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Voices of the Soul in Tan Dun's *The Map*

Tan Dun's *The Map*, a concerto for Cello, Video and Orchestra was commissioned by the Boston Symphony in 1999 and premiered in February of 2003. Through this piece of music Tan Dun attempts to recapture the sounds and experiences of his youth in Hunan, yet the concerto is not simply an exercise in nostalgia for his folk heritage. Rather it is a process he refers to as "collecting a soul."¹ It is not the intention here to undertake a musical analysis of *The Map*, but rather to try to understand, mainly through Tan Dun's own words, as much as is possible about this process of soul-collecting. What is at stake is the interplay between re-creation and invention in the excavation of memory and its transmission into a work of art. The eventual form of the concerto, a result of this interplay, eludes any attempt to place it within a recognized artistic tradition.

The concerto is 'a map' because it became a guide in the composer's search for his musical roots. It created a path to the past, a path to ancient arts and their effect on his soul. What prompted this search was a stone drummer from Hunan, whom Tan encountered in 1981. By that time the twenty-five-year-old composer had left the rural villages of his childhood and youth and spent three years at the Beijing Central Conservatory, where he first absorbed Western music in a newly opened China. Fearing that he had forgotten the music of his youth, he returned to Hunan in 1981, where he came upon this *ba gua* drummer. Using stones as his instrument, the drummer combined the notes of the chromatic scale with the principles of the *I Ching* and shamanistic vocalizations. He was even capable of making sounds of more than one pitch with just one stone. At the time of this encounter, Tan had no means of recording this ancient art, but he never forgot it. "The stone man," he explains, "is in all of us – to share his spirit.

¹ Interview with Tan Dun in *Root: Talk between Tan Dun and his Hometown*, directed by Sheng Boji. Special thanks to Evan Hughes and Emily Chiang for help with the Mandarin.

To me, he is the map, of sounds, of culture, of my memories. I think through *The Map*, through the piece, everybody knows there was, there is, there will be the stone man.”²

Tan’s encounter with the stone drummer clearly represented a transformative memory, but it was a memory that stood in for other memories, other experiences of the sounds of Tan Dun’s youth. Almost twenty years later, armed with a commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Tan returned to the same village to record this ancient practice of stone drumming. To his great disappointment, he found that the drummer had died, and with him, the art of stone drumming. “The tea is cold,” as the villagers put it.³ At this point, Tan observes, “I began reaching inside my heart, drawing the map I could use to find him again.”⁴ “Sometimes the purpose of returning to your roots is to invent, to see how these roots have continued to grow,”⁵ he explains. Here he suggests the beginnings of a marriage of formative memories with the creative process.

He commenced this exercise in map-drawing by making field recordings of the music of three of the ethnic groups from Hunan that comprise the non-Han Chinese minority population, the Tujia, Miao, and Dong. These recording trips took place in 1999 and 2001. The composer explains that he was looking for inspiration in the forgotten moments of his youth, “to keep things from disappearing.”⁶ As a child and young man, Tan had been exposed to rural musical traditions that may have seemed as vulnerable to extinction as the art of the stone drummer. Born in 1957, he grew up in the countryside. During the Cultural Revolution, Tan had been sent to a remote commune (in Guangxi) to labor as a rice farmer. While there, he organized the villagers into a band, using cooking pots, homemade bamboo flutes, and other available instruments to perform at Buddhist temples, at weddings and funerals and Chinese ritual ghost operas. This experience of the musical life of a rural people is surely part of what he was seeking to recapture and record, especially after his later exposure to Western music both at the Beijing Central

² Interview with Tan Dun in *Rediscovering the Map*, directed by Uri Gal-Ed, included in the DVD of *The Map*.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Quoted in the program notes by Ken Smith of the premier performance of *The Map*, Boston Symphony Orchestra, February 20, 21, 22, and 25, 2003.

⁵ Interview with Tan Dun and Yo-Yo Ma on public radio, February 21, 2003.

<http://theconnection.org/shows/2003/02/2003>

⁶ BSO.org, online conservatory.

