

Evoking Traditional Sounds Through Timbral Innovations: Lecture-recital featuring works by John Cage, Franghiz Ali-Zade, Ge Gan-ru and Kathryn Woodard

By Kathryn Woodard

The impetus behind presenting this lecture-recital at the International Spectral Music Conference was to demonstrate a variety of techniques that composers have used to change the timbre of the piano and to show how these changes evoke and represent traditional music and instruments of non-Western cultures.

The idea of evoking the “other” is, of course, not new to piano music and has a long history among Western composers from the *Rondo alla turca* of Mozart to the gamelan-influenced works of Claude Debussy. What is different about the works on this program is each composer’s use of timbre and timbral changes on the piano in order to create perceptual representations of different styles of music. Another important difference is that two of the composers are from the cultures they seek to represent—Franghiz Ali-Zade is from Azerbaijan and Ge Gan-ru is from China—which necessarily changes the discussion from simply a Western view of the “other” to a dialogue between East and West that takes place on the piano. I thought this topic was particularly relevant for a presentation in Istanbul, where the expression “East meets West” is not simply a tired catchphrase but an actual description of influence and cross-cultural dialogue.

Although timbral explorations may be relatively new to the piano repertoire, the idea of employing timbre as a tool for representation is not new. I am thinking specifically of the phenomenon of sound mimesis as studied by Steven Feld among the Bosavi people of Papua New Guinea and by Theodore Levin in Tuva and Mongolia. I have been particularly influenced by Levin’s work and would like to offer a few of his insights into sound mimesis and timbral listening as a way to open my discussion of timbral representations on the piano.

In his book *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond*, Levin discusses how Tuvan music is timbre-centered, including the well-known style of throat-singing, and is used to create mimetic representations of nature and natural soundscapes such as valleys, rivers and caves.¹ Levin collaborated on the book with Tuvan scholar Valentina Süzükei who shares the following perspective on approaches Western scholars and musicians

have taken to the phenomenon of throat-singing and explains the Tuvan's concept of timbre-centered listening: "Westerners who listen to drone-overtone instruments like the jew's harp, or to throat-singing, often ignore the drone and focus only on the melody. But for Tuvan listeners, drone and overtones form an inseparable whole, and the timbre of the drone is crucial to producing a harmonically rich sound that extends over a wide frequency range."² Through his continuing fieldwork Levin also came to the conclusion that when Tuvans speak of "melodic richness [what is] meant [is] timbral richness,"³ that is, a rich fundamental tone that can change in timbre as opposed to creating an explicit sequence of pitches that form a melody.

Related to timbre-centered listening is the phenomenon of sound mimesis, which Levin approaches from a variety of perspectives including research into human cognition. He draws on the work of Merlin Donald who makes distinctions between mimicry, imitation and mimesis as different cognitive stages and capabilities in his book, *Origins of the Human Mind*. The following excerpt from Levin's book refers to Donald's definitions:

"Mimetic skill or mimesis, says Donald, 'rests on the ability to produce conscious, self-initiated, representational acts that are intentional but not linguistic.' Donald distinguishes between mimicry, imitation, and mimesis. . . . Mimicry is 'literal, an attempt to render as exact a duplicate as possible,' and Donald notes that 'many animals possess some capacity for mimicry.' Imitation is less literal than mimicry in Donald's trichotomy, and is common among monkeys and apes. Donald provides the example of offspring copying a parent's behavior, in which the copying involves imitation but not mimicry. Mimesis, by contrast, 'adds a representational dimension to imitation. It usually incorporates both mimicry and imitation to a higher end, that of re-enacting and re-presenting an event or relationship,' and thus involves 'the *invention* of intentional representations.'⁴

Levin relates these definitions to musical life in Tuva and describes "ways in which human sound-makers mimetically represent their relationship to the natural beings and forces that surround them, both in real life and in the magical-realistic world of narrative performances, where the 'voices' of musical instruments represent events in the lives of humans and animals."⁵

Although piano music which may seem distant from Tuvan music both in terms of place and style, these explanations of timbral listening and sound mimesis are relevant to my

discussion since two of the pieces (Cage and Ge Gan-ru) are created from timbre-centered sound worlds, and all of the works utilize timbre as a way to establish, represent and express relationships. In this case the relationships are between cultures rather than between nature and humans.

