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**Title:**

*Introduction to Living Composition: A New Approach to Asian Music,  
Culture and Spirituality*

**Abstract**

Over the last several years I have composed cross-cultural works for Western and traditional Asian instruments, collaborating with various musicians, dancers and filmmakers in Asia, USA and Europe. The idea of ‘living composition’ is to explore solutions to problems of cross-cultural esthetics and musical elements, as well as to redefine the role of the modern composer in the multicultural society of the twenty-first century. As a Japanese composer, I am particularly interested in incorporating various musical practices to create my own compositional techniques and languages. In this paper, I examine the incorporation of Asian vocal and instrumental techniques into Western musical languages, using my own compositions as a guide. I also discuss how hybrid musical elements are comprised in my works with careful attention paid to my own heritage. In closing, I will discuss how ‘living composition’ promotes both a wider appreciation and awareness of today’s dynamic contemporary music—one that is enriched by Asian musical cultures and philosophy.

**Keywords:** living composition, Koji Nakano, Thai Classical music, hybrid musical elements, vocalization, Asian traditional music, cross-cultural collaboration

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*Introduction to Living Composition: A New Approach to Asian Music,  
Culture and Spirituality*

Koji Nakano

**Introduction**

Although we often imitate the outward aspects of other cultures, this is only one part of our learning process. The hardest task is to make a meaningful cultural *confluence* out of a cultural *influence*. For several years, I have been researching East and Southeast Asian traditional music to further broaden my horizons and to explore my heritage as a Japanese composer. My music demonstrates the merging of Western and Asian musical traditions, and also makes reference to theatre, philosophy, rituals and spirituality.

**Early Piano Works**

*Reminiscences* – three pieces for piano (1991-1993), is a collection of my piano works, composed in different years. In *Japanese Cherry Blossoms Falling in the Wind*, the second movement with a duration of 6 minutes and 30 seconds (1991), the music reflects a traditional Japanese sensibility as expressed in traditional *kabuki* theater: two contrasting feelings, simple and dynamic, creating one dramatic expression. *Frozen Crystal* for solo piano (2001-2002) is inspired by Zen meditation. The piece displays repetitive musical ideas that reflect a process of entering into deep meditation. The ideas of 'frozen space and time' are expressed by the use of long rests and sustained notes throughout the piece.

**Recent Works**

In “*MUSIC—WHAT IS ITS FUTURE?*,” Chinese American composer Chou Wen-chung states that the confluence of musical cultures will occur as “the different traditions

intermingle to bring forth a new mainstream that will integrate all musical concepts and practices into a vast expanse of musical currents.” He goes on to say, however, “if the heritages are weak, meaningful exchange may not take place and the results might be misleading or unbalanced.” In my recent compositions, I strive to achieve the confluence of Western and traditional Asian musical cultures.

In 1998, I met Cambodian American composer Chinary Ung at the International Festival-Institute at Round Top in Texas, USA. I later studied with him at the University of California, San Diego. He introduced me to three technical concepts that he identified in the creation of deliberately cross-cultural works: “essence,” “co-existence” and “fusion.”

Ung taught me that a composer must possess not only good technique and knowledge of craft, but also great imaginative powers. In my composition, I have projected the “essence” of traditional Asian music through the abstract representation of traditional Asian instruments in a Western compositional language. For example, in my *Ceremonial: Time Song for orchestra* (2005, m. 27 to 34), I took the essence of the sonority of a Japanese *gagaku* instrument, the *sho*, made of seventeen pipes, which can produce a variety of sound clusters and harmonies by itself, and reproduced it using 11 instruments (including woodwinds, brass, and strings).

Compositionally, some cross-cultural musical elements blend well, but some do not. If two musical elements do not blend, like oil and water, Ung suggests layering the elements in a kind of counterpoint to one another, letting them interlock without losing their separate identities. In *Time Song II: Howling through Time* for female singer, flutist and percussionist (2006), the percussionist plays hand drums using a Middle Eastern style

and technique, while the flutist imitates the essence of the *ryuteki* (Japanese wooden flute), featured in *gagaku* music, producing a unique “coexistence” of two different musical cultures (m. 102 to 112).