Conservatory, which he entered in 1978, and still later at Columbia University, where he pursued a doctorate in Musical Arts from 1986 to 1993.

Yet while Tan returned to some of his earliest musical experiences in composing *The Map*, he was also determined to create something new. “I didn’t want this to be a documentary film or an MTV video,” he explains, “but instead to invent an entirely new form.”⁷ This double allegiance, to preservation and to creation, is woven directly into the structure of *The Map*. He conceived the concerto in ten movements, in all but one of which the cello, accompanied by the orchestra, responds to the musical material of the video recordings, which are projected for the audience on video screens.⁸ The audience sees and hears the traditional music of rural Chinese villages played, except in one case, by the people of those villages themselves. The exception is the stone drumming, which is performed on the video screens (anonymously) by Tan Dun himself. Later members of the orchestra employ stones as percussion in an echo of the stone drumming on the screen.

While the form of the concerto, with its counterpoint between orchestra and video, or cello and video, is new,⁹ at its core lies an act of preservation. Through Tan’s composition, with its ingenious use of video recording, musical traditions threatened with extinction can endure. And these traditions, in turn, were bound up in Tan’s memory with the earliest sensory memories of his childhood. The control of [his own] sound, Tan explains, is completely derived from the unconscious influences of the water, music, and language of Hunan.¹⁰ “To me it is a return, you return home, the home of music, the home of spirit.”¹¹ “It doesn’t matter how long I traveled around the world – those villagers, those people always stayed beautifully in my memory.”¹² “The people, the

⁷ Quoted in the program notes by Ken Smith.

⁸ One movement is an ‘interlude’, with only text on the screen. There were ten movements, including the interlude, in the premier performance, but only nine are included in the DVD recording by the Shanghai Symphony.

⁹ Mary Lou Humphrey, in the updated composers essay on Tan Dun at the Schirmer website, notes that balance and counterpoint are critical elements in Tan’s music, and that the principles of the Yi-Ching have enlarged his idea of counterpoint beyond the relationship of notes to that of styles and structures, even of different ages and of East and West. http://www.schirmer.com/composers/tan_essay.htm June 1998,

¹⁰ Interview in *Root*.

¹¹ Interview in *Rediscovering the Map*.

¹² *Ibid*.

water, the architecture bearing deeply in my mind. It's unerasable. So all those things are in my blood."¹³

In a documentary film charting the origins of *The Map*, Tan points out the rhythm of Chinese village women washing clothes on the banks of the river, slapping them against the stony embankment. The sound, he notes, is like jazz.¹⁴ Surely such memories were lodged very early in childhood, much like the tunes of folk music, and these sounds were naturally associated with other early sensations. He points to the shape of the houses and the towers in Hunan. Like the melody of folk sounds, he explains, the roofs curve upward.¹⁵ It is clear that such simple impressions, -- of folk music, of the roofs of houses, of water lapping and women slapping clothes against the riverbanks -- constitute the earliest childhood impressions, shaping the consciousness and spirit of a future composer.

These are the sounds, and especially the music, that, as Tan explains, transported him into another world. Noting the way that Chinese villagers would play their cymbals to make many different sounds with the rim, the front, the back of the instrument, he translated these insights into his piece, attributing the totally different sound he was able to elicit from the orchestra to the inspiration of his Chinese sources.¹⁶ The resulting composition affords moments of seamless translation, as when the mourning tones of the Chinese cry-singers on the screen shape the opening lines of the cello. There is no mistaking the reservoir of musical ideas provided by this return to the sounds of Tan's childhood.

For this reason it seems natural to situate *The Map* within the tradition of the many composers who have drawn on folk music in their compositions, often in conjunction with an attempt to evoke the rhythms of nature, as if to preserve an earlier way of life. It was a way to bring the past into the present, safe from time. This originally Romantic impulse to draw upon the inspiration of a vanishing life embedded in the rhythms of nature has long provided a wellspring for creativity. One thinks of the natural setting of Beethoven's Pastoral symphony, the folk traditions drawn on by Liszt,

¹³ Ibid..