In the pieces by Ali-Zade, Ge Gan-ru and in my own transcription, the idea of mimesis will be clear. To discuss the music of John Cage in terms of sound mimesis is more problematic since his works do not give us examples of so-called “intentional representations,” but rather they introduce us to different realms and aesthetics of sound where timbre figures prominently. I have included his music on the program in order to provide an example of early timbral explorations at the piano. These were innovations that had a profound influence on many later composers, including the three others on this program, who adopted and developed timbral techniques to serve the purpose of a *kind* of sound mimesis.

I chose to perform excerpts from *Sonatas and Interludes*, Cage’s most extensive work for prepared piano composed from 1946 to 1948. The pieces were composed at a time when Cage was becoming aware of Oriental philosophy and specifically the work of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the Indian art historian and aesthetician. Cage described his intentions for the cycle of pieces: “I decided to attempt the expression in music of the “permanent emotions” [or *rasas*] of Indian tradition: the heroic, the erotic, the wondrous, the mirthful, sorrow, fear, anger, the odious, and their common tendency toward tranquility.”⁶ However, Cage scholar, David Patterson states that it is “impossible to cross-match any one sonata to any one emotion. . . . Consequently, the relation of these *rasas* to the *Sonatas and Interludes* seems to be an eternally murky issue.”⁷

Clear references to particular sound worlds, of Asia or otherwise, are not part of Cage’s intentions for the pieces. However, his decision to use altered timbres of the piano does betray his interest in non-Western music, specifically the sounds of percussion instruments from around the world, which he became exposed to through studies with Henry Cowell and which he began incorporating into his music in the mid-1930s. Although this would seem to point to an overt interest in timbre as an organizing principle in Cage’s music, Christopher Shultis makes the distinction between Cage’s interest in rhythmic elements of percussive music and its timbral components, the former providing the primary compositional framework for Cage and the latter being added later as a result of Cage’s experimentation in performance.⁸ So when I speak of

these pieces as being timbrally centered, I am referring to this performative aspect of Cage's creative work.

Because of these “murky” references to the East, both in terms of sound and philosophy, Cage's music has been studied as a continuation of orientalism in music, just within an experimental framework. John Corbett in his article “Experimental Oriental” compares the tactics of Cage, which he labels “conceptual orientalism,” with those of other composers whose approach Corbett calls “contemporary chinoiserie.” Incidentally he makes quite a similar distinction between mimesis and imitation in his arguments, but as a means for aesthetic judgment. He states, “Unlike Cowell, Partch, and Cage, who were stimulated by non-Western musics to come up with something conceptually and/or sonically original, Hovhanness, McPhee, and Harrison tended to pay homage with the sincerest form of flattery—cheap imitation.”⁹

Although Cage does not make overt references to specific styles of percussion music in the *Sonatas and Interludes*, I propose that these pieces evoke the sound of the non-Western in a non-specific sense simply because the timbre of the instrument is altered. If one doesn't hear the sound of the piano, then one automatically goes looking for ways to describe the “other” sounds that are presented, namely as percussion instruments from a variety of traditions. With further research into the neuroscience of imitation and mimesis, along the lines of Donald's work, maybe it will even be possible to say that it is wired into us cognitively to listen for such relationships and representations in music.

Cage's piano music had a strong influence on the music of Franghiz Ali-Zade, who was born in 1947 in Baku, Azerbaijan. She received her education at the Baku State Conservatory with degrees in piano, composition and musicology. She became an active performer of contemporary music and performed *Sonatas and Interludes* as well as works by George Crumb throughout the Soviet Union during the mid-1970s. She explained to me through recent e-mail correspondence that Cage's cycle, and American music in general, opened up a new world of sounds and timbres for her. And she specifically began to search for ways to create sounds of her country's traditional instruments using prepared piano techniques. One of her earliest pieces using these techniques is *Habil Sajahy* (In Habil's Style) from 1979 for cello and piano, in which she conjures up the string instruments *kemancha* and *tar*, and *gosha-nagara*, the small kettle-drums of Azeri music. In “Music for Piano,” Ali-Zade's “intentional representation” is the sound

of the *kanun*, or plucked zither of Azeri (and Turkish) art music, which she evokes timbrally by placing a beaded necklace over the strings in the mid-range of the piano.