The third and last compositional technique, “fusion,” comes from the idea of blending things together to form a single, distinct entity. In this case, the whole is not just the sum of its parts, but rather becomes something new. In *Time Song II* (m. 9 to 76), I combined three musical inspirations to create a fusion of sounds: 1) the timbres of electronic music played by the three musicians who play different sizes of triangles, 2) the sound of gongs from a temple in Asia, and 3) the echoes of bells that I heard from various churches in Vilnius, Lithuania. While the gongs, crotales and chimes emerge from the rhythmic gestures of the three triangles, their metallic timbre also blends perfectly with the triangles, creating a “fusion” of different musical elements and inspirations that is equally indebted to electronic music, Asian temples, and Eastern European churches.

### **Introduction to Living Composition**

Like other Asian musical cultures, the music of Thailand has subsisted through an oral tradition, whereby a student studies closely with a particular teacher to master techniques and gain knowledge. The act of imitation is paramount, and the consistent interplay between the student and teacher is often a great influence on the student’s musical approach, ideas and philosophies. At the end of the apprenticeship, however, the student must adapt this knowledge to create his/her own musical voice.

In January of 2009, I began a two-month residency at Burapha University in Bangsaen, Thailand, funded by the Asian Cultural Council in NYC. During this time, I

composed *Unspoken Voices–Unbroken Spirits* for Thai Classical singers and *piphat* ensemble, performed by the faculty and students at Burapha University.

While I was composing the piece, I pondered the following questions and concerns:

- 1) What is the role of a composer for Thai traditional music and how does he/she compose a new piece for the musicians?
- 2) What does it mean to compose music for culturally and musically unfamiliar instruments?
- 3) How do we absorb and incorporate cross-cultural elements while still expressing our own musical voice?

In *Unspoken Voices–Unbroken Spirits*, I first wrote a short poem, and then composed music around the text. The singers also memorized all the texts in Japanese and played a percussion part.

**Example 1: Japanese and English Texts (Translations) of *Unspoken Voices–Unbroken Spirits***

<i>Doko karaka</i>	From somewhere,
<i>Kikoeru uta</i>	I hear a song
<i>Kinou yori ashita e</i>	A path is leading
<i>Tsuzuku michi</i>	to tomorrow from yesterday
<i>Na wo yonde mo</i>	Though I call your name,
<i>Kaeranu uta</i>	I cannot hear the response, your song
<i>Sonokoe wo kikasete okure</i>	Let me hear that voice
<i>Yuttari yura yura</i>	(You rest) so peacefully as in a cradle, rocked by gentle breezes
<i>Yasuraka ni</i>	(You look) so peaceful
<i>Omae no ie wa doko desuka</i>	Where is your home?
<i>Kaze no ko ka, mori no ko ka</i>	Are you a child of the wind or a child of the forest?
<i>Potsun to hitori tatazunde</i>	Standing alone
<i>Tsukiyo to mori no mannakani</i>	between the moonlight and the forest
<i>Yure, yureru</i>	The Moon's shadow on the water
<i>Mizu no tsuki kage</i>	is flickering

In writing the piece, I soon learned that most of the musicians did not read Western musical notation. This prompted me to teach my music orally (including pitches, rhythms, tone-colors, the form and structure of a new composition) during two months of rehearsal. I sought a musical common ground between Japanese and Thai traditional

music in an attempt to achieve a confluence of Asian musical cultures. Through the rehearsal process, I developed a greater affinity for *piphat* music, as it possessed similar musical characteristics to a music I am deeply familiar with, Japanese *gagaku*. Although the instrumentation varies, both musical traditions are based on a main melody to be played simultaneously by different instruments in idiomatic ways, creating a heterophonic texture accompanied by percussion. In *Unspoken Voices–Unbroken Sprits*, I combined characteristics of loud, soft, and “mon” *piphat* ensembles. In addition, I used three Thai Classical music singers and added extra percussion instruments to my *piphat* ensemble, including wood and metal wind chimes. It is scored for ten Thai Classical musicians including:

