East Meets West at Chinese Festivals in Toronto

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Abstract: The author discusses a composition by Chinese composer, George Gao, focussing on ways diasporic Chinese composers create music in foreign sites, such as Toronto. In the article, the author demonstrates that, drawing on multifarious sources and embedded influences, the work of such a musical artist is richly textured in creative and hegemonic ways.

This paper examines the cultural baggage that pioneering hybrid musics necessarily carry. Through investigating one of George Gao's syncretized *erhu* pieces "Embroidering the Lotus Purse," I highlight the lopsided power relations "Embroidering" embodies—relations that Richard Kraus describes as, a "cultural sharing that takes place ... most frequently on Western terms, as the stronger partner of the relationship" (1989: x). Further, by studying the deep structures of "Embroidering," I propose that *vis-à-vis* the embodied cultural baggage, hybrid musics are sites for diasporic Chinese composers to negotiate their past experiences as they find their niche in a foreign destination, Toronto.

I begin with a discussion of the work's compositional and performance contexts, the biography of the composer, and my ethnographic bases for interpreting this piece. "Embroidering" was commissioned by the Laidlaw Foundation and was premiered at the third Lunar Chinese New Year of the Arts 1997 (Canada's year of Asia and the Pacific) with recorded music. In the same year, this piece was performed with an ensemble of *erhu* (Gao), *yangqin* (Guo Mingqing),[1] *zheng* (Hong Jie), piano (Michael Fonfara), cello (Tim Casson), percussion (Uli Bonneg), and vocal jazz (Zhang Haijing) at the "Snow and Maple Celebration Concert" staged by the China Central Television (Overseas Branch) for the 1997 Chinese New Year.[2]

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[1] Respecting the Chinese naming convention, last names appear before first names for transliterated Chinese names. Citation of literature published in China (not including Hong Kong) are Chinese in original. All translation is done by the author.

[2] Thanks to Pang Zhixiong, a professional narrative singing performer, who allowed me to use his copy of the taped event. Thanks to George Gao who provided me with and allowed me to use the score of "Embroidering." For the purpose of this paper however, I based my analyses on the 1997 Harbourfront version after Gao critiqued my commentary on September 27, 2000. According to Gao, the Harbourfront performance is closer to the "real" version—CD (Track #1), "George Gao *Erhu* Pieces: Jazz, New Age, Pop, Classical, Chinese," RA-971013C, ROI Productions (Hong Kong), 1997. At Harbourfront (1997), Gao performed with recorded music of the rhythm section, the piano, and vocal parts. The vibraphone section was not present. Through my several years of observation, I note that Gao does not present the vibraphone solo section in the several concerts I attended whenever this specific piece was performed though he finds the vibraphone timbre "enchanting" (liner notes, ibid., 15). For the 1999 Harbourfront "Lunar Chinese New Year's Festival of the Arts," Gao performed with Zhang Haijing his wife (vocal) and Donald Kwan (piano and violin) presenting a version of "Embroidering" not as close to the CD version as the 1997 version. Also performed with recorded musical parts, Kwan harmonized Gao's solo with the violin. The vocal parts were

On both occasions, "East Meets West" was conveniently advertised as the ground for staging contemporary Chinese cultural events, including festivals in Toronto that allegedly facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

Gao graduated from the Shanghai Music Conservatory in 1988. As a distinguished *erhu* composer and performer who has been active musically in Toronto since the early 1990s, Gao enjoys respect from both the Chinese community and the broader society in Toronto. My analyses of this piece are based on the many interviews and conversations Gao and I have had over the past four years (1996-2000). He has read my prior commentary of this piece, made suggestions, and verified my interpretation of his manipulations of modal qualities. My analyses are also based on study of the score, the CD version, local recordings of Chinese festival performances, the comments from Gao's colleagues and critics, and audience response that I obtained through fieldwork.

