustrate the *dizi*'s timbral capabilities (see Example 8). The tremolos in mm. 123-25 highlight the textual reference to the vivid and climatic ending of the poem created by a dynamic image of the flapping sound of the wings, “I startled a whole sandbar of egrets into flight.” Then, in mm. 125-29, the tremolos quickly change into trills over a decrescendo to *piano* as the sound of the wings get quieter. It seems that the egrets are flying away into the distance, leading to the closing tranquil moments of the poem.

**Example 8.** *Melodies of a Flute*, “Lotus Flowers,” flute, mm. 123-125. Flute tremolos.

The musical score for Example 8, measures 123-125, is in 4/4 time. It features a single staff for Flute. The Flute part has a tremolo, followed by a trill, and then a decrescendo hairpin. Dynamics include *ff*, *f*, and *p*.



## *Flute Moon*

*Flute Moon* comprises two movements: “*Chi-Lin’s Dance*” and “*Flute Moon*.”

Each takes inspiration from a distinctive Chinese tradition: ancient Chinese mythology for the first movement and *ci*-poetry by Song dynasty poet Jiang Kui for the second movement. The first movement draws upon a Chinese mythical creature *Chi-Lin*, and the second movement is a fantasy based on the poem *Evanescent Fragrances*.

### **First Movement: “*Chi-Lin’s Dance*”**

In the first moment, “*Chi-Lin’s Dance*,” a vivid image of the mythical creature *Chi-Lin* symbolizes a bygone era of peace and prosperity of the North Song dynasty. Sheng portrays the physical features and dancing movements of *Chi-Lin*, using its characteristics as inspiration for his choice of motives and the development of his musical materials.

Sheng uses contrasting characteristics of instruments to represent the two sides of *Chi-Lin*. The strings, piano and percussion instruments represent the male *Chi*, whereas the solo piccolo represents the female *Lin*. In order to portray the gendered dichotomy in the energetic dance of *Chi-Lin*, Sheng chooses to use extremes of instrumental register—the celli in their low register and the piccolo in its highest register—to distinguish the respective male and female aspects of this mythical beast.

The opening four measures of the first movement introduce *Chi’s* theme. His dance continues until he is joined by the female *Lin*, ninety-four measures later. Example 9 shows the highly rhythmic and savage character of *Chi’s* dance. Of particular interest

are the low registers of the instruments, the cumbersome *al tallone* marking, strongly accented articulations, agitated rhythmic patterns, and high level of chromaticism.

**Example 9.** Bright Sheng, *Flute Moon*, “*Chi-Lin’s Dance*,” mm. 1-4. *Chi’s* motive.

The musical score for Example 9 shows measures 1-4 for Piano, Cello, and Contrabass. The tempo is marked 'Savage' with a quarter note equal to 96 (♩ = 96). The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The Piano part is marked *ff* and features a dense, chromatic, and agitated rhythmic pattern. The Cello part is marked *ff al tallone* and plays a more melodic line with accented articulations. The Contrabass part is marked *ff sempre* and provides a low, chromatic accompaniment. All three instruments play in a low register.

This four-measure module of the male *Chi* expands and gradually builds towards the musical entrance of the female *Lin*. The arrival of *Lin* builds upon *Chi’s* dance by using the same thematic material (see Example 10). The chromatic melodic motive is repeated, then expanded, with increasing intensity created by the rise in register. These transposed restatements in the piccolo passage recall the wavy motion that appeared in the accompanying passages in mm. 1-4.

**Example 10.** Bright Sheng, *Flute Moon*, “*Chi-Lin’s Dance*,” m. 94. Piccolo entrance.

The musical score for Example 10 shows measure 94 for the Piccolo. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 5/4. The measure is marked *ff*. The Piccolo part features a chromatic melodic motive that is repeated and expanded, with increasing intensity and a rise in register. The measure is divided into four groups of notes, with measure numbers 94, 95, 96, and 97 indicated above the staff.

The brilliance of the high range of the piccolo contributes to the savage celebration of *Chi-Lin’s* dance. The piccolo's entrance for *Lin* not only introduces a new color and an extended high range, but maintains a shimmering texture. It affords the

performer greater dynamic and technical control than would be possible if the passage were otherwise scored for the C flute (see Example 11). In this example, these motivic materials unify the two aspects of the dance, male and female. The solo passage on piccolo lies in the middle and high octaves of its range, producing an ethereal, feminine timbre—a strong contrast with the ponderous sound of the string section.

**Example 11.** Bright Sheng, *Flute Moon*, “Chi-Lin’s Dance,” mm.123-126. High range on piccolo.

The musical score for Example 11, measures 123-126 of "Chi-Lin's Dance" from *Flute Moon*, is presented in a five-staff format. The staves are labeled as follows: Piccolo, timpani, Violin I, Violin II, and Viola/Cello. The Piccolo part is written in the high register, marked with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The timpani part provides a steady rhythmic accompaniment. The string section (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello) is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes the instruction "tutti, on the string".