1. A lead singer who also plays *krap* (clapper, a pair of flat bamboo or hardwood sticks) and mark tree
- 2.3. Chorus of two Thai Classical singers, each plays two Thai style gongs, *kong mong*
4. *Pi nai* doubling *khlui* (a quadruple-reed oboe, doubling with a bamboo flute)
5. *Taphon* (barrel shaped drum) playing with two Thai drums *glawng that*
6. *Ching* (a pair of small cymbals) and *chap* (a pair of flat round cymbals) playing with/without water, as well as wood and metal wind chimes
7. *Khong wong lek*, high-pitched circular frame gongs
8. *Khong wong yai*, low-pitched circular frame gongs
9. *Ranad ek*, high-pitched xylophone
10. *Ranad thum*, low-pitched xylophone

During the creative process, my biggest challenge was to experiment musically while maintaining utmost cultural sensitivity. On some occasions, my approaches were indeed outrageous and totally foreign from Thai instrumental and vocal practices. These approaches included dipping the *ching* finger cymbals in a bucket of water, rubbing the surface of the drums with thumbs, avoiding some of the rhythmic downbeats, and singing in harmonies. Dipping the *ching* in water was one of the most memorable experiences because the musicians simply refused to do it. In the Thai tradition, it is believed that the

instruments are embodied with holy spirits, or the spirits of master musicians from the past. Accordingly, it is prohibited to walk across/over them, as this action would constitute a disrespect. Any misuse of the instruments (such as dipping them in water) could be construed as a direct affront on the embodying spirits. After this incident, I took a few weeks to purchase all brand-new percussion instruments for *Unspoken Voices—Unbroken Spirits*. I asked the musicians to perform on these new instruments, as they had never been ceremonially blessed, and therefore did not possess any spirits who could be offended by their “misuse.”

The experience of navigating deeply held cultural values in the process of composing a new piece was transformative. I realized not only that working with Thai traditional musicians is a culturally sensitive process, but also that in order to achieve true “confluence,” I must develop my own knowledge of the living tradition and cultural heritage. I also learned the value of developing strong relationships with the musicians. With their trust, I can inspire them to reach outside of their comfort zones to attempt something new and innovative. After establishing such a mutual respect, I believe that the composer and performers can simultaneously share both a reverence for the tradition, and an excitement for the new possibilities inherent within the tradition.

Since my visit to Burapha University in 2009, the idea of “living composition” has grown in me. I call it “living” composition for many reasons: 1) because it is rooted in collaboration with practitioners of “living” traditional musical arts, 2) because the generation and development of the piece does not end with a score, and 3) because the piece takes new life with each unique realization, depending upon the culture of the performing musicians, or on the communication between the composer and a variety of

acoustic ecologies. It is inspired primarily by my experiences of co-creative composition with traditional musicians, and by an appreciation for the historic role of the composer within these traditions. As many Asian traditional repertoires were anonymously composed, it is reasonable to assume that the music would have been created and nourished by performers of the music throughout history. There was no concept of a composer in the Western sense, where one individual planned all details of a musical performance. The composer served as a creative collaborator, working directly with performers, exchanging musical ideas. Performers and composers are equals in this dynamic. Embracing this dynamic in the act of self-conscious cross-cultural composition, the composer of the new work, as co-creator, needs to be receptive to input from the performers, who can (and likely will) enhance and expand the composer's musical ideas.

Adopting a balanced power-relationship between composer and performer led me to embrace a form of indeterminacy in creating new works for traditional Asian ensembles. A living composition begins with an idea and an open framework, the end result being largely informed by both the musical culture and the individual musical personalities of the performers. For my living compositions, there is usually no score, or I create a simple score with basic information. The performers can interpret rhythms and ornamentations freely according to specified rules and guidelines. A living composition can thus be performed by a variety of traditional ensembles in Asia, with each realization varying according to the musical culture. The result will also be determined by the individual musical personalities of the performers. A good example of this can be found in Thai music and its oral history. As discussed earlier, the Thai ensemble approach to a composition rests in the act of multiple instruments performing idiomatic ornamentations



and elaborations of the same melody. These particular elaborations are idiomatic not only to the characteristics of their particular instrument, but also to the direct stylistic lineage passed down by previous master teachers, and also to the inclinations of the specific performer. Thus, each musician and his/her unique lineage plays a role in the creation of the piece.