Interpreting "Embroidering"

To interpret hybrid arts, Ingrid Monson points out that one must "be able to move successfully among several levels of analysis and that detailed knowledge of musical processes is crucial in situating music within larger ideological and political contexts" (1999: 33). In interpreting Gao's hybrid piece, I propose to examine "Embroidering" from several perspectives: 1) past history versus the contemporary setting, and the composer's creative response at the crossroads of intersecting cultures; 2) deeply embodied musical knowledge versus the composer's skin deep experience of other musics such as jazz; 3) personal musical grooves and political agendas versus responsibilities (as a composer or anyone whose work is cross-cultural); 4) the nature of cross-cultural bridges, how they are constituted, and what we are allowed to learn from the alleged cross-cultural encounters; 5) embedded (often lopsided) power relations in claiming music and certain musical instruments as "international"; and 6) the agency cross-cultural composers have in blurring boundaries that allegedly set the East and the West apart.

Meaning of the title "Embroidering a Lotus Purse"

On a personal level, Gao finds engaging the Shanxi folk melody on which he bases his work. In the liner notes he writes, "(a)mong folk songs of the various provinces of China, many have the title 'Sewing the Purse' ... but I like the Shanxi one most. I learned it when I was still a boy, and until now I have never felt sick of it" (CD liner notes, p. 14). In a broader context however, Gao's personal musical preference falls in line with some culturally constructed patterns.

According to Yi Ren, the women's practice of sewing and embroidering aromatic purses for their lovers and spouse, and singing a folk song with lyrics that narrated sentiments attached to such a trend had made "sewing the purse" popular both as a musical topic and handicraft. Apparently, this practice was found in many Chinese

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slightly altered and extended compared to the CD version. Similarly, the vibraphone solo was not presented on that occasion.

provinces[3] in China during the 1800s. Explaining Gao's preference, Yi further remarks, "the Shanxi version was and remains most popular because of its fluent melody, rich modal-timbral qualities, refined embellishments, and deep sentiments" (Yi Ren, 145). Such fine musical qualities are not fortuitous; they are rooted in a couple of practices, one socio-cultural and geographical, the other musical.

During the mid-Qing dynasty, "*zouxikou*"[4] or literally, "taking the western route," was a way of life for families that did not produce enough to support themselves in their home provinces, Shanxi and Shaanxi in particular. Males of such families, therefore, *zouxikou* in an attempt to secure temporary employment for eight or nine months in a year. They then would spend the rest of the time together with their families, after having made something out of the often menial jobs that characterized the nature of such employment on this route. According to Wang Shu, this westward route began at the village of Hequ, Shanxi; it then followed the course of the Yellow River, passed through the city of Baotou (Inner Mongolia), cut across the northern part of the Ningxia (now an autonomous province) and ended at the Gansu province (Wang Shu, 144-186) where, in fact, Gao grew up. Women whose husbands *zouxikou* expended their emotions sewing the purses as they experienced the period of difficult separation, longing for their spouses' safe return. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Shanxi "Embroidering" folk tune, which originated right at the starting point of such a western route, is most profound in emotion and refined in embellishment compared to those that prevailed in urban areas such as Beijing and Tianjin which had no part in the *zouxikou* tradition (Wang Shu, 156-164). Musically, there was also the practice of performing this piece along the *zouxikou* route in an "*erren tai*" format, literally meaning a theatrical performance for two with musical accompaniment. Commonly used instruments were *dizi*, *sihu* (a four-stringed bow instrument, used in both Han and Inner Mongolian musical cultures), *yangqin*, and *sijuewa* (bamboo hand drum) (Miu Tianrui, 97).

Structural Characteristics

Musically the Shanxi "Embroidering" is made up of thirty-four strophes[5] of a melody that comprises eight measures in three phrases (2+2+4). The number of core words in the lyrics of the phrases is respectively 5+5+7 plus syllables to connect keywords of the phrases (Yi Ren, 143).

In Gao's hybrid piece "Embroidering," the basic phrase structure remains intact.

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[3] They were Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Jilin, Tianjin, Shanxi, and Inner Mongolia. See Yi Ren, "The Profound 'Embroidering the Lotus Purse," 130-131.

[4] "zouxikou" is a Chinese term that embodies the verb "to go" or " to take."

[5] Zhao recorded thirty-four strophes for this particular "Embroidering." The lyrics describes the sad feelings of a woman who is about to be left behind by her husband who *zouxikou*. It also describes in detail the materials and the ways she gathers them for sewing the purse. The lyrics also gives a detailed description re what are sewn (mostly legends such as the cowherd boy and the seventh sister) on the purse and the haste with which her husband embarks on the western journey. See Zhao Kuanren, "The '*Erren Tai*' Folk Tradition of the People of Hequ," 234-236.

