

IN FLUX: A Study in Cross-Cultural Composition

by
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For my family, who has unwaveringly supported my interest in music.

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Abstract

This creative project is a mixed ensemble composition that takes influence from multiple cross-cultural sources, including modal jazz, traditional Chinese music, and modern Western orchestral music. The methodology was documented with the intent to serve as a potential guide for others looking to pursue cross-cultural composition as well as expose listeners to other genres, techniques, and cultures. The composition aimed to be independent in its musical identity, preserving the sonic roots of each style as a demonstration of maintaining musical diversity as opposed to musical assimilation.

Terminology

- *Dizi*: bamboo flute played horizontally to the player's position
- *Erhu*: two-string Chinese bowed instrument
- *Form*: the structure of a musical composition
- *Modal jazz*: a musical style that emerged in the mid-1950s United States, which emphasizes modulation between musical modes, as opposed to maintaining a tonal center
- *Score*: sheet music containing each part of a composition, vertically aligned to visually synchronize each part
- *String Quintet*: common small ensemble in Western classical music consisting of two violins, viola, cello, and bass
- *Yangqin*: Chinese hammer dulcimer
- *Zheng*: Chinese plucked long zither

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Introduction

During the summer of 2008, my father installed an undercabinet CD player in our kitchen. Dad had always been a music enthusiast—the electronic CD library and elaborate sound system in our basement were evident of that—and the latest installation was a simple solution to move even more music upstairs. When he had finished attaching it, he and I went downstairs, where he fished through the mesmerizing holographic stream of CDs, taking one back with us to effortlessly pop it into the new undercabinet player. It was unlike anything I had seen before. To the tune of “Tomorrow Never Knows” by The Beatles, Dad taught me how to use it in a way my eight-year-old brain could understand, where the complex swath of buttons and knobs downstairs had been reduced to a few: pause, eject, fast-forward, rewind. It was the day I was finally able to explore music on my own accord.

Following my father, I spent the rest of the year exploring the Beatles’ discography, mainly being drawn to their later records. I was fascinated by how experimental and otherworldly the band had been, drawing influence from other musical cultures. Experimentation and cross-cultural potential are now some of my foundations as a prospective composer, and for my thesis creative project, I composed an experimental piece that incorporates unique instrumentation and compositional techniques into the conventional Western orchestra model, specifically styles that are traditionally not included.

This project incorporated two outlying musical cultural components, modal jazz and traditional Chinese music, into a composition that maintained the fidelity of each. Rather than having the traditionally Western instrumentation dominate the composition,

it was important to preserve the character of the other two styles in order to uphold the goal of musical diversity.

Though the advent of globalization may seem to lend itself to exposing others to new cultures, this is not entirely the case. In his report for UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), Ricard Letts states that, empowered by large budgets and ample resources, Western pop music is slowly dominating the music scenes across the world. (Letts, 2006, p. 9) Instead of allowing space for coexisting genres and creating new hybrid ones, the Western pop industry is proving to foster homogeneity at the expense of other musical genres. In my attempt to address this, I was inspired by Letts, who uses the shift in the United States' attitude toward immigration as an example of the path forward: instead of championing assimilation, multiculturalism has proven to be the path forward for the U.S. (p. 10) By pursuing my thesis creative project, my goal in creating this composition is to preserve the cultural identity of orchestral music, modal jazz, and traditional Chinese music while also looking forward to creating something innovative. The goal is not to constrict these outside cultural compents to one of the other presented styles. Rather, it is meant to treat each with the merit and creative insight it can bring to a composition.

Musical diversity has been shown to help others be more adept at political, environmental, or cultural shifts. (p. 9-10) Like any cultural practice, musical diversity is also a way one can exercise their own personal freedom of expression. The Western notion of music has a history of being viewed as entertainment and leisure, so the connection to something as pressing as freedom of speech may seem odd. (Shen, 1991, p. 13) However, music has frequently been used to challenge social norms or to express

one's personal experiences and emotions. Additionally, this expression of freedom is more than it seems. It is also part of one's identity and their self-interest in preserving their own culture in which they care deeply. (Letts, p. 10) Though it is more likely to be created through the lens of someone else's experiences, music can often reveal to the listener who they are themselves.

