Asian-Australian Interactions:
Personal Compositional Voice and After-Resonance Renewal

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ABSTRACT

Chou Wen-chung asserts that for the revitalization of an individual's culture there needs to be a sense of a cultural *root* in creativity that can receive creative input, and from this things grow and flourish. In my own music, as a composer of European heritage but born of Pacific environs, I see this *root* as an eclectic Australian attitude after the Sculthorpe tradition, but also incorporating a European technical sensibility. Equally important within this sense of cultural *roots*, is a sense of *personal voice* nourished by what Joji Yuasa calls a composer's *cosmology*—a broad personalized range of interests unique to the individual. In this sense I see the exact choices of an individual as creating a unique set of values—a type of cultural DNA—that nurtures a composer's inner *voice*. It is my contention, that this *personal voice* in my own work is strengthened by a conscious and intuitive awareness of cultural and personal *roots*, and revitalized by cross-cultural engagement. My compositions *Fierce Tranquillity* (2004) and *After Resonance Blues* (2005) draw on Hwang Byungi-ki's *aftertone* concept to create a growing emphasis in my work on sonic after-resonance. This creative renewal sits alongside established personal pitch-orientated gestures of a more European emphasis, although my music also assimilates momentary sounds/living-colour and sound-object influences of the East.

Keywords: aftertone, personal voice, cultural roots, cosmology, revitalization, cross-cultural, composition

1. CULTURAL INTERACTION

The guttural sigh of the Korean violist heard over the ringing resonance of the last notes of *Fierce Tranquillity* (2004) pointed to the physical nature of the work—its percussive quality drawn from Korean music. Chou Wen-chung (2004) asserts that for the revitalization of an individual's culture "the beautiful flowers plucked from a neighbor's garden will never produce roots for future blossoms" (p.213). What Chou means of course, is not to ignore cross-fertilization but to have a sense of cultural *roots* in creativity that can receive input, and from this *root* things can grow and flourish. In my own work as a composer of European heritage but born of Pacific environs, it might seem strange to draw on Asiatic resonances yet it is related to a sense of personal *root* and cross-cultural interaction born of friendships. This sense of cultural *roots* and Asiatic engagement I see as aspects of my personal compositional *voice*: something that is related to the Pacific, friendship and a European heritage. I believe that this *voice* is strengthened by a conscious and intuitive sense of cultural and personal roots and revitalized by cross-cultural interaction born of friendships.

Personal Voice and Cultural *Roots*.

The New Asia String Quartet's performance of *Fierce Tranquillity* at the 2005 Pacific Rim Music Festival in Santa Cruz, brought an explosive percussive quality to my music reminiscent of the Korean court music (chong'ak) and gutsy kayagum (Korean zither) sounds that inspired the work. This East-Asian flowering in the music is related to a sense of

personal *voice*. I see *voice* as not only embracing Chou's concept of personal cultural *roots* (Chou, 2004, p.213) but also Peter Sculthorpe's idea of forging a tradition from one's own geographical locale (Crossman, 2005, p.16). The latter's position is an eclectic attitude related to his Pacific locale.

Another way of describing this *voice* is through Joji Yuasa's concept of a "Composer's Cosmology" (Yuasa, 1989, pp.176-177). Yuasa relates this concept to both localised tradition and universality but then personalizes it as an "individual cosmology" (p.197). In Japan at the 1990 Pacific Composers' Conference he explained this cosmology as something the individual assembles from their wealth of experiences and ideas. Tan Dun further develops this eclectic conceptual approach by placing the emphasis on the artist as an individual, especially in a wildly eclectic musical sense (Utz, 1998, p.143). Dun's artistic license includes faking traditional Chinese music as well as quoting mainstream European and Indian music (p.147) in his compositions. Dun considers that "it is actually a tragedy for a contemporary composer to be interested in only one culture. That's not enough to form a language of one's own" (p.144).