The static rhythmic patterns on piccolo in mm. 156-61 of the movement develop into rapid and dramatic figurations (see Example 12). In this giant creature’s dance, the upward sweep of the piccolo to high A explodes with excitement as it engages with the percussion glissandi.

**Example 12.** Bright Sheng, *Flute Moon*, “*Chi-Lin’s Dance*,” mm.156-161. Rapid repeated figuration on piccolo.

The image displays a musical score for three instruments: Piccolo, Xylophone, and Marimba. The Piccolo part is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 2/4 time signature. It features rapid repeated figuration, marked with a forte (ff) dynamic and a five-measure rest (5) indicated. The Xylophone and Marimba parts are also written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature. They provide a rhythmic accompaniment with a similar five-measure rest (5) indicated. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting at measure 163.

Sheng closes *Lin’s* dance with a coloristic and dramatic timbre by blending the sound of piccolo with xylophone in mm. 163-8. In this most dramatic moment of the movement in m.168, he combines trilling with an extremely high range on the piccolo. In this passage, he specifically applies trills to both the extremely high B-flat notes on piccolo and the same trilled notes on xylophone, suggesting that the music is reaching the peak of the movement (See Example 13). He often employs trilled passages like those found in Example 13 to create a dramatic, rising trajectory. The performer can translate this musical contour into a gesture that portrays striving for the highpoint of a dramatic moment. The movement closes with *Chi’s* theme.

**Example 13.** Bright Sheng, *Flute Moon*, “*Chi-Lin’s Dance*,” mm.163-168. High B-flat trills on piccolo.

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Piccolo and Xylophone. The Piccolo part is written on a single staff in treble clef, 3/4 time, with a tempo marking of ♩ = 96. It features rapid, high-range passages with frequent trills (marked 'tr') and dynamic markings of *ff* and *fff*. The Xylophone part is written on a single staff in treble clef, 3/4 time, with dynamic markings of *f* and *ff*. It also includes trills and rapid passages. The two parts are synchronized, with the Piccolo often playing higher notes than the Xylophone.

In this movement, Sheng employs standard piccolo effects—high range, rapid passages, and trills—to illustrate *Lin’s* character or to further enhance the intense atmosphere. The use of high range on the piccolo provides a rich and well-balanced color with its unique woody and piercing sound, blending with the male *Chi*. Rapid passages in this movement frequently serve to enhance an intense and vivid atmosphere. Trills add a shimmering effect that highlights the exciting moments in *Chi-Lin’s* dance.

## Second movement: “Flute Moon”

Scored for C flute, the second movement, *Flute Moon*, is more lyrical and contemplative than the first. While it appears to be a love song, given its haunting, romantic, and nostalgic mood, the lines expressing lost youth are, in fact, metaphorical allusions to China’s peril at that time, when half of the country had fallen to Northern invaders. Contrasting with *Chi-Lin’s* dance, which represents the bygone prosperity of the North Song dynasty in the first movement, the second movement is evocative of the pain and loss of a time of turmoil. This juxtaposition creates a dramatic lament of a tragic era in Chinese history.

With a name identical to the title of the whole work, *Flute Moon* is a fantasy based on the *ci* poem, *To the Tune: Evanescent Fragrances*. It was composed by a famous twelfth-century Chinese musician and composer of *songci*, Jiang Kui (1155-ca. 1235). Throughout the movement, Sheng uses the flute to present the entire melodic line of the poetry, providing vivid imagery as a whole. According to its musical materials and poetic stanzas, the movement can be divided into three parts. In the first stanza of the poem, portrayed in mm. 1-44, Sheng treats the flute with fast trills and running notes to indicate “moonlight, flute and winter sweet blossom.” Contrasting the peaceful opening of string section, the forte dynamic level of the flute entrance trill gives a sense of a peaceful winter night with a bloomed flower. For the second stanza, set in mm. 45-99, Sheng uses flutter tonguing within the flute line, providing increased tension, emphasizing the words “plucked” and “brisk and frosty.” In the third stanza, he adds grace notes and pitch bending techniques to the flute passages to create a nostalgic feeling that reflects the words “love and lyrics” in the poem in mm. 100-159.<sup>58</sup> Sheng pays orchestral homage to Jiang’s works as he appreciates Jiang’s artistic refinement of *songci* and use of metaphorical references.<sup>59</sup> Also, he adds his own translation of the poem to the score:

*To the Tune: Evanescent Fragrances*<sup>60</sup>

Oh, moonlight, my old friend,  
How many times have you accompanied  
My flute beside the winter sweet blossom?

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<sup>58</sup> Shelly Smith, “Eastern and Western Aesthetics and Influences in the Twenty-first Century Flute Concerti of Chinese-born American composers” (D.M.A. diss., Florida State University, 2012), 61.

<sup>59</sup> Bright Sheng, Interviewed by Aralee Dorrough (Houston, 1999, unpublished).