In pursuing this creative project, I hope to introduce listeners to new types of styles and instrumentation while simultaneously demonstrating that cross-cultural music is necessary when looking to compose new and exciting works. This project will also document the compositional process in order to offer readers and listeners one possible avenue for pursuing their own cross-cultural works.

While the concept of cross-cultural music has grown in popularity since the 20th century, academic work outlining a creative approach into one unique musical idea is not well documented. The creation of this thesis project aims not only to create a new work of music but to document a possible approach to cross-cultural composition that can be utilized by others. The future is global: the world is becoming increasingly connected, especially with the internet giving many access to alternative approaches to and experiences with music. As interest in and exposure to different music cultures grows, it is important to demonstrate one's own findings on how they would creatively approach the topic. Aside from an academic setting, the resulting composition can also be a chance for casual listeners to experience new musical cultures. It has a chance of incorporating at least one cultural component with which they are familiar, and this can serve as a gateway to other styles of music.

The result of this creative project was a composition that incorporated traditional Chinese and modal jazz elements, including instrumentation and compositional techniques. Though having many unique building blocks, the composition stands alone in its unique musical identity and has drawn inspiration from each cultural component, rather than utilizing one central cultural component and building upon it with others. A major goal of this project was to discover how to balance each cultural component accordingly. Inserting instrumentation usually not found in Western ensembles was only the first step. Therefore, the addition of alternative compositional techniques allowed for greater potential when creating the final product. Prior research was used to compare each cultural component, and this strategy was used to identify how each can work together as well as how one can adapt to fit another.

Methodology

Growing up in the United States, I have been surrounded by many types of music throughout my entire life. However, as I took an interest in music at school, my training was entirely rooted in classical Western music theory. Because of this, I began “IN FLUX” with no prior experience writing for Chinese instruments, and I was quite lost as to where to begin.

Establishing Connections and Intent

While in the early stages before composing, I first made the initiative to reach out to experts in person in order to gain a better understanding of where to begin. My thesis advisor Dr. Akins was the first person I talked with, as I was more familiar with jazz and Western theory. He was able to point me to certain artists, such as Miles Davis, and scholars who had written on the topic of modal jazz.

I conveniently had been a member of MTSU’s Chinese Music Ensemble for over a year, so I had an additional connection with my instructor, Dr. Han. While relying on research, I decided it would be equally important to approach the topic with a hands-on strategy. Dr. Han is a professional zheng player but was also able to point me to other professionals, such as her husband Randy (a multi-instrumentalist who taught me dizi and sheng) and another one of my instructors, Liu Laoshi, who has been playing yangqin for many years. I also had a year’s worth of experience studying and playing the erhu with my instructor Gretta Maguire and Mr. Hong Wang.

Dr. Han and I had a thorough discussion on how to take a cross-cultural approach with the best intentions. Both she and I had noticed that prior compositions that feature

Chinese instruments in a Western setting often lose their character, sometimes because the composer fails to reach out to other experts, instead opting to write on their own accord. Underlying this is the common suggestion that Western theory is somehow more “correct” than other studies of music, one in which all other forms must conform to. When approaching the topic of cross-cultural composition, I quickly understood that there is an element of care that must be upheld.

“Going to the Source”

It was these conversations with Dr. Han that transformed the professional connections I had from important to vital. In order to create a cross-cultural composition that looks forward, I must have a deeper understanding of these cultural components. This includes “going to the source,” so to speak, rather than primarily relying on one’s own experience, assuming knowledge, or relying solely on second-hand information. Both from hearing Dr. Han’s anecdotes and my experience writing “IN FLUX,” it is easy to think of Chinese instruments as direct parallels to Western ones. However, these instruments have their own unique set of characteristics, and additionally, this approach often further perpetuates the notion that these instruments must “conform” to Western conventions. Though similar in construction, the zheng is not a harp, the Yangqin is not a Western dulcimer, and the dizi is not a flute.