In contrast to Dun, Chou Wen-chung emphasizes the sense of cultural *roots* necessary for engagement with outside resources to revitalize culture. Chou (2004) discusses the role of the *wenren*—an artistic sage-like figure—in ancient Chinese society whose duties included creativity and, most importantly, the continuation of cultural heritage (pp.213-214). He sees this revitalization of culture as "responding to stimuli coming from both within and outside the culture" (p.214). However for Chou, this amalgamation process must be anchored in a sense of cultural *roots* so as the creativity does not just become an emulation of other cultures. As Chou states the "process of revitalization by assimilation and introspection is deeply rooted in one's own legacy and proceeds through slow evolution" (pp.214-215). Interestingly, he observes that in the broad spectrum of Chinese culture these creative interactions enabled the arts to flourish but when a sense of cultural roots disappeared from the mix, the arts declined.

In regard to my own personal creative identity as an Australasian composer of European descent, I see the necessary *root* for creativity as comprising of two prongs: Pacific locale resonances and a connection to a European heritage. This dual *root* interacts with personal *voice* to create music. I see the personal range of influences covered by Yuasa and Dun as being related to a composer's inner sensibility: hence the uniqueness of the individual's range of influences helps to identify the DNA of personal compositional *voice*. The revitalizing elements coming from a cross-cultural engagement in this mix, I believe, need to strike a resonant frequency with this inner sensibility so as the music has a genuine connection to the composer’s life.

Friendship and Cross-cultural Engagement

My own compositional *voice's* cross-cultural engagement is born of friendships: one with a Filipina-Australian poet and the other with a Korean-Australian composer. The poet Merlinda Bobis encouraged me to explore Filipino resources, especially kulintang percussion ensembles, in order to resonate with her poetry whilst conversations with composer Ji Yun Lee have provided aesthetic insights into Korea. This cross-cultural input from East and South-East Asia has interacted with my European heritage and sense of Pacific locale to reinvent my compositional *voice* as a Pacific-European fusion. This *voice* has identifiable sonic gestures related to both my Pacific locale and European sensibility: momentary colours, colour chords and Pacific sound-objects.

2. CREATIVE RENEWAL

Asiatic resources inspire the momentary colours and Pacific sound-object approaches in my personal musical *voice*; these sit alongside a more European orientated gesture of sonorities emphasizing interval-colour—*colour chords*. The Korean aesthetic of the plucked aftertone merges these moments and *colour chords* as well as articulates the sound-objects into flexible beat units to revitalize my latest work.

Momentary Colours, Colour Chords, Sound-objects and Korean Aftertone

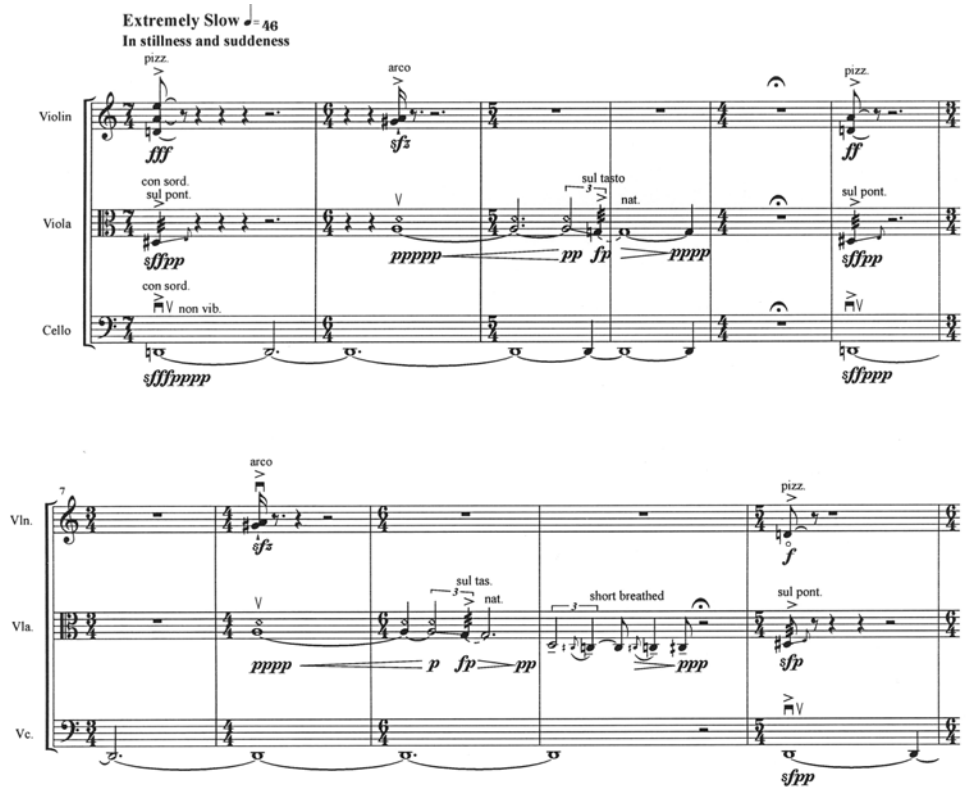
Momentary colours are one of the Asiatic inspired concepts behind my string trio—*Fierce Tranquillity*. The explosive colour moments attacked with vigour by the Korean musicians, form a changing labyrinth of colours at the works outset. This approach is related to an Asian *living-colour* concept where the single tone is varied to create a living thread through the music.