Figure 1: Overall Structure of "Embroidering"

Intro. | 4-bar intro. (mm. 1-4)| **MM:** ♩ =98 **Key of C**
Section A | 8-bar phrase (traditional), 2x (mm. 5-20)| (*shang diao*)

Key of G
Section A1 | Var. of the melody based on the musical materials of the folk melody, 2x (mm. 21-36) | (*zhi diao*)[6]

Key of C
Section A | 8-bar phrase (traditional), 2x (mm. 37-52)| (*shang diao*)

MM. ♩ =125

Bridge | 4-bar bridge, piano/keyboard (mm. 53-56), introducing the walking bass pattern for the rest of the upcoming section|

Section B1 | *erhu* improv. repeated over the 8-bar phrase structure, 4x (mm. 57-88)|

Section B2 | vocal jazz begins as a voice/*erhu* dialogue, 4x (mm. 89-120)|[7]

Section B3 | *erhu* returns playing the melody 4x (mm. 121-152)|

Coda | 9 -bar (2+2+2+2+1) (mm. 153-161)|

Gao seems to have settled on what he understands as "improvisatioin elements" as a musical means of bridging the Chinese and Canadian cultures. While Gao does not define what is "Chinese," he defines "Canadian" as "a mixture of different things."[8] Regarding "improvisation," Gao explains that the "Chinese way" of *improvisation is "based on the melody" while the Western way is "based on* harmony." For "Embroidering," Gao claims to have incorporated both melodic and harmonic improvisational styles.[9]

Introduction and Section A (See Figure 2)

Gao comments that the introduction and section A are "very traditional." He continues, "the ornamentations there are fully done and are done with the traditional style. Even if you take it to China, everyone there will have a sense that it is very traditional."[10] While Gao emphasizes ornamentation as a marker for what he considers "traditional," I would argue that the harmony used in the introduction, section A, and to a large extent in Section B (where Gao claims that he uses "jazz"

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[6] In cipher notation, *shang* mode reads 2, 3, 5, 6̣, 1; *zhi* mode reads: 5, 6̣, 1̣, 2̣, 3.

[7] In the "real" version, that is, the CD version, there is a section C performed on the vibraphone. This section consists of melodic improvisation done over the basic 8-bar structure four times before the *erhu* returns to conclude the piece.

[8] Author interview with Gao, July 9, 1997.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Author interview with Gao, September 7, 2000.

harmony) is fundamentally a "traditional" representation of an embedded unequal power hierarchy reflected in Gao's deployment of Western harmony.

Below is a legend for the musical transcription on the following pages.

Legend for the percussion section:

 shakers

 wood block

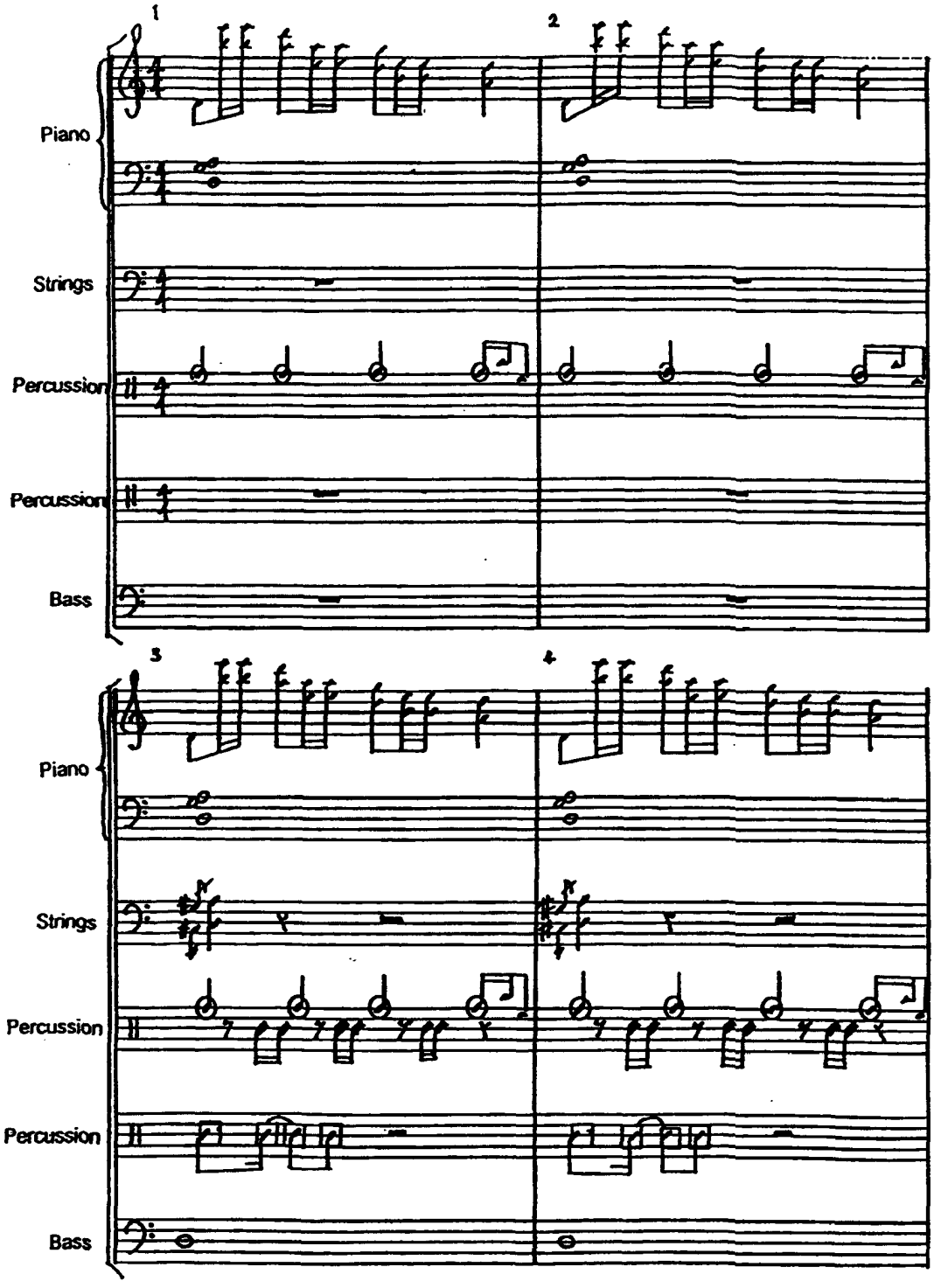
 wood fish

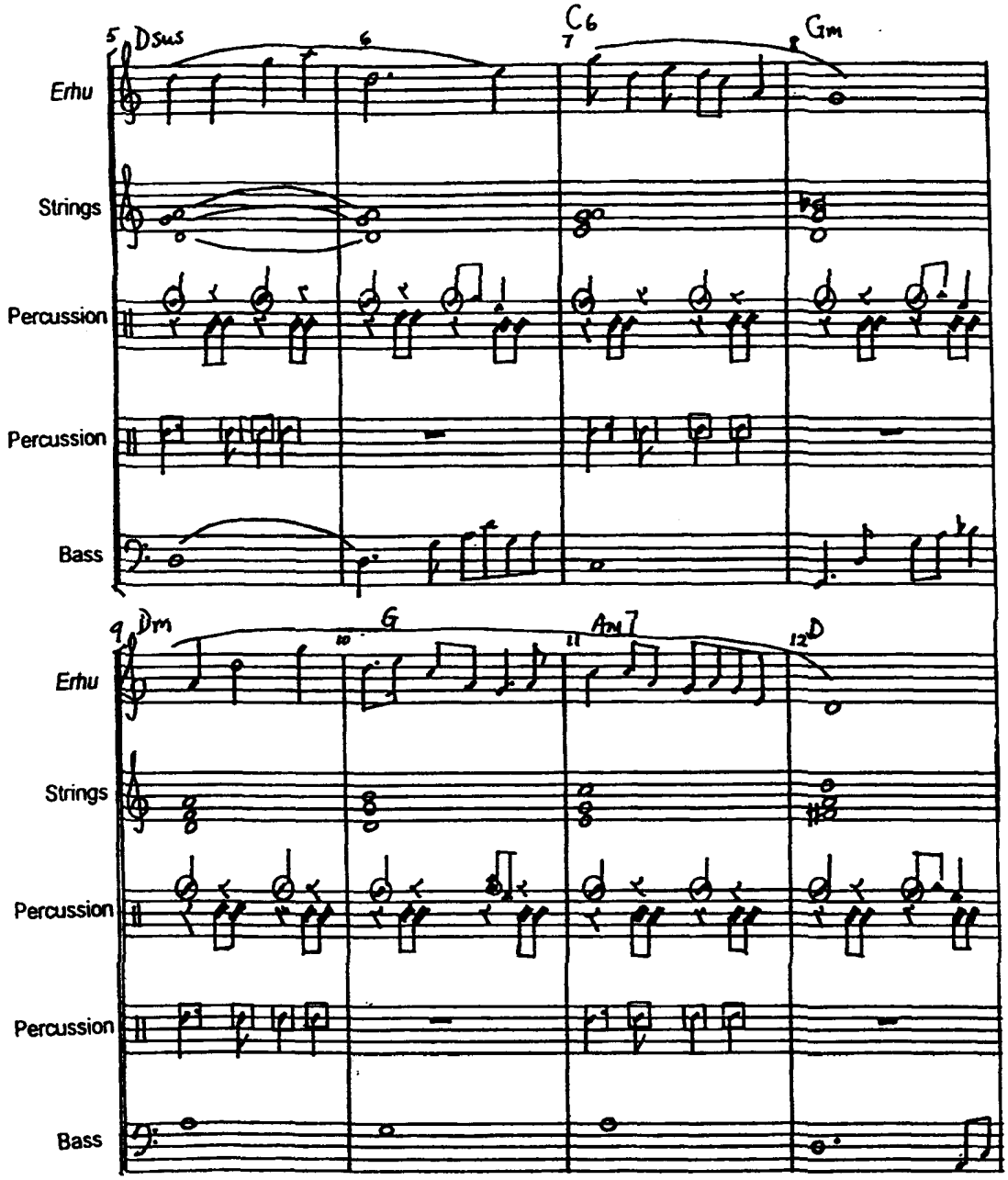
 conga

 snare drum

 high cymbal

Figure 2: Introduction and Section A




5 Dsus
6
C6
7
Gm
8
Erhu
Strings
Percussion
Percussion
Bass
9 Dm
G
10
Am7
11
D
12
Erhu
Strings
Percussion
Percussion
Bass

Examining Gao's harmonic notation one sees the welding of Western harmony and Chinese pentatonicism in several ways. Am7, a chord basically identical with C6 for instance, is a chord comprising fundamental notes of the pentatonic aggregate. The DGA (mm. 1-4) shares two common notes with both C6 and Am7 but contains the note D, a note that emphasizes the *shang* mode, a mode which according to Zhang Xiaofu is associated with a "relatively dim" sonic affect (Zhang Xiaofu 1987: 22). In the context of Western harmony, the interplay with the third of these chords Dm (m.9) and Dmaj (m. 12) evokes the first two of three pentatonically-derived ancient Chinese seven-tone scales (see figure 3 below), and a Picardie third. This is what Gao understands as a "colourful harmonic progression" (CD Liner Notes, 14).

Figure 3. Ancient Chinese seven-tone Scales[11]

Yayue Scale

Qingyue Scale

Yanyue Scale

[11] See Zhang, *Pentatonic Modal Qualities*, 18-19.

In situating a pentatonic melody in the seven-tone harmonic environment, Gao enacts a musical tradition which Jochen Noth (1994: 85) dates back to the 1930s, a time when Western musicians made their impact on the Chinese musical world causing many Chinese composers to experiment enthusiastically with musical syncretism as a medium through which, according to Chinese musicologist Ju Qihong, "a new path is created for Chinese music" (Ju Qihong 1992: 25). Through this new path, "(c)osmopolitan musical leaders sought to modernize Chinese music (and) to minimize the impact of traditional Chinese musical practices, arguing that modern music, like modern science, must meet international standards."[12] Barbara Mittler also observes, "Western music was emulated in all kinds of ways, Chinese instruments and playing techniques were reformed to make *erhus* sound like violins" (Mittler 1997: 274). Indeed, "(f)or many musicians, direct emulation of the West was a clear goal.... (Chinese musicians) have insisted on defining modernity in terms of features basic to Western music, such as the increased use of harmony, or choral singing" (Kraus, 28). Western musical practices are never adopted purely on their aesthetic bases. "Embroidering," like many contemporary Chinese hybrid compositions, embodies unequal power negotiations that cut across time and place.