Going to the source would prove effective, as I was able to learn from my instructors at the Center for Chinese Music and Culture intricate techniques and philosophies behind Chinese composition, instrumentation, and performance. Having

access to these firsthand accounts also allowed me to acknowledge the history of Western attitudes in order to intentionally avoid these common pitfalls.

Practice and the Hands-on Approach

I agreed with Dr. Han that in order to write for these instruments, it was important to learn how to play them myself in order to get a “feel” for them. I scheduled weekly meetings before our class time to focus on a single instrument which was significantly helpful. With her feedback, I wrote short zheng solos to further improve. My general composition skills were being refined with Dr. Akins as well in his 4590 Scoring for Visual Media class. Along with studying techniques, this active approach was the experience I would need in order to prepare myself for composing.

Exploring Inspiration and Reference

Alongside experience, reference songs were also paramount when approaching “IN FLUX.” Dr. Akins and Dr. Han both provided pieces that would be relevant, such as Miles Davis’ “So What” and Dr. Han and Randy’s original contemporary compositions, such as “Black Zheng” and the traditional pieces we were learning at ensemble practice.

Through my own exploration, I relied on previous strategies I had picked up over the years, which for me personally was to find other composers and songs that aligned with a sonic identity I wished to emulate. The composer J.Jay Berthume has an online presence that I have learned much from, but our styles relied heavily on complex harmonies and modulation, which would later become problematic when incorporating traditional Chinese, which is less interested in chordal movement (see “Comparing

Styles”). I would be required to explore other artists who more closely emulated this. Though not within the cultural compents explored in this project, I particularly found minimalist composers Terry Riley and Philip Glass to be helpful in conceptualizing a “sonic cloud” (see “Techniques in Application”) that did not rely heavily on functional harmony. This new strategy proved to be extremely helpful because it was both a genre outside my compositional experience but also contained artists I enjoyed and were more familiar with. Despite this being a study incorporating modal jazz and traditional Chinese, it was necessary for me to draw further inspiration from other cultural components and critically deconstruct them as a way of formulating a distinct sound of my own that also contained these underlying styles.

Movement in Music: Comparing Styles

During one of our first individual lessons, Dr. Han passed down advice she had learned while visiting South Korea last summer: “Western music is the movement of sound; Chinese music is sound in movement.” This concept is difficult to initially understand, and it took time for me to internalize the meaning of this. With time, it became the foundation for understanding how to approach “IN FLUX.”

First, it is important to address the main apparent conflict between modal jazz and traditional Chinese. As stated earlier, I learned through my studies with Dr. Han and Randy about Chinese music theory, which gave way to the idea of the “sonic cloud.” For Western composers—and frankly, listeners as well—the idea of a piece of music lacking much functional harmony may seem strange, only relegated to atonal work. Modal jazz in particular gains character in its ability to modulate between different modalities.

However, Chinese theory is a fascinating medium that maintains a strong sense of coherence, movement, and melody without emphasis on functional harmony, opting for a piece to exist in a “sonic cloud” which, initially to me, seemed nebulous when analyzed through the lens of harmony.

Here, it was important for me to realize I needed to critically think independently from this fundamental Western notion. Through further study, I learned the “sonic cloud” still contained this sense of movement and interest through melody and countermelody alongside distinct and contrasting timbres within the ensemble. This is where we can observe the difference between *movement of sound* (deriving motion from changing harmony) and *sound in motion* (deriving motion from melody). This is further supported when analyzing instruments with similar structures but differing cultural origin. We can use the zheng and the piano as a case study:

Though both instruments utilize strings, the methods in which they are stimulated are different, which offer distinct yet intriguing insights when compared. First glance at the zheng suggests limitations in terms of string count (21 versus a piano’s 88), suggesting the piano has more notes available. However, the zheng is designed for the player to have convenient access to its strings, which grants the unique ability to bend to a much larger range of pitches. When analyzing these two instruments through the lens of movement, this can be understood as encapsulating the aesthetic of *sound in motion*, as melodies can flow seamlessly and microtonally. This goes beyond the piano’s larger, but concrete set of half-step pitches, ones that are hammered with the ability to often play more than two simultaneous notes. This is more suited to harmony, and furthermore, the *movement of sound*. This can be extended to an even more similar Western instrument—

the traditional harp—which still is not designed with the type of pitch-bend access in mind:



Fig 1. When comparing the build of the traditional harp and 21-string zheng, the horizontal orientation gives the player an opportunity to bend pitch. Similarly to the piano, the harp utilizes both hands to access a larger array of pitches.

