

CHINESE MUSICAL INFLUENCES,  
WESTERN STRUCTURAL TECHNIQUES:  
THE COMPOSITIONAL DESIGN OF CHEN YI'S *DUO YE*

Wendy Wan-Ki Lee

In the past fifty years, there has been a multiplicity of new compositions with a blend of cultural forces. Among those are the works produced by Chinese and other Asian composers, many of which have combined Western compositional techniques with elements from their own musical heritages, such as the folk music and dance forms of their native land.

As non-Western elements become increasingly prevalent in contemporary music, performers are faced with greater challenges of interpretation, since the meaning of such compositions now lies not only in one particular performance tradition but in diverse musical practices. Although existing scholarship could potentially serve as a useful resource for performers, it is often too technical or too superficial to offer any practical interpretive information.

The continuing rapid outburst of compositions with a combination of cultural influences demands an immediate solution to the difficulties mentioned above. To aid in the dissemination of such works, there is the need for more scholarly commentaries that will involve methods of analysis which are user-friendly, work-specific, and culturally-inclusive. These analytical means should not only help to unveil the core musical elements in the amalgamation of Western compositional techniques and Chinese or other Asian aesthetics, but also preserve the composer's individuality in the music.

Chen Yi's solo piano piece, *Duo Ye*, clearly demonstrates the composer's expertise in synthesizing Chinese and Western elements in her music. The existing scholarship on this work tends to present general observations that only offer information on the surface level of the composition, and aspects of musical influences have often been identified without much explanation.

My objective in this essay is to discuss the compositional design of *Duo Ye* by focusing on two aspects that are essential to the understanding of this work: Chinese musical influences and Western structural techniques. Assuming no prior knowledge of the subject, my reading of this work is intended to be presented in an approach that is user-friendly, work-specific, and culturally-inclusive. It is an attempt to unravel the intricacies beneath the musical surface and offer a springboard of ideas that would enable more convincing performances of this work.

First, I will discuss the Chinese musical influences of this work—what they are and how they are captured at the piano, an emblematically Western instrument. Second, I will present my analyses of the musical form of *Duo Ye* by drawing upon structural principles and harmonic function of a typical single-movement Classical sonata in the Western musical context. Third, we will gather all our findings and talk about what we can learn from our observations.

## CHINESE MUSIC INFLUENCES

### Duo Ye

In 1980, Chen Yi attended a performance of Duo Ye while she was collecting folk songs of the Dong minority in southwest China. This emotionally charged experience prompted her to write a piano piece using the same title and utilizing similar musical characteristics.

“Duo Ye” is a traditional folk song and dance form of the Guangxi Province in China. Two prominent features that are often heard in this Chinese musical practice are the uses of minor third intervals and call-and-response singing effect. Duo Ye is often performed to celebrate the joy of a harvest or the arrival of an important guest. In it the lead singer improvises a melody while others dance in a circle with a bonfire set in the middle.

At the beginning of Chen Yi's piano work, contrasting registers and tempi have been used to capture the call and response in the folk singing of Duo Ye. The constant repetition of “Ye Ye” at a minor third in the folk song, which inspired Chen Yi to compose this piece initially, is imitated at the piano by having the same interval repeated many times throughout the piece. This minor-third interval not only functions as an important ingredient of the recurring 025 trichords and octatonic-sounding melodic lines; the various uses of this interval also serve as the building blocks of all the diminished or diminished-seventh chords that are heard very often at the vertical simultaneities of this piano piece.

### Yu-he-ba

The rhythmic organization of *Duo Ye* is based on the use of a Chinese compositional technique called Yu-he-ba (sum of eight)—a type of rhythmic sequence used in *shifan-luogu*, a traditional instrumental ensemble in East Central China that often consists of instruments such as the bamboo flute, gong, and drum. Yu-he-ba is a Chinese compositional technique in which the number of beats that one part gains is equaled to the number of beats that another loses; when both parts are put together, the total sums to eight beats.

In Chen Yi's *Duo Ye*, a similar rhythmic organization can be observed. The same number of beats that result in total each time is 11 beats (instead of 8) in each pair of call-and-response in the opening measures. For example, at m. 1, the “call” has three beats, together with the “response” at mm. 2-5 (eight beats), sum to a total of eleven beats. The same number of beats will result when the duration of the “call” that appears a second time at m. 5 (six beats) is added to the “response” in mm. 7-8 (5 beats), thus demonstrating the composer's application of the principles of Yu-he-ba in the piano work.

### Chinese Mountain Song and Folk Singing

Chinese mountain song is a type of folksong usually sung by two people who work in the mountainous and hilly regions; one initiates the tune and the other respond, as a way of releasing their intense emotion during labor such as the tending of flocks, or simply as a means of entertaining themselves. The content of these songs could range from lovers expressing their feelings for one another, or workers praising beautiful landscapes.

Although the musical traits of these Chinese mountain songs will vary depending on the geographical regions that they come from, one particular characteristic that is common to all is that they are free in rhythm and are not performed in a strict pulse. The space that exists between each musical statement is as important as the statements themselves.

In Chen Yi's *Duo Ye*, one can relate the non-metered Adagio section of this piece—with its broad, spacious, tranquil melody that contrasts to the rhythmically driven music around it—to the unrestrained musical effect of Chinese mountain songs.

Singing in indefinite pitches and sliding tones are some of the vocal sounds that are characteristic of so much traditional Chinese folk songs. In Chen Yi's *Duo Ye*, grace notes have been used extensively to capture these vocal effects on the piano. But unlike in the Western musical canon where grace notes are generally treated as decorations or embellishments which are subordinate to the melody, the ones that we have here occupy a much more significant role and are a part of the melodic line themselves, just as these grace notes would be inseparable to the melodies we hear in Chinese folk singing.