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Dvorák, Grieg,, Bartók, Kodály and Ives, and the primal rituals of Stravinsky. In fact Tan paid tribute to more contemporary examples of this genre in the premier performance. In his selection of works to accompany *The Map*, which he himself conducted, Tan included Shostakovich's *Overture on Russian and Kirghiz Folk Themes*, Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* from the opera *Peter Grimes*, and John Cage's *The Seasons*. By these juxtapositions Tan was clearly suggesting an affinity for the music of folk traditions and natural rhythms, at least as reconceived in a contemporary idiom.

But there is an important difference between *The Map* and this continuing tradition. Through the technique of video recording, Tan was able to preserve the integrity of his indigenous sources, incorporating them wholly without embellishment. They are embedded in his composition like jewels, his own invention providing their setting in the material for orchestra and cello. This formal structure preserves the authentic sound of the popular music of Hunan, but allows the composer to build upon it, thereby expressing something of his own response to his original musical heritage.¹⁷ This interplay between the composition and its actual, embedded sources distinguishes *The Map* from the more Romantic tradition (broadly speaking) of its Western predecessors. Instead of imposing a coherent individual stamp upon his material, underscoring his own creativity, Tan chose to create the possibility of a musical dialogue, as if to allow the sources of memory to speak directly, though at the same time expressing his own response and inviting ours. The result radiates out, as if across time and space, preserving a vanishing art, expressing its effect on one human soul, and inviting the dialogue to continue.

One movement, for example, draws on the antiphonal Miao vocal tradition by having the cello respond to a woman rice farmer singing on a video screen, taking what was originally a means of communication across villages and fields in China as the basis for the structure of *The Map*. Referring to this custom as *feige*, Tan explains his original idea for the form of his concerto: "*Feige* means flying song, you can fly song into the

¹⁷ Barbara Mittler points out that because of the cultural revolution, younger Chinese composers sent to the countryside were exposed to folk music that had not been filtered through western musical forms, unlike the officially 'Chinese' music favored by the establishment, which was actually a hybrid form. *Dangerous Tunes: The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China since 1949*. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997), 294-97, 356-57.

sky and somebody will answer to you.”¹⁸ When he heard this young woman sing her flying song on his recording mission to Hunan in 1999, the idea of the antiphonal structure of the piece came to him. At that moment, he decided to do *The Map*. As he recorded her song, he explained to her that she would be singing with a very famous cellist on the other side of the earth.¹⁹

“This song she is singing to us on the tape [in origin?] may be thousands of years old,” he explains, “but we can still sing with her, play with her, but after we are all passed away, there will be many many cellists playing with her and we can bring this oldest culture to the future. That’s the map.”²⁰ Here the map seems to represent an invisible thread of continuity and unseen connection that transcends temporal limitations. Through the inspiration of *feige*, the dialogue between ancient musical sources and the human soul can span the world and cross the boundaries of time.

This antiphonal structure not only preserves the integrity of its Chinese folk sources but also allows for a degree of freedom to improvise, at least for the soloist and members of the orchestra. Here again *The Map* represents a departure from the traditional way in which folk music has been absorbed in classical composition. In a radio interview after the premier performance in Boston, both Yo-Yo Ma and Tan Dun alluded to improvising during the rehearsal, the composer making analogies to jazz. As Yo-Yo Ma put it, the score is a map, and not all is written down. He spoke of practicing by deliberately *not* practicing, but listening to the singer or musician on the screen, and watching what Tan, as conductor, might be doing. Though technically his part is written, the cellist explained, it really feels like the first time. He mentioned trying to create sounds with his cello beyond the normal technical scope of his instrument, presumably in response to the music on the screen. This relative freedom to listen to the indigenous Chinese sources and respond with some degree of spontaneity sets up invisible connections such as that between the percussionist on the concert stage and the stone drummer, or between the cellist and the leaf blower on the video screen. “I cannot tell who is cello and who is the leaf,”²¹ explained the composer, alluding to Yo-Yo Ma’s

¹⁸ Interview in *Rediscovering the Map*.