### **Musical Transformations of Living Composition**

As a Japanese composer trained in the West, but engaged with East and Southeast Asian music, I have lived many musical lives. I was born and educated in Tokyo, and later studied in Boston, The Hague, and San Diego. At UCSD, Ung gave me both awareness and a wider appreciation of Asian traditional music, culture, art and philosophy. My teaching career took me to Thailand, Taiwan and many other countries. As a citizen of the world, it was inevitable that my musical journey would lead me to search for a new approach to creative work in a multicultural era, one that would allow me to work with broadly with Asian traditional music, while continuing to practice Western composition.

In 2009, I composed *Time Song III: Reincarnation* “The Birth of a Spirit” for *daegeum* (a Korean large bamboo transverse flute), violin and violoncello, for the 2010 Pacific Rim Music Festival at University of California, Santa Cruz in USA. The piece is based on the metric and pitch ideas of *Looking at a Dancing Apsara through Rectangular Prisms* for flute and *pinn peat* ensemble (2009), and *Scattered Clouds/Dramatic Sky* for flute, bass clarinet, viola and violoncello (2009). The stylistic differences among the three pieces are based on practical issues. The examples 1a, 1b, and 1c demonstrate how the basic metric and pitch materials of the three pieces were re-worked and transformed

from one work to another. The similarities between all three pieces demonstrate the basic framework of the living composition.

**Example 1a: The Metric and Pitch Analysis of *Korng Tauch* (high-pitched circular frame gongs) and *Korng Thomm* (low-pitched circular frame gongs) in Part I from *Looking at a Dancing Apsara through Rectangular Prisms* for flute and *pinn peat* ensemble (2009)**

12/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
8/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
6/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
4/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      | x2  
2/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      | x2  
4/4 | Si                      Mi                      La                      Re | x4  
4/8 | Si                      Mi                      La                      Re | x6  
4/16 | Si                      Mi                      La                      Re | x5

**Example 1b: The Metric and Pitch Analysis of Clarinet in Part I from *Scattered Clouds/Dramatic Sky* for flute, bass clarinet, viola and violoncello (2009)**

8/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
7/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
6/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
5/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
4/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
3/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
2/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
4/4 | Si                      Mi                      La                      Re | x2  
4/8 | Si                      Mi                      La                      Re | x3  
4/16 | Si                      Mi                      La                      Re | x4

**Example 1c: The Metric and Pitch Analysis of *Time Song III: Reincarnation* “The Birth of a Spirit” for *daegeum* (a Korean large bamboo transverse flute), violin and violoncello (2009) from measures 1 to 33**

8/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
7/4 | Si                      | Mi                      | La                      | Re                      |  
6/4 | Si                      | So                      | La                      | Re                      |  
5/4 | Si                      | Mi<sub>b</sub>                      | La<sub>b</sub>                      | Re                      |  
4/4 | Re<sub>#</sub>(Mi<sub>b</sub>)                      | So                      | La<sub>b</sub>                      | Re                      |

3/4 | Sib        | Fa        | Do        | Re        |  
 2/4 | Re#     | Mi        | Fa        | Fa#     |  
 4/4 | Lab So Fa# Fa |  
 4/4 | So# Si Sib La |  
 2/4 | Lab So |  
 2/4 | Sob Si |  
 2/4 | La So |

Generally speaking, the performance by Western instruments of transcribed Asian traditional music has had mixed-results. Elements such as timbre, pitch, and tempo fluctuation are often lost in the translation, significantly altering the esthetics of the original music. In addition, composers must be extra careful when dealing with multiple musical cultures in their compositions. In this piece, I was importing a framework designed primarily for traditional Thai musicians to a Western ensemble with a Korean instrumentalist. Asking the performers to improvise their parts completely (as in the traditional Asian realizations) might have yielded potentially incoherent results. A fully notated score more readily accomplished the cultural manifestations I wanted to express in this realization, as both the Korean traditional musician and the string players (members of Del Sol String Quartet) have a strong background in Western music notation. In this way, I was able to maintain a semblance of traditional Asian heterophony, while creating a realization that was technically and culturally suited to the Western manner of performance practice.

