A Chinese Take(Away) of Brahms: How The Singapore Chinese Orchestra Courted Europe

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ABSTRACT

In March 2005, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) embarked on its debut European tour in Budapest and London, taking two programmes in anticipation of different cultural expectations. In Budapest, it presented, among other pieces, Johannes Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 5 and Bela Bartok's Romanian Dances. In London: avant-garde and film composers Tan Dun and Michael Nyman. This article briefly tracks the background of Chinese orchestral music in Singapore, and examines the articulation of its contemporary Asianness on two platforms where the West has taken on different guises of The Other. Apart from challenges in transplanting cross-cultural aesthetics as an extension of an old game played over the past 60 years of Chinese orchestral development, the SCO's European tour threw up discussions on situational identity, representation and reception in the cross-wiring of Singaporean state agenda, commercial enterprise, artistic aspiration and historical makeup. This case study

seeks to deconstruct an orchestral sales pitch in terms of a layered musical, sociological and transcultural courtship.

Keywords: *Singapore, Chinese orchestras, situational identity, transculturalism*

INTRODUCTION: A CHINESE TAKE(AWAY) OF BRAHMS

As classical music encores go, Johannes Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 5 counts among the top choices of conductors and orchestras around the world, out on a limb to sweeten the end of a concert with a piece of bite-sized entertainment. The more familiar the item, the better the connection with a primed (or overfed) audience; the more stereotyped, the more effective is its throwaway consumption, in allowing listeners to check in and out quickly of a known musical code and benefit from the bonus cultural experience without the semantics of putting in conscious appreciative effort. This work in question, scored originally for piano duet but later re-arranged for orchestras of varying sizes (including a setting by the composer himself), has entered popular consciousness, even among non-classical fans, as a red-blooded sweep of rousing dotted phrases sounding suitably exotic (Eastern European or otherwise). But to sell a work apeing the gypsy cliché of decidedly non-Hungarian melodies – to Hungarians themselves? And in an arrangement that featured foreign-looking, nasal-sounding instruments which seemed to have originated from China but were yet arranged on stage as if they were members of a Western symphony orchestra?

This was exactly what the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (henceforth SCO) did in March 2005, using an arrangement by in-house composer Law Wailun, when it made its debut at Budapest's newly-opened Palace of The Arts, to a packed crowd. Conductor Yeh Tsung had justified (Yeh, pers. comm.) – indeed, exhibited pride – at this choice of billing, pointing out that in the clash

of cultures the quintessential strengths of his orchestra could better be exposed. The message he was sending, however, was a matter of greater debate: Was this unintended kitsch, or the quick-handed negotiation of cultural politics and a good example of postmodern irony?

The encore item was part of a larger, ambitious programme that formed the European debut of the 80-strong orchestra when it embarked on its first tour of Europe. The three-week trip, which also included London and Newcastle, packed two programmes for two kinds of audiences, but erstwhile also in consideration of the ensemble's own cultural baggage and its musicians' educational backgrounds and capabilities. This article explores the articulation of situational identity in transcultural terms through a case study of how SCO began courting Europe through music – via programme-making and interpretation.

A few notes can first be said of the SCO. The orchestra has beginnings that mirror the rise of Chinese orchestras in China itself. The latter genre grew out of developments like the May 4th movement which resulted in the exhortation of Chinese citizens to be "scientific." Much of this has been documented by Han and Gray (1979: 1–43) and Mittler (1997). China, then, had been suffering an inferiority complex in the wake of its defeat over the Opium and Sino-Japanese wars. All representations of "feudal ways" – including traditional music – were blamed for its political failure and to be expunged in favour of modern advances. A Chinese equivalent to the Western symphony orchestra was created, merging models of *Jiangnan Sizhu* (silk and bamboo music) and other regional genres with the functional harmony of late-Romantic, Russian-styled orchestral techniques.