¹⁹ <http://theconnection.org/shows/2003/02/2003>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

capacity to be “open to the wind of [his] heart,” and to “see things invisible.”²² In this interview, Tan characterized the unseen connections brought to light through performances of *The Map* as part of a ‘continuing journey’, at least until the piece is taken back to the villagers whose music inspired it.²³

This relative freedom to improvise and develop the music in performances of *The Map* bears some resemblance to traditional Chinese musical practice. There, according to Barbara Mittler, the composer is often anonymous and “the performance and variation on the bone-structure of a composition by a musician plays the part of composition.”²⁴ Tan adopted a similar technique in his *Dao ji*, or *On Taoism*, of 1985.²⁵

One might conclude, then, that perhaps *The Map* fits more accurately into an indigenous musical tradition than it does with that of the west. But it is not that simple. Mittler cites improvisation as one of a number of techniques that unite indigenous Chinese music with ‘new music’, creating in contemporary music a confluence of Chinese and western musical practice. Tan himself describes his own experience in ABA form. A is Chinese music he encountered during the Cultural Revolution; B is Western romanticism to Bartók discovered at the Beijing Conservatory; and A returns in the form of contemporary music which he found to be similar to his own Chinese tradition. The result is a reverberation of influence, or what Mittler calls a “double-mirror-reflection.”²⁶ For example, Cage was influenced by Asian music, and in turn his use of silence in composition led Tan Dun back to his own Chinese tradition.²⁷ This reverberation helps to explain the structure of *The Map*, with its possibility of ongoing musical dialogue. It is as if Tan Dun has transposed his own experience of diverse musical traditions into the piece itself, allowing the dialogue to continue, and thereby eluding any attempt to situate the concerto within a single tradition.

Given this plurality of influences, we might be tempted to situate *The Map* under a postmodernist rubric. After all, here is a piece written for a Western-style orchestra, performing in a concert hall, but accompanied by a collection of Chinese gongs, drums,

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mittler, 355.

²⁵ Ibid. 354-55.

²⁶ Ibid. 298, 355.

²⁷ Ibid. 298.

and stones, responding to rural Chinese village musicians and rituals projected onto video screens. Some might term the composition resulting from this dialogue a ‘hybrid’ form, or ‘eclectic’, or a ‘multicultural’ approach, terms that are often associated with postmodern artistic forms. The cultural *avant-garde* meets the disappearing rituals of a minority peasant population. At first glance, it’s a *mélange*. A *mélange* with an ‘ex-centric’ artistic imagination, or ‘de-centered subject’, no less. These are terms for the postmodern imagination discussed by Richard Kearney, in his *The Wake of Imagination*. There he argued that the postmodern artist functions like a *bricoleur*, recycling existent forms rather than creating something new. No longer a controlling source of meaning, he or she simply reassembles fragments, a mere “‘player’ in a game of signs.”²⁸ Writing about the postmodern imagination as expressed in the images of literature or the visual arts rather than music, Kearney sums it up as follows: The artist “experiences himself afloat in an anonymous interplay of images which he can, at best, parody, simulate, or reproduce.”²⁹ Here we have the plight of the creator in an age of electronic and digital reproduction. And behind this description of the postmodern artist is of course a host of theorists who have heralded the ‘death of the author’, or the demise of the autonomous subject, thereby making way for the de-centered subject who is no longer a controlling source of meaning. Instead he is shaped by forces beyond his control.

If we apply these notions of the condition of the postmodern artist to *The Map*, certain parallels do emerge. The composition is an eclectic form, and it incorporates videotaped images and even music that Tan did not himself create. Furthermore, Tan admits to being prey to forces beyond himself that helped to shape the composition. “Sometimes I am composing music and sometimes music composes me.”³⁰ The resulting piece led the music critic of the *Boston Globe*, Richard Dyer, who reviewed *The Map*’s premier performance, to question whether Tan had been able to follow Stravinsky’s example in assimilating folk traditions into an “urgent personal voice.”³¹ Dyer’s implication that no such unity was evident in *The Map* functions like an uncanny echo of

²⁸ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 11-13.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 13.