Handwritten musical score for "Däageum" (J. S. Bach, BWV 1013). The score is for a 4-part setting of the hymn "Däageum". It includes staves for Daageum (flute), Voice (soprano), Vln. (violin), and Vcl. (viola). The music is in G major and 3/4 time. The score is handwritten and includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, dynamics (mp, pp, mf, f), and articulation marks. The title "Däageum" is written in a stylized font at the top left. The score is divided into measures by bar lines, and there are repeat signs and first/second endings indicated. The handwriting is in ink on aged paper.

In *Time Song II* (2006), *Time Song III* (2009) and *After the Gentle Wind....* for solo flute (2011), I used various vocalizations by instrumentalist(s) as the heart of the works; they are not only spiritual and musical extensions of each instrument, but they also bring a sense of “oneness” to the music. The use of vocalizations is common to various Asian traditions for the same reasons. For instance, the Japanese *satsuma*-style *biwa* player sings and plays to tell a tragic story. The voice and music constantly interact with each other, intermingling, blending, and often contrasting. It is a good example of what I refer to as ‘melodic vocalization.’ Another vocal technique is ‘instrumental vocalization’ (again, in my own terms), in which Japanese *taiko* ensemble members communicate with each other by shouting random words or phrases; this functions doubly as a cue and as a dramatic enhancement complementing the musical narrative.

### Example 3: Melodic and Instrumental Vocalizations



In *Time Song III*, I also combined voices and instruments in various degrees to create new timbres and musical functions: a) chanting, b) instrument as vocal accompaniment, c) voice as instrumental accompaniment, d) the use of voices as part of the orchestration, e) vocalizations as a contrapuntal line among instruments and/or voices, f) vocalizations as part of the heterophony, g) vocalizations as a cue or to express musicians' musical and spiritual transformation.

### Collaboration with Nature and the Environment

In the program notes for *De Staat*, renowned Dutch composer Louis Andriessen states, "How you arrange your musical material, the techniques you use and the instruments you score for, are largely determined by your own social circumstances and listening experience, and the availability of financial support." Andriessen goes on to point out that a composer needs to be separated from his conditioned society in order to create an individual work of art. This attitude helps an artist to develop his own voice, and with regard to instrumentation, to separate himself from the strong traditions of the past.

Over the last several years, I have engaged in self-exploration through music. In 2009, I traveled to Cambodia, Thailand, Japan and Austria, where I made various recordings of environmental sounds including insects, animals, chanting, cow bells, etc. Three years later, I composed *Worldscape I* for amplified *pipa* and pre-recorded sounds (2012) commissioned by Taiwanese *pipa* virtuoso, Hsi-Jong Wang for his solo recital as part of the 2012 Guandu Arts Festival at Taipei National University of the Arts (TNUA) in Taiwan. He gave the world premiere at the TNUA Concert Hall on October 12.



Dress Rehearsal of *Worldscape I* for Amplified *Pipa* and Pre-recorded Sounds,  
TNUA Concert Hall, Guandu Arts Festival, Taipei National University of the Arts, October 2012.  
*Pipa*: Hsi-Jong Wang; photo by Koji Nakano

In the *Worldscape* series, I am especially interested in exploring my relationship with sounds from nature and my own environment. For *Worldscape I*, I first created a pre-recorded track to accompany the *pipa*. The written *pipa* part reflects my thoughts about and dialogue with nature and the environment represented by the pre-recorded track. For the ending of *Worldscape I* and *II* written in commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Cage's birth, a player expresses his or her cultural and environmental sounds and ends in silence. For me, the *Worldscape* series reflects multiple dimensions of collaboration; 1) the composer, nature and his environment, 2) the composer and performer, and 3) the performer, nature and his or her own environment.



Rehearsal of *Worldscape II* for Amplified *Jakae* and Pre-recorded Sounds, Department of Thai Classical Music, Burapha University, October 2012. *Jakae*: Wisarut Somngam; photo by Koji Nakano.

*Worldscape II* for amplified *jakae* and pre-recorded sounds (2012) emerged from *Worldscape I*. During one month of rehearsal, I taught a *jakae* player how to interpret the original score and help to co-create *Worldscape II*, as a living composition. *Worldscape II* is also a collaborative piece with the Thai choreographer/dancer Julaluck Eakwattanapun and her dance students at Burapha University in Thailand. It was premiered at Burapha's 2012 Music and Performing Arts International Festival.