Comparatively, the SCO is a younger organisation, formed in 1996 on the instruction of then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. Singapore itself was founded in 1819 by British trade official Stamford Raffles, who encouraged immigrants from China, Europe and India to populate the island. In 1965, it declared its independence from Britain, and today is a multi-cultural (some

prefer to use the word culturally-orphanaged) city-state of largely Chinese migrants. These settlers had set up religious and clan associations – community-rooted social groups bearing links to China, some of which boasted cultural arms, including local music ensembles. Many groups were active from the 1900s to 1970s, and in the later part of the 20th century as institutional "orchestra-isation" took off in China, small orchestras began to take over the roles of local musical ensembles in Singapore, in the same way that government-run community centres and schools (which housed the new ensembles) also began replacing the social function of clan associations. In 1996, PM Goh decided to professionalise a group of amateurs playing at a government-sponsored grass roots group known as the People's Association. The SCO – which began life playing Russian-style pieces by Peng Xiuwen and Liu Wenjin – was thus instituted. Its first director was Hu Bingxu, an old-school Beijing conductor who favoured classics of the romantic-pastiche composers. He was succeeded by Shanghai-born Yeh Tsung in 2002, an America-based musician trained as a Western conductor. Today, the orchestra holds about 30 ticketed concerts a year, including three to five world premieres. Its staple diet has about 3/4 focus on works of the early-to-mid Chinese orchestra oeuvre (e.g., Liu Tianhua, He Zhanhao**)**, although in the recent years of Yeh's reign concerts featuring regional genres (albeit delivered in heavy conservatory-schooled styles) and the contemporary Asian *avant garde* (e.g., Ge Ganru, Tan Dun) have also begun to appear.

ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS: SCO IN LONDON AND BUDAPEST

The SCO's European tour, in which I participated as an ethnomusicologist/journalist, was brought about by three factors – the first two being invitations from the Barbican Center in London and the Budapest Spring Festival. The third – which was important in financing tour expenses – was its inclusion as part of a larger culture and tourist campaign on behalf of the Singapore government at large (under the auspices of the Singapore Tourism Board and the National Arts Council), and held in London. Any programming strategy undertaken will

thus have been influenced by the wishes of its overseas presenters, state-endorsed identity and Yeh's personal preferences – all three making constant negotiations with the ethnic, cultural, educational and historical makeup of the orchestra itself.

What did the SCO want to say about itself? Stokes (1994: 4–5) writes that music "does not simply provide a marker in a pre-structured social space, but the means by which this space can be transformed." The SCO's musical sales pitch to Europe was a PR exercise in not just establishing Singapore as having "arrived" on the world arts map, but a deliberate statement on how, despite a less-than-favourable reputation, the island-nation was not the proverbial cultural desert. The articulation of this new identity through music, however, was effected through different terms according to where it played.

Another way of looking at the situation would be to consider the projection *of* musical identity as a reaction to projection *on* SCO's European audiences and their presumed (or lack of) knowledge of Chinese orchestras. Comparing bills presented by the group in different places, distinctions in the articulation of identity can be noted when the orchestra begins to second-guess the other: Budapest (as Eastern Europe) and London (as an international stage).

Consider the two different bills taken to London and Budapest below:

Romance of The Two Kingdoms: SCO in…

London (projected as the "international"stage)	**Budapest (projected as "Eastern Europe")**
Tan Dun: Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon	Kuan Nai Chung: The Sun, from The Age of The Dragon
Michael Nyman: Melody Waves (commission)	Phoon Yew Tien: Village Pasir Panjang
Tang Jian Ping: Hou Tu	Tan Dun: Fire Ritual
Qu Xiaosong: Divine Melody (with calligraphy by Tan Swie Hian and video work Janos Suite by Casey Lim)	Tang Jian Ping: Hou Tu
	Zoltan Kodaly: Selections from Hary (arranged by Sim Boon Yew)
Law Wing Fai: The Yellow River at Hukou (with calligraphy by Tan Swie Hian)	Bela Bartok: Romanian Folk Dances (arranged by Law Wai Lun)

A sample bill by SCO concerts presented in April of the same year, titled Yan Hui Chang and The SCO, is also presented below for reference:

Peng Xiuwen (arr.): The Surging of Messy Clouds

Phoon Yew Tien: Xin Tian You

Yan Hui Chang: The Sound of Water

Yan Hui Chang: Luo

Liu Wenjin & Zhao Yongshan (arr.): Ambush from All Sides

What is interesting lies in what the SCO chose *not* to play as opposed to what it *did* play. At home, mindful of its middle-to-senior-aged and Chinese-educated listeners, a typical programme included works of the romantic pastiche variety by the likes of Peng Xiuwen, and would usually draw a 70%–100% crowd, particularly so if a major soloist from China was in town. In the case of the April programme, the star guest performer was Hong Kong conductor Yan Hui Chang, whose works – of a traditional coloristic variety styled as programmatic symphonic poems, were featured, alongside tried and tested pieces such as Ambush from All Sides and a Peng Xiuwen vignette.