³⁰ *Rediscovering the Map*.

³¹ Richard Dyer, “A Composer Shows his Roots,” *Boston Globe*, 21 February 2003.

all the theories lamenting the absence of a controlling source of meaning in the arts of postmodernism.

But this approach takes a univocal form as the model of what a work of art should be, and is thus totally unsuited to the antiphonal structure Tan chose for *The Map*, with its innovative use of video. Tan was clearly *not* attempting to impart “an urgent personal voice,” or Kearney’s controlling source of meaning, but instead to allow musical voices to speak to each other across space and time. In so doing, he was preserving intact the musical sources of his childhood, so that their own voices, as well as his own, might be represented, and further interchange made possible. This capacity for exchange is ‘the phenomenon of today’, Tan explains, alluding in the same breath to the Boston Symphony Online Conservatory. It is what in China is meant by the ‘Silk Road phenomenon’. The Silk Road was an invisible road. It means “things related that you cannot see.”³² The culture of Hunan is connected to the consciousness of the world, to life in New York.³³ These unseen connections call for a reciprocal exchange. The journey will not be finished without a return to the village that inspired *The Map*. This return is still the Silk Road.³⁴

This project, the composer emphasizes, has nothing to do with postmodernism or any other ‘ism’. Such labels are of no importance, he says in a documentary film about his return to Hunan in search of his roots. It is whether one finds the feeling of oneself and combines what he most wants to do with his memory and his dream.³⁵ He refers to something ancient that is always in his mind, something that he experienced at weddings and funerals, a feeling from which he can never break away. “I live in the memory, in the dream. The dream of Hunan will be in my life forever.”³⁶ While at first this statement seems to suggest an inescapable link to the past, as if all creation is re-creation, it becomes clear that this thread has no discernible end. It is an invisible passage that links the past with the future, transcending any musical genre or artistic style by escaping the bounds of time altogether. Through the *Yi-Ching*, Tan has embraced the idea of

³² <http://theconnection.org/shows/2003/02/2003>

³³ *Root*.

³⁴ It is noteworthy that Tan Dun completed this return to the village in November, 2003, when *The Map* was performed with the Shanghai Symphony and Anssi Karttunen, in the village of Feng Huang (Fenghuang) in Xiangxi (Western Hunan).

³⁵ Interview with Tan Dun in *Root*.

balance between what has been and what has not yet come to be.³⁷ “The sound, the melody, must come from somewhere but also continue to somewhere.”³⁸ To resurface the primary sensations of childhood that have taken hold archaically is to recast them so that they may flow freely into the future. Here memory floods into creation and the language of that transmission process is music.

Yet even sound, for Tan Dun, provides a passage to a place that lies beyond sound. It was part of the culture of his childhood, he explained in an interview, to see things as spirits. The leaf is a spirit. The leaf can talk to the river, and the river can talk to a cloud. “I want to be piece of a cloud.”³⁹ If you have this kind of spirit, he went on, you can be a good composer, emphasizing the need to feel free to cross the boundary of spirits and cultures. The invisible connections, then, that Tan’s composition makes possible can cross all boundaries, the boundaries between time and space, and those between the human spirit and the natural world.

This journey brings us back to the stone man. He is a touchstone for Tan, a point of departure. He is the numinous sentry at the border. Like a map, he points the way. Yet it was not entirely his art of *ba gua* drumming that had such a profound effect on the composer. Tan says he was not even interested in *ba gua*, but in recreating his memory of this man.⁴⁰ Yet if it was not the stone drumming that Tan was searching for, by drawing his map, his invisible thread of connection, then what was it?

Here we depart from the various models in which we have been attempting to classify *The Map*. We depart from the tradition of composers drawing on their own folk heritage, and we depart from postmodern eclecticism. The anthropological exploration seeks to bring elements of profound significance from the past into the present. The postmodern model, by contrast, suggests the forces that lie beyond the subject, taking hold of his being. As we have seen, both models are useful here, and expose important aspects of the creative process at work in *The Map*. But the encounter with the stone man suggests something more as well. It suggests a soul’s communion across conventional boundaries. The stone man was a shaman. His art was ghostly. He threw

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Mary Lou Humphrey on Tan Dun, June, 1998, in www.schirmer.com/composers/Tan_essay.html

³⁸ *Rediscovering the Map*.