One of my goals was to not assimilate into one culture (particularly Western orchestral), so realizing how I could find qualities of each within another style helped me when comparing them and finding how they could work together. I had mentioned the minimalist composer Philip Glass, whose work *Music in Twelve Parts* helped me better understand this concept. These pieces have little harmonic movement, yet still capture a sense of motion. Using Glass and the minimalist genre as a proxy was beneficial to deconstructing the difference between *movement of sound* and *sound in motion*.

As mentioned in the previous section, the strategy of exploring genres outside the scope of this project was a pivotal moment of clarity in my composition process. I would go on to employ these philosophies when approaching the piece as a way of synthesizing *movement of sound* (modal jazz) and *sound in motion* (traditional Chinese) into a new product. The name “IN FLUX” is a reminder of this. *Flux* can be observed as a distinct

type of movement, yet it suggests an element of fluidity: a definite form without a rigid structure.

Techniques in Application: Synthesizing Styles

When finally beginning the writing process, I was able to reconcile the apparent differences I perceived between traditional Chinese and modal jazz and discovered a new realm of possibility. Much of the music I performed in Chinese Music Ensemble was either in the key of G major or D major, since the instruments are usually tuned this way. In the case of the zheng, its structure is limited in its capacity to move between keys during a performance. Because modal jazz is characterized by having no clear tonal center, this appears to be a conflict.

Modal harmony was a topic I was quite comfortable with and was able to utilize in many new, creative ways. This ultimately obscured my ability to relate what I experienced as a complex technique to the idea of a composition remaining in one key. However, returning to my early music education, modalities were taught within the context of one diatonic key, changing the tonic to a different note in the scale while maintaining the key. I was a bit embarrassed to have seemingly forgotten this, but nonetheless, it was necessary to remember. Taking the key of D major, for example, it is possible to extract seven distinct modes, finally opening a practical synthesis between modal jazz and traditional Chinese.

This brought me to my next issue: some instruments, such as the zheng and dizi, were tuned to a pentatonic scale. Without the fourth or seventh scale degree, it would be much more difficult to suggest certain modes such as Lydian or Aeolian. This limitation,

hypothetically, cannot play the note C\$, so melodies can be created with forethought, without the issue of modal conflict. This is a simpler alternative to having the player switch to another dizi during performance. It also aligned with my goal of not having the Chinese instruments “conform” to Western conventions.



Fig 5. The zheng line in context with bass and cello allows for a Lydian feel in measure 26, beat 4 with F# over C major (m. 24-27).

This approach can be taken further. Unlike the dizi, the zheng could hypothetically perform the accidental C\$ by either a) retuning a string beforehand by retuning B up a half step to C (at the expense of losing tonic in B natural minor) or b) initially pressing down on the B string to temporarily play C\$. By continuing to embrace a traditional tuning, however, more modal opportunities can be created. We can analyze the zheng line that occurs in context at measures 24-27. With the zheng tuned to D major pentatonic and the brief modulation, the C major chord now allows the opportunity for the melody to modulate again and briefly suggest the Lydian mode. Again, without any

changes to the zheng's conventional tuning, its apparent limitations can quickly become a key component to the composition's character and unique color.