In my trio the after-resonance of sound following the attack is worked within that gesture and varied at its recurrences (see Example 1). Resonant triple stopped open-string sonorities —plucked for their attack quality—combine with short metallic sounding sul ponticello glissandi to work the inside of the gesture. Other variations include strong down-bow attacks with wafer thin high harmonics as the afterlife of the tone, or microtonal vibrato oscillation on a stopped note with an open string acting as a resonator. A later extension of this idea is the continued use of open string plucking and bass drone but with an expressively charged viola line kicked off by a short breathy harmonic—an airy explosion into sweetness. Here the inspiration was the explosive breath attack motion into sound, called mura-iki (Lependorf, 1989, p.235), which is characteristic of the Japanese shakuhachi (traditional bamboo flute).

Renowned Korean kayagum (zither) player, Hwang Byung-ki talks of the *aftertone* of a plucked note spreading out into the acoustic in Korean court music (chongak) (Hwang, 2002, p.813). Filipino composer Francisco Felicano (1983) in his discussion of Chou Wen-chung's music relates this working of the moment to Chinese Confucianist philosophy, which values the "single tone" (p.9). Most recently, Korean composer Kim Jin-Hi utilizes this tradition in her work calling it " 'Living Tones' " (Kim, 2003, p.127). My own work follows this tradition of varying the moment but differs from the Korean model discussed here, in that it works not only transient sounds but sustained ones as well.

In my latest work *After Resonance Blues* (2005), for Amsterdam based pianist Marcel Worms, I deliberately extended the *aftertone* concept via stopped-note and plucked piano resonances merging into momentary *colour chords*. The rubber stopping of piano notes to create a metallic-like vibration is a technique I first employed in *Daragang Magayon* (1999-2001)—a music-dance drama collaboration with Merlinda Bobis. Here, the prepared note technique was used to create a gong-like resonance reminiscent of the deep agong sound (gong) from Moro percussion ensembles in the Philippines (Crossman, 2002, p.65). In *After Resonance* I extended the *aftertone* idea by merging the gong-like resonance to plucked strings to ordinarily struck notes via sonic overlaps.

Example 1: Bruce Crossman, extract from *Fierce Tranquillity*, bars 1 to 11. Changing colour punctuations.