Ali-Zade first performed the work in 1989, but she did not decide on a fixed notation for it until 1997. Rather she relied on a modal framework for the piece, similar to that of Azeri music, called *mugam*, as a way to structure her performances and which allowed her the freedom to improvise, a predominant feature of such modal traditions. Both the potential for improvisation and the selection of pitch material modeled on a particular *mugam* serve as additional means for evoking the sound of Azeri music in this work. I will perform from the notated version of the score. However, having listened to Ali-Zade's own recording of the piece before she decided on the fixed notation, my performance is also informed by her original improvisatory approach to the piece, and I do allow myself liberties with melodic figuration and rhythmic phrases.

While Ali-Zade credits Cage's influence she also sets herself apart from his "approximation of eastern sound concepts" by claiming that she is "incorporating the European instrument into her own musical tradition."¹⁰ However, Ali-Zade admits that she became acquainted with *mugam* and Azeri art music quite late in her career through self-directed study. Her music then is an example not only of a response to Cage's experimental orientalism, but also of dialogue within the artist herself, discovering, recreating and representing aspects of identity.

The next composer featured on the program is Ge Gan-ru who has been called China's first avant-garde composer. He received degrees in both violin and composition from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. In 1982 when China was still unfamiliar with twentieth-century Western music, he wrote politically controversial works including *Yi feng* for solo cello in which he used unorthodox extended techniques to produce timbres simulating Chinese percussive instruments. In 1983 he was awarded a fellowship to attend Columbia University where he completed his doctoral degree. He has since lived in the United States and has received commissions from the New York Philharmonic, the Tokyo Philharmonic and the Kronos Quartet among many others.¹¹

I performed two movements from *Gu yue*, or "Ancient Music," which has four movements total, each referring to a Chinese traditional instrument—gong, qin, pipa and drum. In these pieces Ge Gan-ru uses a variety of techniques for evoking the sound of Chinese music

and his work clearly demonstrates the principle of sound mimesis as a means to create something new while still remaining rooted in tradition.

The first piece is entitled “Gong” and refers to the large bells found in Chinese temples. The bell sound is re-created on the piano with preparations and also by modifying the lowest strings to produce harmonics. Although the notation is specific as to which overtone should be produced, the resulting sound isn’t simply one isolated pitch but rather a timbrally rich sound, which approximates that of a gong. The second piece is titled “Qin,” which is a type of Chinese zither. Although the main technique of playing the instrument involves plucking and strumming the strings, a wide variety of other sounds are also part of the instrument’s tradition, and Ge Gan-ru evokes these with varied extended techniques.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Ge Gan-ru about his work and posed questions to him about his explorations of timbre. I wondered how and when he became interested in using extended techniques as a means for evoking traditional sounds. He told me that with such a strong background in Western music as a young person he actually “looked down on Chinese music” and followed trends in twelve-tone composition in his early years. However, he realized this system did not enable him to express what he felt and his leanings became closer to Bartok who also looked to his own culture for inspiration. He remembers when visiting performers came to China from the West and brought scores by composers such as Cage and Crumb. This music inspired him to explore ways to represent his own culture’s music on Western instruments. Such extended techniques are particularly relevant for exploring Chinese music on the piano in Ge Gan-ru’s view since that tradition is timbre-centered rather than pitch-centered. He explains the difference in hierarchies of musical elements by stating: “While in Western music, composers are concerned with relationships between *pitches*, in Chinese music what is important is the *particular* pitch [with] its microtonal and *timbral* character.”¹² With this in mind, I want to point out the difference between American and European composers who used timbral effects as a way to break with pitch-centered tradition and to introduce the listener to new sound worlds, while non-Western composers rely on timbral innovations as a way to continue and reinterpret the tradition of their own country within the framework of Western instruments.

