

MAKING TRADITIONS IN EAST ASIA

A significant aspect of the renewed interest in reconnecting with history and tradition that took shape in the 1960s has been a recognition of the diversity of the world's musical cultures. As Berio wrote in his *Christian Science Monitor* essay, "A composer's awareness of the plurality of functions of his own tools forms the basis for his responsibility, just as, in everyday life, every man's responsibility begins with recognition of the multiplicity of human races, conditions, needs, and ideals." As we have seen, composers throughout the twentieth century borrowed from non-Western musical styles. In recent decades, composers and performers around the world have integrated their own musical traditions with the postwar trends we have been tracing as well as with popular music and jazz.

Such developments have been particularly significant in East Asia over the last half-century due to the multifaceted cultural politics of China, Korea, and Japan. By the early twentieth century Western classical music was officially championed in all three nations as a tool for modernizing society, often at the expense of indigenous musical traditions. The subsequent revival of interest in traditional music and instruments in these countries followed very different trajectories, reflecting changing attitudes toward westernization, modernization,

and nationalism. Japan, for example, westernized aggressively after its defeat in World War II; not until 2002 did training on traditional Japanese musical instruments become part of the middle-school curriculum. In contrast, Western music was suppressed in China during the violent imposition of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s in favor of broadly accessible folk-based works.

East Asian composers have integrated traditional and Western music through quotation, allusion, and the combination of Western and Asian instruments and musical systems. Toru Takemitsu (1930–1996), a leading figure in postwar Japanese music, sought alternatives to Japanese music in the work of Debussy, Messiaen, and electronic techniques. When John Cage and pianist David Tudor were invited to visit Japan in 1962, their presence inspired an outpouring of indeterminate and Fluxus-inspired works by Takemitsu and others, including Toshi Ichijanagi and Yuji Takahashi. In fact, Takemitsu claimed that it was Cage's interest in Japanese music that first inspired him to incorporate Japanese elements into his own work.

Takemitsu began composing *November Steps* (1967), a concerto for the traditional Japanese biwa (lute) and shakuhachi (flute), with the intention of demonstrating points of contact between Japanese and Western music, but he ended up emphasizing what he identified as fundamental differences between them in terms of sound, the passage of time, how one listens, and the basic conception of music: "We speak of essential elements in Western music—rhythm, melody, and harmony. Japanese music considers the quality of sound rather than melody."

Another major figure in the integration of East and West is the Chinese-born Chou Wen-chung, who came to the United States in 1946 to study with Varèse. Central to his teaching and composition has been the concept of a "re-merger" between Eastern and Western traditions to form a new mainstream. Chou helped a number of young Chinese composers come to the United States to establish their careers, including Tan Dun (see Chapter 15), Bright Sheng, Zhou Long, and Chen Yi.

Chen Yi (b. 1953) practiced piano and violin in secret before being sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution to work as a laborer. She later studied at the Central Conservatory in Beijing, where she became the first woman in China to earn a master's degree in composition. In her *Chinese Myths Cantata* (1996), Chen combines a contemporary Western idiom with instruments and subject matter drawn from Chinese art and literature. Her piano piece *Ba Ban* (1999; see Anthology 24) is based on the melody, characteristic rhythmic pattern, and form of the traditional Chinese instrumental piece from which the work takes its title. She integrates these elements with twelve-tone techniques developed through her studies with Chou Wen-chung and Mario Davidovsky. At times the rapid pentatonic figurations echo the exoticist fantasies of works like Debussy's *Pagodes* (see Chapter 2), but as the work unfolds *Ba Ban* uncovers

layers of history documenting a rich and specific life story that takes us across continents and a half-century of experiences.

Recalling the anxiety he felt in bringing together East and West in *November Steps*, Takemitsu wrote in 1989: “Today’s young people do not share that ambivalence. Perhaps they have no sense of crisis; in fact, they handle two different traditions skillfully.” As we will see in Chapter 15, such border crossings between cultures, histories, and traditions play an ever more central role in many aspects of contemporary musical life. While such developments always give rise to tensions and traumas, for many young composers, performers, and listeners today, it is the sense of crisis itself that seems a thing of the past.