³⁹ <http://theconnection.org/shows/2003/02/2003>

stones to the ground in eerie musical patterns. He “talked to the wind, clouds, and leaves. He talked to the next life and the past one.”⁴¹ He treated all things as spirits. Encountering the stone man was a passage to a place beyond time, beyond past or future, where spirits speak.

The rituals of Chinese shamans involved the audience in shared participation, prompted by the altered state of consciousness of the shaman. They evoked the unseen world of gods, ghosts, and ancestral spirits, and made possible a dialogue between the human soul and nature. Tan invokes this tradition in *The Map* not just with the stone drumming, but also in the first movement, which features Ghost Dancing. Ghost dancing was an ancient masked ritual presenting the search for the ghost, entertaining the ghost, and sending the ghost home. Here again, the boundaries of time and materiality are traversed.

Music and performance in such rituals were part of the shared life of the community in rural Hunan. There was none of the artificial separation of the listeners from the musicians that exists in a Western concert hall. Like some of his ‘new music’ contemporaries, Tan Dun has been striving for some time to reunite musical life with performance and audience participation. Commenting on his Orchestral Theatre series initiated in 1990, he wrote,

Music which clearly separates the role of performer from listener, or orchestra from audience, seems usual to modern concert-goers. Actually, such isolation began only a few hundred years ago, while the history of music as an integral part of spiritual life, as ritual, as shared participation, is as old as humanity itself. The idea of an ‘orchestral theatre’ gradually came to me as a way of finding this lost unity and bringing the performing arts back to the audience. I began to see the orchestra as a dramatic medium which could once again bridge the creative and the re-creative, completing the circle of spiritual life.⁴²

⁴⁰ Quoted in the Boston Symphony program notes by Ken Smith.

⁴¹ Quoted on the video screen during the performance of *The Map*.

⁴² Quoted in the essay by Mary Lou Humphrey on Tan Dun,
http://www.schirmer.com/composers/tan_essay.html.

In the same way *The Map* makes completing that circle possible. It draws the audience into the ancient rituals on the screen, underscoring the theatrical and spiritual aspects of these folk traditions, and thereby enlarging the community of participants across the boundaries of time and culture. The effect is markedly different from postmodern pastiche. Instead it creates a bridge between the next life and the past one, whether we consider that bridge to span Tan's own musical trajectory, or the history of music itself, or the ancient traditions of China and the electronic age. But the meaning and beauty of these rituals, evoking a place beyond time where spirits speak, must be conveyed and translated for the benefit of a contemporary audience, especially a western audience. It must be recast in another language. Tan has achieved this translation in part by allowing the different voices, composed, recorded, and improvised, to speak to each other across conventional boundaries. Sometimes these voices almost seem to merge. In the last two movements of the concerto, the cello, orchestra, and video become 'one' and, as Tan has described it, "recreate music in its original, monophonic state: simple, like heartbeats. It is a finale that does not end"⁴³

The lost art of the stone man prompted Tan Dun to create the map to find him again. This map is a passage, or boundary crossing, that gives form to the composition. It spins an invisible thread that erases distance and time, and circles infinitely back. Like the river in the village to which Tan Dun eventually returned with the Shanghai Symphony, driving four days with their vans and instruments to build a concert stage over the water and perform *The Map* for the village of its origin, this piece of music "will carry on the spirits to somewhere forever, because the water always reminds you where you have come from and where you want to go."⁴⁴ Like the river, the shaman makes possible the passage to this world of spirits that knows no boundaries of space, time, or materiality. Instead of a postmodern *bricoleur*, playing with fragments, I'd like to suggest that the composer is a shaman, allowing the discourse of spirits to be heard.

⁴³ Interview with Tan Dun, July 10, 2004, New York, included with the DVD of *The Map*.

⁴⁴ *Rediscovering the Map*.