#### WESTERN STRUCTURAL TECHNIQUES

Although the wide array of stylistic influences in *Duo Ye* might create some confusion with regard to its overall shape since it tends to draw freely on characteristics from diverse musical sources, there is no doubt that this work does possess musical elements closely resembling those of a single-movement sonata form in the Western tradition. In support of this claim, I will now present my analyses of the formal design of *Duo Ye*.

In the Western music tradition, sonata form is defined not only by thematic contrast but by harmonic contrast as well. In a twentieth-century sonata, the harmonic function may be less clearly defined due to its dissonant musical language, but some basic structural elements still remain in this type of music. The existing analyses of *Duo Ye* seem to reach a consensus on where the development, recapitulation, and coda appear in this sonata-like work. The discrepancies lie in their readings of the exposition. This is mainly due to the long period of motivic development after each of the two themes. Two main questions then arise regarding the exposition: 1) Where does the transition begin? 2) Are there more than two themes in the exposition?

I propose that the exposition consists of only two themes, with a slow transition in between.

*Duo Ye* is delineated by theme 1 with C# as its tonal center. Fragmentations of theme 1, serving as an extensive elaboration of the main ideas from theme 1, begin when the opening call-and-response ends. The non-metered, recitative-like Adagio follows as the transition. Although it is quite unusual for the transition to be in a slow tempo, this passage provides a link between themes 1 and 2, offers a drastic change of character when the rhythmic activities from before come to a halt, and prepares the listeners for theme 2. Also, just as the transition typically ends on the dominant harmony of theme 2 (V of V) in a Western sonata, the bass motion at the end of the transition in *Duo Ye* can be heard similarly. The constant pounding of the note D reinforces its move to the secondary tonal center of G that follows. Theme 2 is centered on G (a tritone and not a perfect fifth away from C#); it opens with twelve different pitches in the left hand and a highly ornamented melody above it. A noticeable change in texture once again sets off the fragmentations of theme 2, confirming the G tonal area. The development and

recapitulation are relatively short in comparison to the exposition, which occupies for at least 2/3 of the piece. The recapitulation brings back the original C# tonal center (written enharmonically as Db at times) and is confirmed by a coda to end.

#### BRIDGING CHINESE MUSICAL INFLUENCES, WESTERN STRUCTURAL TECHNIQUES, AND BEYOND

After having discussed the Chinese musical influences and Western structural techniques in *Duo Ye* separately, let us now digest our findings and attempt to connect the pieces together to enhance our understanding of this work.

The Chinese musical practice of Duo Ye provides the initial source of inspiration for the composer. The characteristics of this traditional folk song and dance form get translated to something that has a similar effect on the piano. During the writing process, aspects of other Chinese musical influences such as the indefinite pitches and sliding tones in folk singing also come into play and are imitated at the keyboard, as these are the sounds that are deeply rooted in the composer's experiences. Subsequently, the various musical ideas of this piece are put together and become organized. To perform these tasks, compositional techniques are drawn from both Chinese and Western musical sources, and this is evident in the composer's uses of Yu-he-ba as well as motivic development such as the elaborations of a minor third to become diminished triads and diminished-seventh chords that exist within a particular octatonic collection, serving as the major pillars of the melodic and harmonic design of this work. On the structural level, these various musical ideas and tonal centers tend to lend themselves nicely to the Western formal delineations of a one-movement sonata, with contrasting sections that are not only musically satisfying but logical and coherent in its musical flow as well.

In conclusion, this paper will hopefully enable a greater understanding of the wide array of Chinese and Western compositional techniques used in *Duo Ye*, facilitate our evaluation of its aesthetic value, and encourage us to focus our attention not on the act of canonization but on appreciating the musical depth and meaning of this piece. From our observations through the Chinese and Western microscopes of musical subtleties that exist in this work, the analytical approaches taken in this essay are intended to help unravel the musical intricacies of *Duo Ye* as well as to serve as a springboard of ideas for musicians who are interested in learning about other similar compositions.

When a Western-style composition is combined with its "Chineseness" (often produced by the composer's musical references to Chinese traditional aesthetics and performance practices), it demands a great deal of its interpreters. Not only do pianists need to utilize their own imagination and musicality in performing such a work, they must also acquire a comprehensive understanding of the amalgamation of Chinese and Western musical elements that is central to this piece. Interest in this kind of music also lies in seeing the Chinese and Western components interact with each other in distinctive ways that make them inseparable; and as music unfolds within a basically Western construct, the resulting fusion produces a powerful musical effect when all the materials blend into a complete whole. *Duo Ye* by Chen Yi is such a work; and it is therefore crucial for their performers to absorb the musical essence and then convey the dramatic outcome to its audience.

In *Duo Ye*, the Chinese elements that provided the initial sources of inspiration for the composer become something that is quite out of the ordinary when they are incorporated

within the context of a Western music composition. More specifically, when the elements deriving from the various traditional Chinese performance practices are translated by the composer to the Western musical language so that they can be played on a piano—an emblematically Western instrument—their existence in a way stretches beyond the confines of the Western musical tradition, since the sound produced by them is not typically heard in a Western music composition, or if it is, it arises for different reasons. The fine line between what is inherently Chinese or Western becomes blurred, and musical interest lies primarily in having the elements from two different cultural traditions rub together to create an appealing sonic effect.

But whether the overall effect is a tossed salad or melting pot—that is, whether it is the individuality of each of the cultural components that enhances the music, or the fusion of different cultural forces that results in something that sounds fresh—the distinctive voices of the composers will always emerge from it; and it is important for us as analysts and performers to help unravel the logic of such unique compositions—those that can withstand the test of time and speak to every one of us.