<sup>60</sup> Sheng, Program notes.

We **plucked a sprig** to arouse her beauty,  
In the **brisk and frosty air**.

But now your poet is getting old,  
And he has forgotten **the love and lyrics**;  
Yet, he still resents the few flowers beyond the bamboo,  
For their **chilling fragrances** has crept into his chamber.

Jiang Kui lived during the Southern Song dynasty, the tumultuous era plagued by constant war with the enemy from the North that also affected Li Qingzhao. Jurchens occupied significant portion of North China and continued to invade the South Song dynasty.<sup>61</sup> Vivid images in the poem, like “moonlight and blossom with chilling fragrances,” create a reflection of old times. Sheng writes, “in this poem, the poet recalls and laments China’s prosperity before the invasions.”<sup>62</sup>

Sheng’s choice of a poem for this movement simulates Chinese theatrical singing through prominent ornamental techniques of the flute, such as trills, flutter tonguing, and pitch bends. In flutist Aralee Dorrough’s interview with Bright Sheng, he explains that the reason he uses these techniques is to evoke a natural effect of singing as in lyric poetry from the Song dynasty.<sup>63</sup> These instrumental techniques have are pervasive, not only in Chinese *dizi* music, but also Sheng’s personal musical vocabulary. The flute’s passages in this movement are tightly unified by these three techniques.

The first noticeable embellishment that Sheng applies is the trill on the entrance of the solo flute in m. 21 (see Example 14). According to Sheng’s interview, in this

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<sup>61</sup> Jurchens were an ancient nation, originally North-Asian. They were the major enemy of the Song dynasty. They established the Jin dynasty in Northern China as the Song dynasty retreated to the South. The Jin dynasty was eventually destroyed by Genghis Khan. Jurchens were at last assimilated by the Chinese.

<sup>62</sup> Sheng, Program notes.

<sup>63</sup> Sheng, Interview.

particular work, the color of the trill should be as bright and primitive as it can be, rather than producing a sweet and elegant color as in many other Western classical flute pieces.<sup>64</sup> It begins with a sustained E-flat trill at the *fortississimo* dynamic level, punctuated with a harp's glissando. The violent passage creates a wide and unrefined “surprising” effect that quickly vanishes into a soft and continuously trilled E-flat.

**Example 14.** Bright Sheng, *Flute Moon*, “Flute Moon,” m. 21. Trill entrance of the flute.

Flutter tonguing, as an extended technique, often appears to create an extreme or dramatic atmosphere. In many traditional Chinese musical genres, flutter tonguing technique is used in conjunction with trills or tremolos. In Example 15, at m. 45, Sheng applies this technique on a trilled high A to increase tension and tempo. The combined techniques that Sheng uses create a relatively brassy timbre going directly into the second stanza of the poetry. The image of the second stanza of the poem, “we plucked a sprig...in the brisk and frosty air,” highlights an exciting sound with the purpose of increasing tension and energy. Sheng continues to employ these two elements for the same purposes in subsequent stanzas to tightly unify the movement.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



**Example 15.** Bright Sheng, *Flute Moon*, “Flute Moon,” mm. 44-5. Flutter tonguing and trills on high A.



Sheng also employs pitch bends in the flute passages (see Example 16). The technique is produced by rolling the head joint inward or outward to create a mournful effect, suggestive of the imagery of the ancient Chinese poetry. Of course, it is especially suitable to this movement in light of the picture that the poetry has conveyed. In the very last passage of the flute, Sheng calls for this portamento-like technique from the high D-flat to C natural in a *pianississimo* sound at m. 141. It depicts the words “chilling fragrance” as the wind flows into the chamber, according to the final line of the poem, as a sweeping descending gesture in the flute line.

**Example 16.** Bright Sheng, *Flute Moon*, “Flute Moon,” mm. 141-5, glissandi.



## Conclusion

Sheng’s eclectic compositional style epitomizes the cross-cultural background of a new-wave Chinese American composer who underwent a musical journey from the

East to the West. Sheng aspires to revitalize Chinese traditional music in a modern context by creating a hybrid musical idiom that infuses Western musical language with Chinese traditions. In both works, he approaches this problem in two ways. First, he evokes timbres and textures that are recognizably Chinese, but are executed through the exclusive use of Western instruments. Secondly, he interprets Chinese poetry and mythology through his music.

China has a long and rich history of literary and musical achievements. However, relatively few people have the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of these achievements outside of the East due to linguistic and cultural barriers. Such works deserve a wider audience worldwide.

In this study, I have explored Sheng's two works and provided a cultural interpretation. I hope that this research allows performers to have a deeper understanding and appreciation of Sheng's compositional style, which is imaginative and idiomatic regarding the use of the flute in his chamber and orchestral works. Meanwhile, understanding the importance of the dramatic action in evoking imagery and poetic atmosphere in Sheng's flute works will provide direction to the performers and enhance the enjoyment of performing these pieces.

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