

Feedback on NY Qin Society 1st yaji of 2024 - Celebrate Chinese New Year

Peiyong & Qin friends,

What a wonderful way to begin the Lunar New Year !! Many many thanks to you for organizing it.

First, your charming design announcement using the simple traditional papercut of a baby boy riding a young dragon --hopeful premonitions of an auspicious Dragon Year.

Second, your superb planning of the program, starting with Jungping's 袁中平 presentation and collection of rare and unusual fine antique ink cakes, Ten Views of West Lake 西湖十景, accompanied by Master Yuan's calligraphy and poems. This Hangzhou group and the exhibition and catalog deserve repeated viewing, and I propose that *JP present other examples of his ink cake collection plus his calligraphy in a future program devoted to this subject.*

Third, re your overall program, it was a pleasure to meet Yuan Xi 袁僖 (also calling her Master Yuan might present a problem in the future; I suggest using her full name) after viewing her introductory videos. I liked hearing her play on two different instruments. I look forward to further comments and her thoughts on playing metal vs silk strings, and also to hear her perform both a familiar and a new piece, plus more comments about the latter. Hearing a new piece -- for those who have not performed or "dapu'd" it -- is always a challenge, and we appreciate having the meeting recorded to hear it again.

NB. The discussion about "what is Sichuan/Shu style" might be interesting for some, but was a bit amorphous, as no distinct examples were given. Nonetheless, the topic of regional styles, and how they became that way, is a key one, and will arise again. The analogy with cooking, eg, with Sichuan cuisine, bears thinking about, and whether such a comparison can be made with the other qin "styles" or "schools" of playing. Eg, if a regional cuisine has distinctive a) ingredients and b) cooking techniques (sautéing, steaming, braising, frying, etc) and/or c) presentation modes, eg. wrapping, by hot pot etc. what exactly are the equivalents in qin playing:

is there value in categorizing the hand techniques even more precisely than in the handbooks, and in describing even more precisely what is meant by "the attack" and "the release," etc. We need visual and audio examples vis a vis the "regional styles" question.

Fourth, it was good to hear our two new members, Han Yining 韓一甯 and Wang Geng 王耕, as they always present new points of view on their pieces and on what and how they are thinking about qin music. Yining is on a quest to discover the sources of the Mei'an style, and Wang Geng puts us in touch with what is happening in Beijing. The piece Wang played had a particular gravitas and after hearing the tale about 獲麟, I wanted to know how it influenced his interpretation or style of playing.

Fifth, I was happy to hear a composition by André since he is also a composer for other instruments. I have not played 大胡笳, however, so I appreciated Juni's questions, as she and the more experienced players know it. If André had had more time, I would've liked more specific illustrations of how he was influenced by this famous piece.

Sixth, hearing Juni hold forth on her beloved 9-string qin will continue to be a challenge for me. She is so precise about the mathematical/physical adjustments needed in making and playing this new instrument. Is it as basic a change or development as from the clavichord to the piano-Forte to the modern piano? Even with her precision

I am not convinced that I need to move to a 9-string when I am still mastering the potentials of the 7-string qin.

But thank you, Juni, we all admire your enterprise and persistence.

Lastly, we were happy to have Luca Pisano join our gathering again and to hear him play 白雪. I'd like to ask him about his qin -- was it made by a recent master, such as his teacher Master Sou? and what differences does he sense between playing a "new" vs an old qin with 斷文。

Thanks again to you, Peiyou, and to André (and Ralph) For opening the New Year so auspiciously!

Marilyn

王妙蓮

ps. Small correction to Yuan Xi's bio in English: As a Manchu, she can be referred to as: "a Manchu" or "of Manchu ethnicity." Did you use AI to assist your translation? We usually use "ethnicity" when we are differentiating it from a number of different ethnicities, or to emphasize a particular background.

In this case one would wonder whether her ethnicity has influenced her world view or her approach to music.

Dear Marilyn,

Thank you very much for your feedback. I have conveyed your questions to Yuan Xi, and below is her response in Chinese. I used AI to translate it into English:

Having played the qin for a long time, I still find the sound of silk strings very soothing. It has a calming effect on the soul. While modern steel-stringed qins offer longer resonance, which is pleasant to the ears, one may gradually become attached to this sound. However, when playing the silk-stringed qin myself, I notice that the resonance is shorter, leaving more space in the sound. It feels just right.