Table of Strategies

Table 1. Below are the specific methods discovered, which are outlined in the above section. Each of these is given a definitive name and summarized for further clarity:

Method	Definition	Example from IN FLUX
Challenge and recontextualize	Challenge notions of your prior music theory knowledge. Are you thinking about theory from a single perspective? Can you recontextualize and enrich your understanding of another approach by reframing your perspective?	The idea of a “sonic cloud” was strange when viewed through the lens of functional harmony but is still clearly musical, suggesting framing it solely within the parameters of functional harmony to be an unhelpful approach. This was disillusioned once recontextualized as <i>sound in motion</i> .
Contrast and synthesize	Contrast each style thoroughly. How are they similar and/or different? How can you take the theories behind each cultural component and use them to create something new?	Modal jazz and traditional Chinese seemingly conflict in terms of modulation, and Chinese instruments are difficult to modulate within a performance. However, these limitations were found to work perfectly fine when alternative modalities were discovered.

Method	Definition	Example from IN FLUX
Exploring information and reference	Find compositions that distinctly represent each cultural component and critically listen/analyze. What makes them stylized? Will it incorporate or lose something while still being considered a part of the component?	Dr. Akins and Dr. Han were both able to provide examples of their respective fields.
Going to the source	Approach the unfamiliar cultural components with purpose. If possible, reach out to experts in the field in order to gain a firsthand account. Understand there may need to be an attitude of sensitivity due to preexisting and problematic cultural attitudes that limit possibility.	Dr. Han and Randy were able to offer firsthand insight as professionals with experience composing for Chinese instruments. Dr. Han brought attention to Western conventions that were imposed, rather than synthesized with traditional Chinese music.
Holistic learning	Expose yourself to many avenues of learning: reading, listening, studying, composing, etc.	The compositional process incorporated multiple strategies such as research and private study and playing.

Method	Definition	Example from IN FLUX
Immersion	If writing for an unfamiliar instrument, consider having the opportunity to play it. How does it feel? How should you keep this in mind when composing for it?	Weekly sessions were scheduled to spend time with individual Chinese instruments. Additionally, time in Dr. Akins' class was used to practice more familiar compositional approaches.
Proxy genre	Find a personally familiar genre that is not one of the two or more styles you are exploring. Is it emblematic of them in some way? Does it offer insight into how they could be synthesized?	Minimalist music was used to explore both modal jazz and traditional Chinese. Philip Glass' <i>Music in Twelve Parts</i> offered insight into how the "sonic cloud" is present in Western settings while also being somewhat modal.
Simplify	The more familiar culture you are working with may be limiting due to a more complex knowledge. If you went "back to the basics," is there insight into possible syntheses?	Though modal music was a more familiar compositional technique, it was important to realize how it was initially taught and how it can exist within a single key while preserving a dynamic sound.

Reflection

While the overall taste for “IN FLUX” may seem subjective, the success of the project can be measured in its ability to combine each musical style into a unique work. The second key to this project’s success is presenting the reader with a strategy when delving into cross-cultural composition. Overall, I am satisfied with my first introduction to the world of cross-cultural composition.

When I first joined the Chinese Music Ensemble at MTSU, I was introduced to a new world of music. I grew up in a small town, so something like orchestra was not part of my school system’s program. However, through Chinese Music Ensemble, I was finally able to learn a string instrument and, subsequently, a new philosophy on music. This passion would extend to wishing to pursue an original composition that incorporates my own personal view on music.

While exploring this project, not only did I wish to challenge myself musically but personally as well. When it comes to composing (and life in general), I gravitate towards perfectionism, and this creative project was a reminder of this. There were countless times I would toss sketches and ideas out. However, by challenging myself with the more active approach, I found it easier to simply write without excessive judgment. This judgement has a way of stagnating my composing process, where days would go by without progress.

Another challenge to overcome was my tendency to equate complex composition with quality composition. I ended up taking a simpler approach to my first cross-cultural composition, which initially did not sit well with me. This stemmed from a fear of being perceived as an amateur, but to be honest: I am! I have a little less than a year’s worth of

experience composing for Chinese instruments, and learning to accept this naturally increased my speed and growth as a composer.