Section B (See Figure 4)

♩ The musical activity speeds up in two ways. First the metronome changes from ♩= 96 to 125. Secondly, the walking bass figure that underpins the entire section along with the doubling of the harmonic rhythm adds momentum.

Regarding the melody, Gao describes as improvisation the use of composed notes outside the pentatonic aggregate layered over the melodic materials in section A.[13] After repeating the basic three-phrase (eight-bar) structure four times, vocal "jazz" enters, allegedly "improvising" with non-lexical vocables totally unrelated to the original lyrics of the folk song, but nevertheless in line with the way the *erhu* has been playing all along in this section.

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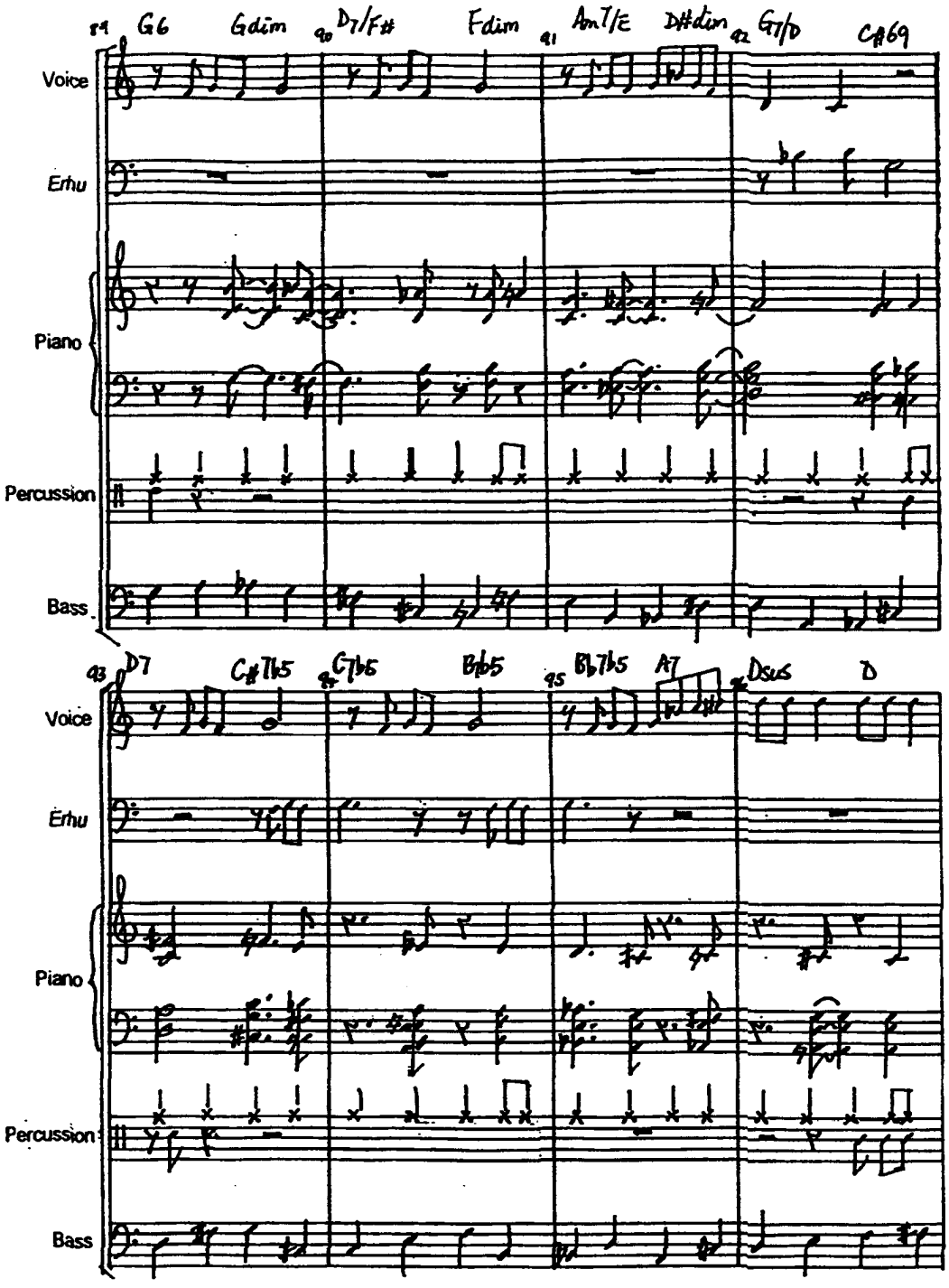
[12] See Kraus, *Pianos and Politics*, x. Empiricism, musically expressed, found its way in the massive Chinese efforts to build up "scientifically" an anthology of folk songs. In fact, these efforts culminated in the so-called "1958 Folk Song Movement." Northwest folk tunes were much valorized as they were collectively used as a symbol of Communist victory (Yenan-based, rural and Northwest) and rural-proletarian importance in a Chinese Communist vocabulary. See Tian Ying, *The 1958 Folk Song Movement in China* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1978).