In the following year, I composed *Worldscape III* in two versions. The first version is for soprano, *pipa* and pre-recorded sounds written for the 2013 Taipei International New Music Festival. The version for *jakae* and pre-recorded sounds was premiered at Burapha's 2012 Music and Performing Arts International Festival. For both versions, I composed the soprano part for Stacey Fraser, who has been a champion of my music for a decade. I also added a vocal part to *Worldscape I* and *Worldscape II*. The ending of the two versions of *Worldscape III* are dedicated to the 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Cage, where the soprano expresses her cultural and environmental sounds and ends in silence. The *jakae* version represents a merging of my training in Western

notated music and my more recent work in living composition; it is a hybrid of my own Western and Asian musical cultures.



World Premiere: *Worldscape III* for Soprano, *Jakae* and Pre-recorded Sounds, Music and Performing Arts International Festival, Burapha University, November 2013. Soprano: Stacey Fraser. *Jakae*: Wisarut Somngam; photo by Koji Nakano.

## **Educating the Next Generation of Asian Composers and Performers with Living**

### **Composition**

In my own view, practitioners of living traditional musical forms must grow within two spheres. One is learning from and preserving our cultural heritages. The other is seeking new potentialities for our traditional culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At Burapha University in Thailand, I have offered the Experimental Thai Music Laboratory for Young Composers since 2011. As the Artistic Director, I annually invite emerging voices from a new generation of Asian composers to participate in a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaboration workshop lasting 7 to 10 days. Through the intensive workshop, each composer learns to be in touch with his or her own cultural roots, while exploring Thai classical music and performing arts, resulting in the creation and performance of new and innovative work for Thai traditional artists.

Another purpose of promoting living composition is to nourish creative minds among Asian traditional musicians, so that they can express their traditional sensibility and musical heritage in the modern world. For that reason, I co-taught three different courses in the form of workshops, “Traditional Sounds and Silent Film,” “Traditional



Sounds and Dance,” and “Traditional Sounds and Notation,” with Prof. Ling-Huei Tsai of the Department of Traditional Music at TNUA in Taiwan from 2011 to 2013.

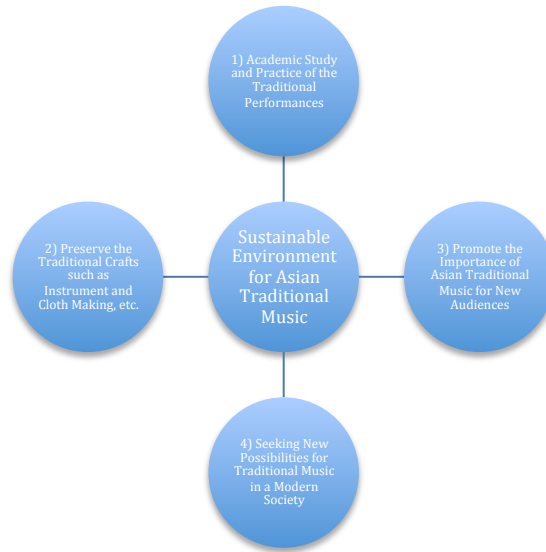


Rehearsal of Final Presentation of Class “Traditional Sounds and Dance” at School of Dance, Taipei National University of the Arts, June 2012; photo by Koji Nakano.

In the classes, both composition majors and traditional music students (majoring in *beiguan*, *nanguan*, *pipa*, *guqin* and music theory) learned how to approach a group composition with a collaborative spirit. My teaching philosophy is to encourage students to understand the broader purpose of their studies, specifically to develop a sense of responsibility for the creation of a sustainable environment for Asian traditional music according to the following precepts:

- 1) Academic Study and Practice of the Traditional Performances
  - a. The Study of Asian Traditional Performances through both Oral and Academic Training
  - b. Research in Asian Traditional Music to Understand Cultural and Historical Sensibilities
- 2) Preserve the Traditional Crafts such as Instrument and Cloth Making, etc.  
“Teaching Appreciation and Respect”
- 3) Promote the Importance of Asian Traditional Music for New Audiences  
“Developing Social Responsibility by Orienting the Local Community”
- 4) Seeking New Possibilities for Traditional Music in a Modern Society:
  - a. Create a functional music rooted in the aesthetic and spirit of Asian traditional music, culture and spirituality  
“Culturally-Specific and Site-Specific Music”
  - b. Reconstruct traditional music as part of the performing arts within interdisciplinary work
  - c. To encourage both traditional musicians and composers to collaboratively create new repertoires for Asian traditional music to carry on their cultural legacies—“living composition”