Overseas in London and Budapest, both bills avoided "classics" of the Russophile variety. This had to do with Yeh's love for modern composers and his anticipation of "Western" tastes, having worked as a symphony orchestra in the United States. There was also the question of the orchestra's stance – being a Singapore outfit on showcase to the world – of having to move

away from the programmes of Liu Wenjin et al. In particular, Yeh explained how he did *not* want to carry some of the mainland-directed doctrinal (communist or otherwise) baggage of Chinese orchestral music:

> I am surprised by how Singapore audiences want to hear old-fashioned pieces. To me, these verge on the vulgar and remind me of the Cultural Revolution, or pieces around that time and in that spirit. Such pieces are no longer fashionable in China. We should still be playing pieces outside the old repertory – but also look at what is happening in contemporary scene, especially if we are going on tour. Audiences in London will know of the Chinese émigré composers in New York.

Yeh's claim about the apparent unpopularity of "old-fashioned pieces" in China may be a slight stretching of the truth, going by recent performance bills of state Chinese orchestras. His point, however, is clear – that a conscious distancing of the SCO's identity from Chinese state ensembles was to be made: SCO's new and different Chineseness was to be defined – as I shall describe later – on terms that would ironically demonstrate its constructed cosmopolitanism.

In terms of what SCO *did* play, its sales pitch to London also reflected the wishes of the orchestra's Board of Directors and the Barbican Centre. Tan Dun's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon Suite was already well-known to British audiences through Lee Ang's kungfu movie, and specifically requested by the Barbican Centre. This did not pose a problem for Yeh, nor the SCO board and the National Arts Council, who already had sympathies for fashionable Chinese diasporic composers with cache value in the symphony orchestra and new music oeuvres while retaining their "Chineseness" by skin colour or birthplace – making them thus politically-correct enough for the orchestra's needs. New York-based and sharp-suited, slightly-bohemian Tan, whose theatre, film and serious music projects balanced commercial,

ethnic-Chinese, constructed "traditional" and modern avant-garde elements, was the perfect constructed fit for the same image that ethnically Asian but English-speaking Singapore was hoping to embody.

Tan's score, originally written for a symphony orchestra but re-arranged by the composer himself for a Chinese ensemble setup, pitted a solo *erhu* (Xu Wenjing on Chinese fiddle) luxuriating against lush, Hollywood-style cinematic arches of sound. The re-orchestration here, while modelled on Western symphonic technique, demonstrated Tan's sensitivity to Chinese instrumental idioms.

A second offering on the London programme featured Michael Nyman, a British film composer who would have already been familiar with some of the SCO's intended audiences through his writing of the soundtrack to the Hollywood film, The Piano. The orchestra had commissioned a percussion concerto from the writer, with the requirement that it would include the use of traditional Chinese instruments, if not Chinese instrumental and melodic styles. In the composer's own words, the piece was:

> wave after wave of melodies – sometimes the same melody, sometimes variants of that melody, sometimes new melodies, sometimes long, sometimes fragmentary, initially harmony-free, but later harmonized, sometimes overlaid with other melodies, sometimes uncombined/this sequence "of choice" is set against the genuine musical wave provided by the percussion music of "no choice" which presents a musical tide which rolls relentlessly and implacably, in total disregard to what is going on around it.

In performance, this "total disregard" that Nyman himself referred to appeared to have an unstabling effect on the orchestra as well as listeners, particularly in an unidiomatic (deliberately or otherwise) treatment of various Chinese gongs. Whereas genesis of the work began as early as June 2003 after discussions with the National Arts Council, Nyman later attributed the conceptual inspiration of his new opus to the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster of December 2004.