[13] Gao's definition of improvisation differs from the usual Western one of spontaneous change during performance.

Figure 4: Section B2, *Erhu*-Vocal Jazz Dialogue



With regard to harmony, I map out and interpret Gao's understanding of "jazz" harmony as follows:

Figure 5: Harmonic Structure of Section A & B Compared

Section A	[1] *Dsus*	[2] ***Dsus***	[3] ***C6***	[4] ***Gm***
Section B	[57] G6 Gdim	[58] **D7/F#** Fdim	[59] **Am7/E** D#dim	[60] **G7/D** C#69
Section A	[5] **Dm**	[6] G	[7] **Am7**	[8] **D**
Section B	[61] **D7** C#b5	[62] C7b5 B7b5	[63] Bb7b5 **A7**	[64] **Dsus D**

Comparing Gao's harmonization between the sections, it is obvious that chords in section B that I highlighted, are chord extensions of those used in section A (generally to the 7th) and tritone substitutions in section B. What is also noticeable is the raising of the third degree of the chords (Dm to D7, Am7 to A7, and Gm to G7) using the affective bright/dim qualities of major and minor chords. With a more "upbeat" feel and use of major versus minor chords Gao calls forth a "bright feeling"[14] which he thinks that the *erhu* does not conventionally evoke. Additionally, he created a chromatic bass contour as a means through which he overcomes what he believes that "some performers who are specialized in traditional Chinese music are not used to playing."[15]

By transforming the *erhu*'s affective representation, and by incorporating Western musical elements in *erhu* music, Gao believes that he has done a couple of things to raise the status of the *erhu*. Additionally, he claims to have raised the technical level of this piece. He explains that he has taken the step "to make the *erhu* an internationally renowned instrument ... just as the violin is, or the *erhu* will die."[16] On one hand, this claim resonates with both Kraus' and Mittler's observations quoted earlier. On another, Western harmony and musics are perceived as life-giving sources.

With regard to "Embroidering," Gao rationalizes, "anything can happen in music (-making)" and that "it does not hurt to have to lose (one's) roots if (one) plays a newer style."[17] How much of one's roots does one have to trade for the aspired "bridge" to cross-cultural understandings when one of the two musical partners has a semi-colonial past imposed by the other?

Regarding China's semicolonial status, Rey Chow shrewdly remarks, historically "(a) clearly identifiable *foreign* colonizer" is always absent (Rey Chow 1993: 9). Consequently, "(w)hatever oppositional sentiment there exists is an oppositional sentiment directed toward itself—'China', 'the Chinese heritage', 'the

[14] Author interview with Gao, July 9, 1997.
[15] Author interview with Gao, September 27, 2000.
[16] Author interview with Gao, July 9, 1997.
[17] Author interview with Gao, September 27, 2000.