Regarding the Manchu lineage, there are currently no special privileges or policies.

The distinctive features of Manchu genes include light amber-colored pupils and a long, narrow face shape. Even those with no experience in horseback riding may feel a strong urge to gallop on the grasslands during their first ride—a possible effect of genetic memory.

While others may be curious about the status of this ethnic group in China, in reality, the Manchu people have fully integrated into Han culture, and are no longer perceived as distinct.

In terms of ideology, I am quite open-minded. I am willing to accept all aspects of existence in this world. Only through acceptance can we gain a deeper understanding of any situation.

Indeed, it's becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between Han and Manchu people. Nowadays, only the elderly in Manchu autonomous counties in northeastern China may still speak the Manchu language. Younger generations rarely speak it anymore.

弹琴久了，还是觉得丝弦的音色很养人，能让内心更安静一些。现代的钢弦琴，振动余音更长，从听觉上是会感觉很舒服，但久而久之就会去追求贪恋这样的音色。自己弹丝弦琴的时候，感觉韵会短一些，音色空间留白更多。恰到好处。

满族的血统，现在没有任何优待的政策。

满族的基因倒是比较明显，眼睛瞳孔颜色是淡琥珀色，在阳光很强的时候，会更偏红一点，脸型也是细长形。哪怕是没有学习过骑马，第一次上马也可以在草原上飞奔的那种 [Joyful]可能这就是基因的记忆吧

别人只会好奇这个名族在国内的情况，但其实已经完全汉化融入了，所以没有人会觉得满族是特别的 [Chuckle][Joyful][Worship]

思想上，我还是比较豁达的。可以接受这个世界存在的一切。无论什么情况，先接受，才有可能更加深入的了解。

是的，汉族與滿族几乎分别不出来了，现在只有东北那边满族自治县的老人，可能会说一些满语。年轻人几乎都没有人会说。

Best regards,
Peiyou

Dear Marylin,

It is hard to explain the music composing process, although it is easy to share an personal impression after that.

Which elements influence me most that could reveal the many intricacies of music creation?

But I can share some clues about it.

About Rainy Rain

First, the title referred to the Buddhist metaphor of the Dharma Rain, which contains sparks of light as raindrops falling from the sky; I forgot to say that yesterday.

As I said before, I needed to relax my mind from the continuous, repetitive study of Dahujia for many weeks. And so I started to improvise on Qin. As I began to improvise, I noticed that I had incorporated many gestures and melodic phrases from DHJ. This makes me feel like I was almost recomposing the same song repeatedly.

To explore different musical possibilities, I decided to deviate from the familiar paths and create a new soundscape. On this regard, I would strongly recommend reading the short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" by Jorge Luis Borges, as it provides insight into this process.

So, my motivation was to escape from the DHJ atmosphere as some unpretentious pastime. However, I started to like what I was composing and put my sensibility to create some coherence as a piece. This led me to enter into a process of composition, which means setting parameters to compose, such as tonal centers and structural themes, searching for

different fingerings applied to a melody, and so on, and also addressing my feelings to a specific emotional atmosphere.

As a result, my initial improvisation transposed the boundaries of unpretentious pastime and turned into a piece of structured and formal music with musical value to talk about.

I'm not sure how I managed to execute that jump precisely. It's simply a matter of playing and allowing the musical notes to settle and linger in my mind until I feel compelled to work with them.

That's why it is difficult to explain the composition process, since it is intrinsically related to the way my mind works.



By the way, it isn't unusual composers to avoid explaining their compositional processes due to the fact they aren't for sure how things and musical elements give the shape to a piece of music. In classical music, it is well known that Ravel, for example, hated to talk about his music. The same with Ligeti and Bartok and others. The quotation I made yesterday of Villa-Lobos: "I can compose a new song in the same time it takes me to fix the wrong notes in an existing one" is another way to avoid explaining music. By the way, he never explained his music.

In my case, an obstacle is always presented, which is the discourse about composition is a separate thing or phenomenon from compositional activity. It is a premise that I take seriously! When I try to explain my music, new thoughts and ideas come to my mind, even though the music itself is already created and in the past. This is a common experience among composers - they create an explanation that matches their music, and this process is timeless.