It was not Nyman, however, but re-interpretations of works by contemporary composers – Hongkong-based Law Wing Fai and China-based Qu Xiaosong, which were deemed feathers in the SCO cap, and presented as *finale* items. Here, it was not enough that a Chinese avant -garde sound – as exemplified by Qu's virtuosic and multi-timbral special effects on the *dizi* (Chinese flute), and the complex, crashing chords in Law's Yellow River – be demonstrated; they had to be accompanied by meta-musical elements of spectacle. Both works were re-staged to impress as multi-media extravaganzas that showed off the ensemble beyond an orchestra *per se*; it was now a vehicle for the more sophisticated world of interdisciplinary theatre. SCO's version of Qu's work, for example, featured the process of the painting of a celestial creature (authored by Singapore artist Tan Swie Hian), via video and digital manipulation, and screened in progress to live music. Law's piece was played to a live demonstration of artist Tan, again, putting a huge brush to a giant scroll. Its dramatic ending showed both Tan and Yeh pushing towards a final flourish through the artist's brush and conductor's baton.

In Budapest, however, a different "Western-tailored" programme awaited audiences – this time projected as not the cosmopolitan listeners of urban London, but an "Eastern Europe" potentially unaccustomed to the sounds of Chinese music. Tan Dun was on the bill again, this time represented not in a concerto but a shorter orchestral tableau, requiring the execution of theatrics (whispering, shouting and the dramatic turning of score pages on music stands) by orchestral members. Two other short pieces, Kuan Nai-Chung's The Sun and Tang Jian Ping's

Hou Tu fulfilled the avant-garde flash and virtuosic requirements where Tan Dun's Crouching Tiger would have been deemed of a softer, more cinematic quality.

More interestingly, however, there was Singapore composer Phoon Yew Tien's "Pasir Panjang" village, an instant-Asia musical construction of – in the compose's words – "simple and joyous Malay folk melodies (which) also depict the peace-loving and optimistic nature of the Malay ethnic group." The inclusion of such a piece – the only one by a Singapore composer, and an example of cultural and social-engineering through music – incidentally mirrors the trend for orchestras in China to programme works inspired by the ethnic minorities: *Yaozu Wuqu* (Dance of The Yao People) being an oft-heard example.[1]

Beyond cultural-engineering exercises in exhibiting the exotic ethnic variety of Singapore, there were finally the big curios of the evening: transcriptions of works by Kodaly and Bartok. Given the evolution of the Chinese orchestral genre at large, and Yeh's plans for showing off its "modern," non-China face in London, such a decision might seem to have constituted a step back in the development of the orchestra's portfolio. However, Yeh justified his choices:

> We're not sure what people in Hungary like to listen to, so it's a good idea to bring something familiar to them. We are already including pieces in new styles to show that we are flexible. So we bring some Eastern European works in transcriptions as well. Transcriptions in themselves are good for training the orchestra – in terms of technique, ensemble-work, and learning new styles of performance. We have chosen Eastern European composers not just because we are playing in Hungary. These composers are culturally closer to Chinese music than Mozart or Beethoven. The exercise is a useful experiment.

Whether or not this experiment was successful was a matter of debate, depending on the subject being questioned. Within the SCO, beyond Yeh and the official board and management, musicians I spoke to pointed out certain challenges of the musical transplantations. These included consolidating tuning systems, understanding the idiomatic requirements of Chinese versus symphony orchestral instruments, dealing with functional harmony and negotiating sonic balance. In retrospect, it can also be said that these very same issues have long been dealt with (or swept under the carpet) over previous decades of Chinese orchestral development, hailing back to the early days when orchestras in China played Strauss waltzes alongside Russian-styled tableaus. Five decades on, this time around, SCO's "leap" backwards in orchestral genre-mapping, however, might have been a gesture of creating novelty for its own sake at the expense of historical and technical development. Yeh explained:

> I know we can't play Hary Janos or Bartok like the Hungarians do, in terms of musicianship and instrumentation. But this is precisely the point, this clash of cultures. We want the Hungarians to see how different their own music may sound on our instruments.