Looking forward, there were setbacks in this process that could be improved. The first was conceptualizing this creative project as a large-scale symphony, which ultimately was not the final product. Though ambitious, this proved to be too large of a project as a beginner. With one composition under my belt, hopefully this vision will not be lost. I also learned many unique and avant-garde techniques while studying Chinese instruments, and my initial desire to strive for complexity had me oversaturating the piece with them. For example, I initially had a more unconventional tuning setup for the zheng but instead decided to opt for the traditional D pentatonic tuning in order to maintain a traditional element. Despite this, I managed to incorporate some techniques, such as bowed strings on the zheng. I have gained more confidence now that, in the future, I can more competently incorporate more avant-garde techniques into compositions.

My workflow was also subject to last-minute changes that I did not anticipate, which largely broke the process up in a way that I found difficult to jump back into. I decided it would be best for me to accept an internship and subsequently postpone my thesis defense in order to focus on it later. While I still stand by this decision, I found the break in between would have been better navigated had I more thoroughly documented my strategies beforehand. Thankfully, I realized this and took time to clarify these in the methodology section for others' reference.

Listening to IN FLUX in retrospect, it feels to me like a distinct genre that ostensibly is somewhat removed from the original cultural components. I am happy with this distinction, as this was my initial goal. Through this, however, I discovered that the

process was the most educational and impactful aspect. The journey I took to arrive at the final composition and the new tools I was able to utilize were what propelled me to finish the piece. I was also able to learn more about myself in the context of creating new music, as well as continue my path toward embracing imperfection and understanding that complexity does not equate to quality.

Conclusion

Through the conception of this creative project, several techniques were conceived in the process of composing “IN FLUX.” This process was studied both during and following the composition process in order to create a list of strategies that can assist students who are interested in exploring cross-cultural composition. With a positive and methodical attitude, it is more than possible to dive into the new musical territory. My wish is that this thesis can be a guide for students to use and build upon in a way they see fit.

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Appendix: Full Score

In Flux

for mixed ensemble

Music by
CLARK WILSON

A thesis creative project presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

INSTRUMENTATION

Dizi in D
Tenor Saxophone
Yangqin
Zheng (21-string)
Piano
Erhu
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello
Contrabass

PROGRAM NOTES

IN FLUX is a thesis creative project presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College. It is intended to be an introductory exploration in cross-cultural composition, and its supporting written component documents the methodology. For more information about the compositional process, this can be found physically at the University Honors College at MTSU or online through MTSU's Walker Library JEWL search under "Honors College Theses."

PERFORMANCE NOTES

1. The score is in D, where the tenor saxophone part is transposed in E.
2. The zheng will be tuned to the key of D, outlined below:



3. The zheng will need a violin bow to be played on certain strings. This is indicated in the score as *bowed* (m. 33-48). All other instances are *pizzicato*.

4. Some technical and expression marks are indicated, with the intention being that the performers will take an additional improvisational approach.
5. When performing, it is vital to have prior knowledge and experience with Chinese instrumentation in order to maintain the ensemble's balance.

DURATION: ca. 2 minutes

14

Dizi

Ten. Sax.

Yqin

Zh.

Pno.

Erhu

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Cell.

Cb.

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

pp

pp

arco

25

Dizi

Ten. Sax.

Yqn.

Zh.

Pno.

Erhu

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Cell.

Cb.

mp

p

tr

bowed

p

mp

38

Dizi

Ten. Sax.

Yqin

Zh.

Pno.

Erhu

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Cell.

Cb.

50

Dizi

Ten. Sax.

Yqin

Zh.

Pno.

Erhu

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Cell.

Cb.

57

Dizi

Ten. Sax.

Yqin

Zh.

Pno.

Erhu

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Cell.

Cb.

pp

pp

p

mf

mp

mf

pp

mf

pp

p

mf

pp

mp

mf

pp

p

mf

arco

p

mf

arco

p

mf

63

Dizi

Ten. Sax.

Yqin.

Zh.

Pno.

Erhu

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Cell.

Cb.

rit.

The musical score consists of ten staves. The top staff is for Dizi, followed by Tenor Saxophone, Yqin, Zhonghu, Pianos, Erhu, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Contrabass. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). A 'rit.' (ritardando) marking is placed above the Dizi staff at measure 63 and extends through measures 64, 65, and 66. The Dizi part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the other instruments provide harmonic support with sustained chords and rhythmic patterns.