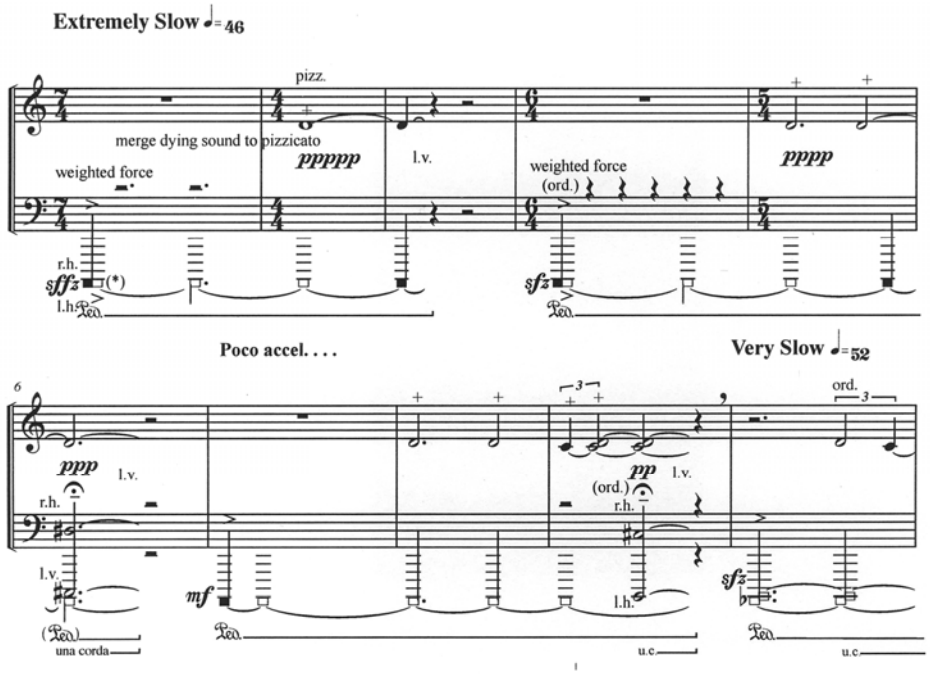
In short, Filipino inspired *living-tones* began to merge with French-style interval-colour conglomerations into a cultural synthesis (see Example 2).

Another interpretation of the *aftertone* concept is *colour chords* as sonorous moments of after resonance. The personalized nature of these sonorities is a bitter/sweet interval mix: yearning major sevenths and dissonant seconds versus stable fourth sounds in *After Resonance*. This focus on sonorous moments of interval-colour finds their equivalent in the French musical tradition of the sonorous vertical moment (Crossman, 2005, p.17), especially in the colour sonorities of Debussy and Messiaen. My own bitter/sweet sonority idea here is something that recurs from earlier work—*Colour Resonances and Dance* (1996-1997)—where the moments work as a continuous sequence (Crossman, 1999, p.70). What is different in my latest work is that the gong-like low sounds, *aftertones* in themselves, are used to break up the *colour chord* sequences into smaller sound bites (see Example 3). These segments become savoured sounds similar to the Korean savouring of the after qualities of a single tone. Perhaps the most telling resonance is the repeated articulation of gong-like low notes to excite the silently depressed notes of the last chord into vibration. Here the undampened 'silent strings' echo with resonances designed to be suggestive of the remembrance of a friend's father's passing.

The final personal sonic gesture examined here is that of Pacific sound-objects, specifically a fragment of Korean Royal Ancestral Shrine music overlaid onto the *colour chord* fragments in *After Resonance*. The melodic fragment used is from the ancestral music *Chonp'ye Huimun* that has associations to its Korean purpose as a musical offering to a dead king (Jeon, 2004, pp.5, 12-13). The music-association in my music is intended as a tribute to the passing of a Korean friend's father. This Pacific found sound-object, which is adapted into my own language, is used to signify both my locale and a Korean friend to personalize the music.

The musical details of this sound-object include its intrinsic qualities and my adaptation of them. Analyst Mee Eun Jeon (2004) observes that the *Chonp'ye Huimun* tune is based on a transposed version of the Korean p'yongjo scale (p.17). Whilst Jeon acknowledges the pentatonic character of the scale he also points out the Korean subtleties of usage: a nuclear melody expressively elabourated (p.12) and the use of vibrato/glissando on particular tones (p.10). My usage of the Korean fragment follows this nuclear elabouration principle: the nuclear cell of second, fourth and third intervals is arranged so that the material gradually accrues in complexity via interval additions, grace note emphasis and chordal interruptions of the line. Furthermore, each linear development of the cell is broken by low gong-like

Example 2: Bruce Crossman, extract from *After Resonance Blues* (piano), bars 1 to 10. Cultural synthesis.