From this, one can infer that musical speeches only can convey past events, but not the way the music transforms itself through time to the composers. Because much of the sound relations put in perspective in time by composers change their perception, and by that, the ideas they have about their music while composing it.

It is like that because many things, such as impressions, images, previous musical listening, abstract calculated musical material, and the correlation between sounds, intervals and building blocks that came from the

repertoire, all are in mutual influence at the same time in the composer's body and mind.

I used to say to my students that **composition is a sensorial quest** - you need to embark on a voyage that you don't know how will end. Or, like a great Brazilian writer said (Ariano Suassuna), "The person who sets out on such a journey may ultimately face a dead end."

Sorry for this labyrinth of assumptions.

Bes wishes.
André

Hello to the Qin Society and particularly André,

Thank you for the Lunar New Year Yaji on Sunday.

I was, one might notice, in attendance and followed the music and some of the discussion at certain points but as usual feel disinclined to comment on the "nuts and bolts" aspect of musical theory, particularly in relation to the Qin. I daily try to expand my awareness of just how music works, but I realize I play too many instruments now to possibly grasp what music is in this lifetime. I feel it's just musical-or it's not. The "why" largely escapes me.

I am also similarly not inclined to comment on the musical performance unless I am really moved to do so. (If any are familiar with the way a Quaker "meeting" progresses, one might get the sense of how I personally choose to conduct myself.) Among the performances, André's really kept my attention and I was on the verge of a commentary but my chance to do so evaporated. (Some of this is due to what for me these days is my unwillingness to express myself in multisyllabic sentences before noon! 😊) André, you are one of the most musical among us! I am so impressed by your dedication to the Qin as your instrument of current choice and your desire to compose music with it. With the addition of a couple of others in the NY Qin Society, there are some talented musicians that make me look forward to the next Yaji.

Thank you,
LPKaster

It was lovely to see (or hear) from Hong Kong all of you wherever you were, though from here I had to retire before the end. Fortunately I have been able to listen via the recording to parts I missed.

Had I stayed up later I would have liked to hear from Juni more about the pentatonic/diatonic issue. It seems to me that instruments like guitar (not to mention most Chinese instruments now played in the Chinese orchestra) have no trouble playing diatonic music. I have also heard many new compositions for qin that are diatonic. Looking the other way, I have recorded over 300 guqin melodies from the early guqin repertoire and cannot imagine any advantage to playing them on a nine string qin.

This is not meant as a criticism of the 9 string qin. Instead, its layout could encourage modern composition that expands on the traditional idiom by playing into the limits that still exist (e.g., not being congenial to playing chords). For example, the increased potential for mixing pythagorean tuning with natural tuning via hui 3, 6, 8 and 11 could lead to adding interesting color if fully utilized.

I do hope that some composers will see the advantages of this new instrument, and likewise hope to hear interesting compositions for it in the future.

John

* * * John Thompson 唐世璋

I wasn't able to attend this Yaji as I was at an in-person tea workshop the same morning. Thankfully I got to see all the presentations and performances on Youtube. It seemed like a bit of ganying/yuanfen to learn that Master Yuan was presenting his WestLake ink tablets around the same time we were drinking a West Lake Phoenix Dancong. I also very much appreciate his traditional composition style.

Excellent playing and song choices by all. Congratulations to Andre on your original composition. Your melodic variety and playing feel make it seem like a much older piece.

And congratulations to Juni on completing a 9-string qin. It sounds great and I think the opportunity for more open-string and harmonic tones will also make it more compatible with Western music. It does sound to me like an adapted instrument, still with the character of a guqin but with added tones reminiscent of guitar or the large classical lutes. Being that it was ultimately created to make the qin more amenable to modern songs, I'd say there's no reason not to explore further musical possibilities as a modern

instrument. The 古琴 will always be a link to China's roots and a way to connect to its ancient cultural wisdom, whether played today or 200 years ago. The 9-string qin (新琴?) might be a departure into the present while still drawing on the past, sort of like musical hanfu which has ancient elements mixed with the modern attitudes and lifestyle.

大家 新年快乐!