What has happened here is a case of constructed situational identity – as a reaction to second-guessing (and projection upon) audiences in London and Budapest. The classic scenario of identity-formation as understood by associative identification by degree of content with traits found in concentric, widening circles of social or political environments (Kaufert 1977) applies to a certain extent. This is seen in how the SCO tries to transcend its assigned, pre-concert identity of a "provincial" Singaporean institution – first to the bigger "overseas" stage of Eastern Europe in Budapest, followed by the even larger "international" platform of London by presenting increasingly dramatic, show-stopping (and what it assumed to be cosmopolitan) programmes. On the other hand, Gladney's (1996) model of relational alterity can also be applied, in terms of how dissociative identification has taken place over the

traversing of the boundaries indicated in Kaufert's concentric widening circles of identity-projection. This is seen in how, where the SCO would be quite happy playing late-romantic classics locally, it chose *not* to identify with these elements (and its associations with the Chinese mainland orchestral tradition) when it debuted in Europe. Yet a third, layered reading of the case here is one that involves aspirations towards trans-cultural ties and identity – how, for example, Chinese composers (by ethnicity or birth) who wrote in a more modern (and sometimes postmodern) language were chosen to form parts of the bills in both Budapest and London; these composers were chosen as much by their "Chineseness" as they were for their "*un*-Chineseness" – measured in terms of cosmopolitan gloss in having achieved success in cities like New York or London, and of course also in terms of musical style.

As far as the intended effects of identity projection upon listeners went, results varied. In Budapest itself, full-house audiences were lukewarm until spontaneous clapping erupted at the surprise encore piece, Brahms' not exactly Hungarian Dance. A member of the audience described her experience: "It's interesting hearing familiar music played with different aesthetics. It's very funny for us too, as Hungarians – Hungarian Dance! – but of course I mean it in a positive way." After the concert, Yeh found himself confronting a line of Hungarian autograph hunters who had come up to question him about the programme – in particular, the newer, semi avant-garde pieces by Tang and Tan, in addition to general curiosity about the instruments they had seen on stage. Yeh appeared encouraged by the response, and in a private interview later admitted that he might have under-estimated the adventurous tastes of his Hungarian audiences.

In London, reception was mixed. In spite of Nyman's star billing the house was only half-full. Most members of the largely British (and white) audience appeared impressed by the item featuring Tan Swie Hian's calligraphy work, but were disappointed by Nyman. A few listeners, who were regular classical music fans, appeared puzzled over the presence of cellos

and double basses and questioned the authenticity of the Chinese orchestra as an ensemble. Yet others asked how the orchestra was different to its counterparts in Hong Kong and Beijing. The concert had also attracted a different kind of audience: British punk violinist Nigel Kennedy's agent had dropped in, enquiring about collaborations. A concert-goer of non-Singaporean, Chinese descent was suitably impressed and commented that "Singaporeans can become ambassadors of Chinese culture overseas in ways that China cannot."

SELF-AWARENESS VS SELF-EXOTICISATION

At this point, it might be useful to consider some of the issues raised by audiences in London and Budapest in relation to the SCO on a non-institutional level. Where official policy was more interested in clearly-articulated and constructed group identity projection, it did not always translate into thought and action on the part of individual members of the performing community. Interviews with orchestral musicians showed divides along generational, educational, professional and nationality factors. These did not always cut across the same planes. Often, the articulation of individual versus larger institutional identity was caught in the tensions thrown up by situational identity, self-awareness and self-exoticisation.

In spite of the fanfare over a world premiere and commission, Michael Nyman's percussion concerto, for example, went down least well with the ensemble. Musicians felt he had not fully understood Chinese music in history or idiom; many had difficulties concentrating on his parallel melodic tangents – whether or not they were deliberately written out of phase.

The deliberate institutional decision – also supported by Yeh – to shy away from "classics" of the 1960s and 1970s also proved unpopular with senior musicians who complained that the programme had too much "modern, unmelodious" fare. Back in Singapore, when the works of

Tang Jian Ping and Qu Xiaosong were given a dry run in concert, there were similar comments heard among the orchestra's regular audiences. On the other hand, Tan Dun's Crouching Tiger had received a warm reception, both from performers and audiences, on account of its filmographic nature coupled with its accessibility in a familiar concerto format.

In contrast, younger players welcomed the newer pieces by Qu and Tang, while enjoying Tan's theatrical episodes with mild amusement at the need to shout and frantically flip pages of score in addition to playing an instrument. As for the avant-garde techniques used in Qu and Tang, younger musicians remarked that they were interesting departures from standard fare that gave room for the exploration of their virtuosic abilities: these pieces were also viewed as vehicles for the advancement of the Chinese orchestral genre the beyond pre and post-communist agit-prop.