#### Example 4: The Diagram of Sustainable Environment for Asian Traditional Music



#### Challenges of Cross-Cultural Performance

During the premiere of Toru Takemitsu's *November Steps* for *biwa*, *shakuhachi* and orchestra, the esteemed Western-trained Japanese composer learned that traditional Japanese instruments are deeply dependent on their own geographic climate, recalling that, "Because of the dry and cold weather in New York, the *biwa* and *shakuhachi* players were concerned that their instruments would break." Similarly, my living compositions are not easy to present internationally. They require time to establish relationships with performers, extensive rehearsals in the oral tradition, and it is cost-prohibitive to transport performers from their native countries. My collaboration with filmmaker Tiffany Doesken represents my attempt to ensure the survival of some of the realizations of my living compositions, for the sake of posterity, as well as the potential for dissemination to an international audience. Ms. Doesken's films have preserved realizations of two living compositions, *Unspoken Voices—Unbroken Spirits* and the *pinn peat* version of *Looking at a Dancing Apsara through Rectangular Prisms*. The two audio-visual versions made

in 2009 (*Unspoken Voices–Unbroken Spirits*) and 2010 (*Looking at a Dancing Apsara through Rectangular Prisms*) have been presented as a film, but also have been presented as part of a multi-media work with choreographed dance.



New Presentation of *Unspoken Voices–Unbroken Spirits*, for Thai Classical Singers and *Piphat* Ensemble, Burapha University, Thailand, November 2010. Choreographed by Sanchai Uaesilapa. Filmed by Tiffany Doesken; photo by Tanarach Anukul.

## Conclusion

The American Heritage Dictionary defines “confluence” as follows:

- a) a flowing together of two or more streams;
- b) the point of juncture of such streams;
- c) a gathering or meeting together; crowd.

As a Japanese composer and researcher of various Asian traditional forms, I believe that the future of the arts in Asia will depend on the continued preservation and study of traditional heritage, coupled with the embrace of modern multiculturalism. Early in my compositions, I began experimenting with the incorporation of specific Japanese esthetics into my piano works. However, the music itself was performed by musicians trained in the Western Art tradition and was played on standard Western

instruments. Later, Ung's three compositional techniques helped me to explore various cultural representations in my music. At Burapha University in Thailand, many of my living compositions were inspired by Thai classical music, dance, theater and literature, and composed for the faculty and students in music and performing arts. My idea of living composition was born here. The impetus was to give Thai traditional musicians a new musical space which was not too far from their musical training, yet expressed something new and different from their own musical traditions. The concept of living composition can change its form to encourage musicians and young composers of any culture to actively participate in the creative process based on their living tradition, culture and art.

### **Proceeding to the Future: Innovation from Tradition**

Our cultures are based on past and ongoing cultural confluences. Chou states that the confluence of cultures is not the "borrowing" or the cultural "influence" of other cultures, but is rather a "merger" or "*re-merger*" of legacies. He also states that these legacies are "the roots of culture and must be nurtured from generation to generation" and that by "merging," we are "coming together, sharing each other's heritage, complementing and revitalizing legacies." I believe that new and creative collaborations among various artistic fields will be a powerful vehicle to share traditional values and spirituality with contemporary audiences as well as to carry Asia's cultural legacies and traditional sensibilities into the future. I hope that the concept of "living composition" will foster more active creation among Asian traditional musicians, as well as inspire many more composers in Asia and elsewhere to approach creative work that is rooted in a deep understanding of traditional music and philosophy. My hope is that both traditional

musicians and composers will contribute to the enrichment of traditional music, culture and legacy in various part of the world. As we embrace the responsibility of deeply exploring our cultural roots, we must also keep an open mind, so that our living tradition might grow in different directions, just like the roots of a tree. Indeed, a new creative work is a fruit sprung from this very tree, and it belongs to the same body, inherited from our ancestors to be passed down many more generations.

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