Dan Reid

Meanwhile, I've been discussing with Ms. Yuan Xi the possibility of NYQS participating in their international guqin event in Chengdu, China. Chengdu city organized one last year and holds it once every five years. Additionally, Chengdu city is currently managing to establish a Chinese Western Guqin Alliance. Yuan Xi will keep me updated on any future international events this Alliance will host, and I'll make sure to keep you informed as well. Hopefully, we can represent NYQS in these events and visit Chengdu, known as the "Country of Heaven."

Sincerely
Peiyu

Dear André,

My thanks for your extensive and spontaneous explanation of how you composed your Rainy Rain piece. As I read your account, what came to mind was your "total immersion" (a phrase often used in accelerated language learning) in 大胡笳 to the extent that when you wanted a rest from it, an imprint had already occurred in your mind/brain/body hand, so that the "new" phrasing and rhythm seemed to flow out of you spontaneously.... What seems a mysterious process to the listener you have articulated (and I quote your passage below), and called upon the words of past thinkers, such as Spinoza, Suassuna and the composer Villa-Lobos to assist you:
...So, my motivation was to escape from the DHJ atmosphere as some unpretentious pastime. However, I started to like what I was composing and put my sensibility to create some coherence as a piece. This led me to enter into a process of composition, which means setting parameters to compose, such as tonal centres and structural themes, searching for different fingerings applied to a melody, and so on, and also addressing my feelings to a specific emotional atmosphere.

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I'm not sure how I managed to execute that jump precisely. It's simply a matter of playing and allowing the musical notes to settle and linger in my mind until I feel compelled to work with them.

At the risk of being redundant I requote more passages relevant to me (below) that explicate why you believe that "composition is a censorial quest":

... When I try to explain my music, new thoughts and ideas come to my mind, even though the music itself is already created and in the past. This is a common experience among composers - they create an explanation that matches their music, and this process is timeless.

From this, one can infer that musical speeches only can convey past events, but not the way the music transforms itself through time to the composers. Because much of the sound relations put in perspective in time by composers change their perception, and by that, the ideas they have about their music while composing it. It is like that because *many things, such as impressions, images, previous musical listening, abstract calculated musical material, and the correlation between sounds, intervals and building blocks that came from the repertoire, **all are in mutual influence at the same time in the composer's body and mind.***

In brief, you are putting into words *your musicality*, as Lawrence notes in his response, and we thank you for it. In so doing you have helped NYQS and its members *enter a new phase of being and thinking*, a more philosophical one, that broadens our mission and could well be entered into our current mission statement. This indeed leads us into the new Dragon Year !!

Marilyn

王妙蓮

Dear Marilyn,

Thank you for your feedback and questions.

This time, I played on a mass-produced instrument strung with a new set of Hashimoto silk strings in standard gauge. I believe its sound is quite good, and I consider myself fortunate to have found this instrument.

During my time in Hong Kong, I had the opportunity to play some older instruments, and from my experience, I've learned that age alone doesn't guarantee good sound quality. There are numerous factors that influence the overall condition of instruments; when they are well-preserved or properly restored, they can become very valuable both in terms of sound quality and monetary worth.

Take, for example, the 太古聲 instrument master Sou used for his recent recordings. While I didn't hear the instrument before master Sou's restoration, I've been told that initially, its sound was rather average despite being a Song dynasty instrument. Now, its sound is truly amazing; I've tried it myself, and the resonance and depth of its tone are really remarkable. However, one needs to be cautious of some protruding 斷文, avoid excessive pressure, and become accustomed to occasional buzzing sounds.

In general, I've found that instruments made by renowned or supposedly renowned artisans often fall short of my expectations, and I wouldn't be willing to pay even half of their price tags. I distinctly recall one of my worst experiences playing an instrument made by 查阜西 that sounded disappointingly cheap. It was intended to be sold at auction in that condition, and I genuinely wonder who would desire such an instrument. My priority lies in the tonal quality of the instrument because I am primarily a player, not a collector. Therefore, I assess instruments solely based on their sound, without placing much emphasis on their makers. For this reason, I've never commissioned an instrument from a qin maker as I would never know how it might ultimately sound. Instead, I prefer to select instruments already on the market. And surprisingly, one can occasionally come across excellent instruments even among mass-produced items.

All the best to you and to all the members,

Luca