The dividing line drawn between opinions so far may appear to be that of a generational gap, but is also another demonstration of situational identity in progress – that of negotiating professional versus personal identities. Take for example two somewhat internally and externally contradicting views on programming by the two musicians who were commissioned (not necessarily to be construed as volunteering) to transcribe the problematic Bartok, Kodaly and Brahms pieces.

Sim Boon Yew, who was responsible for the Kodaly arrangements, felt that any touring programme should be "as comprehensive as possible," and took a view which privileged what he believed to be superior "Western" musical tastes, while at the same time demonstrating that he was eager to showcase to these very "learned" audiences the ethnic variety of music found in Singapore and her surrounds, if also in the name of self-exoticisation:

> Singapore audiences are mere music enthusiasts who don't have as much ability to appreciate sophisticated works. Europeans are more mature. SCO must showcase contemporary Chinese music in addition to classical ones. This contemporary music should include well-acclaimed works with Southeast Asian elements.

Law Wai Lun, who had re-arranged Bartok Romanian Dances, believed, however, that "you can never please everyone." His comments are slightly more insidious in terms of their layered accusations at "foreign" markets, even as he had tailor-made an arrangement for the very foreign audience he claims enjoys Chinese music for politically-incorrect curiosity value:

> I personally like late-romantic music, but I'm sure there are others who don't. It's a nice gesture to play the music of Hungary to the host country. On one level, we always perform for our audiences. But what they want may not always be what we want. It's just like Zhang Yimou's flms – they are not necessarily a true depiction of life there. Yet they are acclaimed in the West, because these audiences are intrigued by the poverty and exoticism portrayed in these films. I think it's good to hold orchestral tours and play to foreign audiences, but we can also tour lands closer to ourselves, in particular the Chinese diasporas of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Malaysia.

The comments of Sim and Law have to be contextualised against two very old controversies of the past – heard in the 1932 Cairo Conference on Arab music (Racy 1991) and the 1979 Oriental Music Festival in Durham (Fang 1981), during which the use of Western technique on traditional Mid-East/Chinese music brought forth great agitation across the East-West divide: Was musical modernisation necessarily the same as "orchestra-isation" or "Westernisation" and, even if not either – necessarily a good thing?

The stakes now at the SCO have ironically been fast-forwarded by developments in the orchestra-isation of Chinese music itself and a re-toggling of political and cultural map-markers. To Law and Sim, the Russo-phile school, once a bone of contention, has now become the "mainstream," from which departures by way of Tan Dun now make the new controversies. While post-colonial aspirations to standards once set by the "West" once revolved around late-Romantic styles taking over local chamber genres like *Jiangnan Sizhu*, these yearnings have now been replaced by the New York avant-garde movement.

SCO's case has been further complicated by factors of individual versus institutional allegiances playing over the notion of "Singaporean-ness." For example, Law and Sim both believe in incorporating local Singapore elements into SCO programme: This ranged from borrowing musical material from Singapore's immediate environment of South-east Asia, to expressing modernity in inter-disciplinary art.

The idea of "Singaporeanness" is also juxtaposed against "Chineseness" and understood in terms of education versus nationality of constituent individuals: While most SCO members held Singapore passports, many were born and trained in China, causing the scenario of opposing and reinforcing dual loyalties: The China-born members, while more than happy to assert their privilege of having enjoyed a deep-rooted (constructed, perceived or otherwise) musical education entrenched in the background of thousands of years of mainland Chinese history and culture, ultimately pay lip-service to and officially emphasise their "Singaporeanness" as far as the matter of citizenship, passports and jobs are concerned. The Singapore-born musicians, on the other hand, hold pretensions to a "globalised" Singaporean privilege of English-as-first-language in education, but almost always have to strive for greater cultural depth in assuming a deeper Chineseness against their China-born colleagues. Of course, the hyphenated and hybridised identities of both categories are never always so clear cut: musical allegiances and tastes, seen in terms of different situational reactions to

programming (as shown above and also below), are governed by the constant negotiation of identity against contexts and environments.

A Singapore-educated *erhu* player called "X" puts it this way:

> I'm not sure the SCO is typically Singaporean yet. We are still copying others before coming to our footing and making things truly our own. Maybe in years to come it will show. But the larger problem is the same old one: What does Singapore want itself to be? It's after all constituent of several cultures – you can't run away from the Malay, Indian, Chinese or whatever typology.