Like Ali-Zade, Ge Gan-ru differentiates his music from that of Cage and others in terms of compositional approach. He emphasizes that even though Cage was receptive to the East, his music is still highly systematized and governed by logic, a characteristic which Ge Gan-ru

considers a predominant feature of Western thought and aesthetics but which is opposed to the actual tenets of Eastern philosophies and artistic approaches. When I queried him about Cage's later use of chance procedures and even the *I Ching* in his compositions, Ge Gan-ru answered, "even that is used in a logical and highly systematic way."¹³

The final piece on the program was my own transcription of music by Umar Temor who is from Tajikistan. I heard his music at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington D.C. in July 2002. That year's festival was dedicated to cultures of the historic Silk Road.

I heard the piece with Umar Temor performing as vocalist along with a chorus, several string players and frame drummers. The ethnomusicologist Ben Koen, who has done fieldwork in Tajikistan, provided me with information about Umar Temor, who is also a master of the spiked fiddle known as the *qaichek* or *kamanche* and teaches Tajik folk music at the university in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. His focus is on spiritual music related to Islamic mysticism and this devotional song and dance is an example of his own personal style although clearly rooted in tradition. The original song text is in classical Tajik-Persian and the title "Bazme Rabbani" can be translated as "Spiritual Gathering."

The following is an excerpt from the song's lyrics:

"Let us sing praises to our Beloved.

Forget the self, leave love of the world behind, and

Host the Spiritual Gathering!

Sing sweet, lyric poems.

Chant verses of love.

One travels from place to place, from ocean to ocean, imprisoned by the world.

Host the gathering of God, all are welcome!"¹⁴

It was not my intention to record something at the Folk Life Festival so that I could write a transcription of it. I was just so taken by this particular piece that I thought it would be worthwhile to try my hand at it. By definition a transcription is not intending to create something new, but rather is closer to the definition of mimic: "as exact a replicate as possible." And so one could label my attempts as two steps back on the evolutionary scale described by Donald.

However, whereas rhythms can be mimicked and melodies are closely approximated, the timbral

aspects of the piece provide the mimetic challenge, that is, being able to recreate and reinterpret the overall sound world of the piece.

I used preparations that I am familiar with from playing Cage's works and experimented to achieve a suitable timbral environment for the piece. I also used one preparation to alter the tuning of the piano and to approximate a modal shift that occurs in Temor's performance. By wedging a dime between the strings of C4 and C5, I was able to achieve additional 'A's (A4 and A5) that are approximately 2 commas flat from tempered tuning.¹⁵ These pitches occur prominently in Umar Temor's vocal refrain during the third section of the piece.

A result of this transcription, of course, is that I am throwing myself into the cross-cultural dialogue regarding the evocation of traditional sounds. I have been particularly curious to know Umar Temor's impressions of my work and what he thinks of my mimetic attempts at representing his music on the piano. Unfortunately, I have not yet heard directly from Umar Temor, although Koen has relayed the message that he is very intrigued and excited by the idea.

¹ Theodore Levin with Valentina Süzükei, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond*, Indiana University Press, 2006.

² Ibid.

³ Levin's most recent recording from the region does credit the timbre-centered nature of throat-singing and other Tuvan music. See *Among the Spirits: Sound and Music in Tuva and Sakha* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2000).

⁴ Levin, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Cage, "On Earlier Pieces" (1958), *John Cage: An Anthology*, Richard Kostelanetz, ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 129.

⁷ David W. Patterson, "The Picture That Is Not in the Colors," *John Cage: Music, Philosophy and Intention 1933-1950*, David W. Patterson, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 204.

⁸ Christopher Shultis, "No Ear for Music: Timbre in the Early Piano Music of John Cage," *John Cage: Music, Philosophy and Intention 1933-1950*, David W. Patterson, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 90-91.

⁹ John Corbett, "Experimental Oriental," *Western Music and Its Others* (University of California Press, 2000), 173.

¹⁰ Franghiz Ali-Zade, quoted in the liner notes for *Crossings...Music by Franghiz Ali-Zade* (BIS CD 827), 1996.

¹¹ Weihua Zhang, "Ge Gan-ru" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music in Musicians*, 2000.

¹² Quoted in Richard Steinetz, "Ge Gan-ru," *Contemporary Composers*

¹³ Ge Gan-ru, in an interview with the author, 17 September 2003.

¹⁴ Lyrics by Umar Temor, translated by Ben Koen, from e-mail correspondence with the author, 18 October 2002.

¹⁵ I learned of this technique from Paul Hogan, a composer at Columbia University.