Chinese tradition', 'the Chinese government', and the variants of these"(Rey Chow, 9). While positing the self as independent (in both territorial and linguistic terms), the foreign other "is not purely "oppositional" ideologically; on the contrary, the point has always been for China to become as strong as the West, to become the West's equal" (Rey Chow, 9). To be "equal" implies a current unbridgeable distance; and if this distance is bridged, it is in some undefined future when China finally catches up. In the composer's mind, one must go beyond, if not against one's musical tradition to survive—a term which in itself is laden with nuances of inequality. Stemming from unequal power relations, misrepresentation of both the self and others brings about cultural misunderstandings of various kinds. What do audiences learn about the *zouxikou* musical tradition which could have resonated profoundly with their diasporic experiences? What have we learned about the jazz tradition which Gao claims that he engages?

Perceived "Death" and a New Lease of Life

With respect to the density of the imported cultural baggage and cultural (mis)understanding "Embroidering" embodies and conveys, Gao breaks new grounds. At the intersection of cultures, Gao allows a nineteenth-century Chinese folk tune to blossom anew in a contemporary Western metropolitan context. As James Lee, the former chairman of the Toronto Canadian Chinese Artists Centre remarks:

> I dare say that in tonight's concert, the single most important performance is Gao's "Embroidering." I am not saying that what he's doing is superb, but he's trying to breakthrough from tradition.[18]

In the same vein, Peter Bok, secretary of the Toronto Chinese Music Association commented,

> George is right! No matter (in) Hong Kong or Taiwan, Chinese music never goes beyond the mainland Chinese frame. ("Embroidering" signals) a good trend.[19]

Additionally, Gao finds his niche in Toronto as he claims,

> If there is nothing in Toronto that needs me as a Chinese musician, I wouldn't (have) live(d) here.[20]

Indeed, what brought Gao to Toronto was a perceived dead end in mainland China:

> After I graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory, I went to one of the best ensembles and I was the soloist. For the first year, I felt that I could do something. But ... every musician in the ensemble didn't practise because there were no concerts. (For) one year, I remember (that there were) only two or three concerts organized by the ensemble. The pay was so low that I couldn't even feed myself....

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[18] Author interview with James Lee, May 10, 1999.
[19] Author interview with Peter Bok, April 26, 1999.
[20] Author interview with Gao, May 3, 1999.

> Popular music (from Hong Kong and Taiwan) was all that the people wanted to hear. Our kind of music was hurt.[21]

The processes of creative music-making, cross-cultural experimentation and imaginings, allow the composer to find his sense of meaning in his adopted country. More importantly, this syncretized piece shows Gao to breathing new life in a diasporic context: new life that "absorbs Western classical influences, Western pop influences..."[22] and allows the composer to combine these influences into new compositions hence preventing the Chinese instrumental tradition from "dying."[23] At the same time, through such musical works, diasporic Chinese composers such as Gao craft dense sites where one may indeed engage multi-level analyses.

Conclusion

"East Meets West," an expression that connotes deeply embedded power laden meanings that often elude participants, has been the catch phrase for many festival stagings in Toronto. In various cultural contexts, incessant Chinese efforts have been made to "meet" with the "West." This contact has never been easy. Within this zone, very often, musical syncretism brings to the fore the tension between deeply embedded Chinese musical knowledge and the skin-deep understanding of musical cultures whose borders are allegedly crossed.

For artists who are involved in intercultural exchanges, and for many of us who pursue intercultural studies, it is not uncommon that we are often trapped in "our own mystifications and misrepresentations, building our investment and engagement in fictions that misrepresent the lives of others and hide the conditions of our production—the contexts of power, hate, hurt and fear in which we live" (Lipsitz 160). More profound intercultural understanding, I believe, lies in our interrogation of the roots and disjunctures of our emotional experiences and investments. The tension involved in music border crossings, indeed brings to light the contingency of such emotions and boundaries. As Zhang Longxi cogently remarks, "(t)he beauty of real difference or the aesthetic of the Other cannot be truly appreciated unless various misconceptions are exposed and the false polarity between the East and West is totally dismantled" (Zhang Longxi, 131). Syncretized musics, dense as they often appear, play an important role in dismantling such polarity.

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[21] Author interview with Gao, August 10, 2000.
[22] Author interview with Gao, July 9, 1997.
[23] Ibid.

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