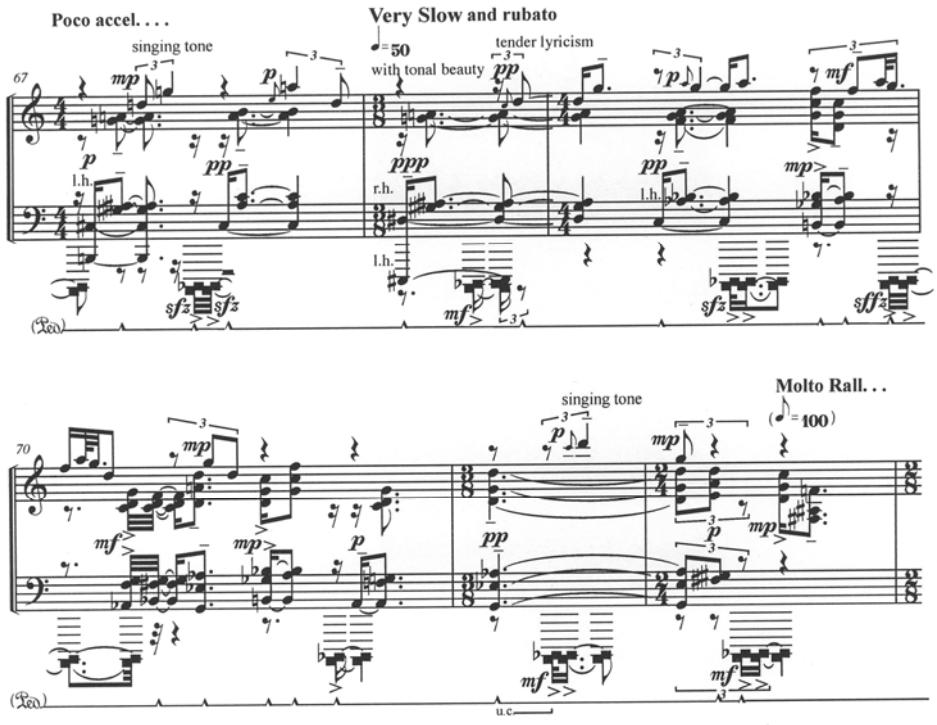


resonances from prepared notes. These vibrating low buzzes colour the pentatonic quality of the line perhaps in the spirit of the Korean treatment of the p'yongo scale with "tones connected by vibrato" (Jeon, 2004, pp.9-10), albeit that my vibration is outside the line whereas the Korean treatment is from within the tune (see Example 3).

The rough quality of the gong-like sounds breaking of the sound-object, form slow uneven beats in their division of the line. This jolting asymmetrical quality has parallels with the Royal Ancestral Shrine music source and general character of Korean rhythm. Korean rhythm is controlled by the idea of a flexible beat; here the actual length of the beat varies but it maintains the overall number of counts (Provine, 2002, pp.841-842). In Royal Ancestral Shrine music rough percussive strokes on pak (wooden clapper) and cholgo (barrel drum), in modern practice, break the sounds into wide spaces in a slow tempo (Jeon, 2004, pp.8, 12). In *After Resonance*, the asymmetrical beat-like slabs cut roughly by gong-like sounds parallels Korean flexible beat and percussive articulation. Although earlier works of mine use prepared notes this is the first time that they are close enough together to form an asymmetrical beat. Korean-Australian composer Ji Yun Lee pointed out to me the abrupt-roughness quality aim of Korean instrumentation over its smoother Western counterparts. It occurred to me after this conversation, that this abrupt quality of Korean instrumentation had influenced the piano piece by bringing out an emphasis on the gong-like roughness in this section (see Example 3).

In conclusion, I see my own *personal voice* in composition as being nourished by a hybrid cultural *root*—Pacific located Asiatic sounds and concepts intermingled with a European interval-colour sensibility. Several, identifiable sonic gestures have emerged from this: momentary colours and sound-objects as signifiers of my Pacific locale, and bitter/sweet interval-colour sonorities of a European sensibility. The revitalization taking place in my *personal voice*, is that the Korean *aftertone* concept and its associated attack sound deployed in my latest works have brought out an abrupt gestural quality and merging of sounds in them. The effect is to revitalize my music with an abrupt Korean energy as well as synthesize contrasting cultural resonances.

Example 3: Bruce Crossman, extract from *After Resonance Blues*, bars 67 to 72. Colour chords, sound-objects and asymmetrical beats.



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