Here I would like to quote Everett and Law (2004), who have couched similar scenarios of locating East Asia in Western music in terms of transculturalism:

> Rather than viewing the East-West divide in polarized terms, I construe it as a set of intersecting trajectories that have zig-zagged across the contemporary cultural terrain both within and outside China…(Everett and Lau 2004: 24)

The zig-zagging that Lau has described is often the breeding ground for paradoxes that drive music itself. Institutionally, inasmuch as SCO is trying to be "Singaporean" as opposed to "Chinese," it bends over backwards in trying to reflect an over-engineered multi-cultural showcase that really does not actually say much for a unified national identity. This is especially so given the transcultural nature of New York composers like Tan Dun on its bill; composers who want to be viewed as "individuals" but whose success ironically rides on

their "Chinoiserie" branding. Here, it appears to be a case of Appadurai's (1996) intersecting ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, ideoscapes – and I might like to add my own – "eduscapes" – coming together to create a layer cake of multiple meanings packed into the rendition and reception of music: ideas of national style and identity are always being challenged, in yin-yang fashion, by transnational ties that hint at a cosmopolitanism (rooted in a real or imaginary "modern Chinese" musical culture); personal choices are likewise pitted, often in symbiotic relationships, against institutional directives (where musicians derive ironic pleasure in executing a directive against will, or happily take their pay and stage glory in the charade). The opposing dualities and double (sometimes triple) loyalties are also mutually reinforcing, in the same way that Sakai (1988) observes that universalism and particularism supplement each other, rather than conflict with, in understanding Japanese culture.

The case of personal versus professional identity becomes clear when we consider what individuals like "X," musicians trained in Western classical, Chinese orchestral and pop styles, surmised of the SCO's European musical courtship. Many, in fact, were aware of the politically-motivated origins of the Chinese orchestra, but concluded that – "we still have to live and reckon with our history – not just of the genre of Chinese orchestra, but also how it has come to be in Singapore" (X, pers. comm. 3 April 2005, Newcastle). To return to Brahms again: While some senior musicians actually believed that Hungarian Dance No. 5 was a bona fide Hungarian tune and that Brahms was Hungarian (!), many were also aware of the double-entendre and played up to the game of irony. While SCO musicians might have been caught in an artistic quandary over whether to interpret the transcriptions with sarcasm, they were also professionals who had to execute Yeh's directions – in this case, a literal reading of the score. For some, this became an exercise in celebrating anti-cool and "camp" values. An orchestral musician, "Y," explained:

> We don't always agree with what we've been asked to do, but we have to do it because we're paid and professional. Somehow we manage to take it seriously but at the same time, in a funny way too.

What remains to be discovered now is whether layered constructions of musical identity and motives actually translate into layered interpretations of a work. More crucial is the question of whether any layered interpretations are perceived as such in real-time music-making itself – and understood and unpacked in their very complexity by the intended audience.

I have already devoted a few paragraphs to foreign reception of the SCO programme, which revealed a curiosity as well as confusion over cultural translations and cross-wired (deliberate or otherwise) codes. A post-concert interview with Yeh also reflected that he was more or less pleased with the performance of his ensemble, and also with the general musical pathos of the entire tour. While it is near-impossible to measure "interpretation" without indulging in personal or cultural subjectivity, I would like to venture that the deliberate and accidental misalignment of trans-national and trans-cultural motifs have led to a situation of *default* – as opposed to *active* – interpretation: The revelations here lie not in what is *meant* to be heard, but what is *not* heard and what is *unwittingly* played and heard: an organisationally confused rendition of Michael Nyman's Melody Waves, an emotionally-charged delivery of Tan Dun's Crouching Tiger concerto complete with wincing soloist theatrics, bravura displays of Qu Xiaosong cloaked under stone-faced displays of seriousness and majesty; and a rousing dispatch of Brahms' Hungarian Dance undercut sardonically by nasal tone colours – and experienced as a joke of three different punch lines, understood by at least three different

groups of people: Yeh, his Hungarian audiences, and his individual musicians with their split and dual loyalties.

Was the SCO courtship a success? In so far as it bought over Europeans as a result of projections upon European cultural norms – the answer is not clear. But in so far as it unwittingly articulated its multi-rooted identity and ambitions to a piqued crowd – definitely.

NOTES

1. This point was first mentioned in conversation with Rachel Harris in the summer of 2005.

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