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**Experiencing Identity, Forming Poetic Space:
Expression and Interaction in a Portfolio of Original Compositions**

Portfolio Commentary

Volume 3 of 3

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Abstract

This doctoral research in composition focuses on representing and presenting the identity-forming process through a portfolio of musical compositions and its accompanying academic commentary. On the one hand, the Commentary serves to present a compositional process that involves sampling, reflecting, and updating my own identity. On the other hand, the Portfolio of Compositions represents creative outcomes from different stages of this dynamic process. The Portfolio consists of compositions for solo instrument (with or without electronics and visual components), solo vocalist with various mediums, small instrumental and vocal ensembles (up to six players, with or without electronics and interactive devices), and large ensemble (twelve players).

After first introducing this research's personal and theoretical background, this Commentary then addresses the portfolio compositions in detail. The essential concept of 'identity sampling' is discussed first on a case-by-case basis: how a sample, such as stereotypical pentatonicism, or tonal language inflections, has been reflected upon in my portfolio compositions. During the discussion, several important concepts that address different musical aspects are introduced, such as the 'poetic space' for the organisation of materials; language *pheno-* and *geno-song* for analysing vocal identity; and the 'network of interaction', which recognises the dynamic relationship shared by the composer, performer(s), audience and even non-human objects in a performing space. Finally, the commentary ends with a discussion of two concluding projects, the first being a ninety-minute concert that reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the second being a large ensemble work that strives to achieve structural coherence in a more considerable length of time. In conclusion, the research reveals a process of experiencing identity rather than seeking a definite and fixed answer.

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Author's Note

This submission comprises 3 volumes. The Portfolio of Original Compositions is separated into Volume 1 (portrait-oriented) and Volume 2 (landscape-oriented). Volume 3 is the Portfolio Commentary.

Chinese Transliterations

Transliterations of Chinese terms and names in this commentary are based on the *Hanyu Pinyin* system, the standard phonetic scheme in the People's Republic of China. All translations of terms, references, and quotations of Chinese sources are by myself unless otherwise indicated. All Chinese names in the main text (excluding quotations where applicable) will appear according to Chinese practice in the following order: last name, first name. This practice will also be followed in the bibliography. In the footnotes, the order first name, last name will be followed.

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Introduction

This Commentary complements and contextualises my Portfolio of Compositions by laying out the creative journey that I have gone through from starting my PhD research in 2017 and its completion in 2022. The journey started with questioning ‘self-identity’ in an attempt to understand concepts of ‘self’ that move away from identifying myself with one or more specific cultures, nationalities, and political stances. By emphasising the idea of ‘self’, I consciously set my research apart from those more debatable issues of identity, the complex and contradictory natures of which I had been fully aware of during my master’s studies. Having said that, all my portfolio compositions involve features, both musical and non-musical, that may be associated with specific cultural, national and political subjects. Rather than using music to reflect on the identity of these subjects, I employed them in striving to shape a musical identity of myself. Essentially, these observations made on different aspects of my identity, or ‘identity samples’ as I would later call them (see Chapter 1), have signposted my search for an authentic ‘self’ and the development of a personal musical language. My PhD research thus focuses on the experience of an ongoing self-identity forming process through musical composition.

The process of building of an identity naturally involves validation and invalidation of potential sources of identity. In his book on Adorno’s view on identity, Oberle argues that ‘people first experience identity negatively’, that ‘[n]o identity is born pure; identities are always the result of negation, a recoil from an unreconciled, unemancipated state.’¹ According to Buddhist philosophy, an identity similarly realises itself by excluding everything that is not itself.² This concept of ‘negative identity’ fits my own experience well.

¹ Eric Oberle, *Theodor Adorno and the Century of Negative Identity* (Cultural Memory in the Present series; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), pp. 3–4.

² Florian Coulmas, *Identity: A Very Short Introduction* (Very Short Introductions series, vol. 593; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 25.

Since the age of sixteen (around the time of my arrival in the UK), I have encountered music and arts containing different portraits of ‘China’ from geographical, cultural, political, and other aspects. As my studies of all these aspects continued, I started to feel increasingly uncomfortable with these somewhat clichéd portraits, which, as I then realised, do not reflect the complexity and dynamicity of my own identity. After all, how does one decide if a creative work is authentically ‘Chinese’ given the long history of China and its countless cultural variants, which have resulted in different sets of perceptions and expectations from the audience and creators themselves?

As a geographical, cultural, and political concept, ‘China’ has existed for more than two thousand years.³ ‘Chineseness’ — the set of attributes that signify a Chinese identity — can act as both the source and result of the self-stereotyping practice of ‘being Chinese’. While its first usage in academic discourse is hard to pin down precisely, the term ‘Chineseness’, as suggested by Ming Dong Gu, has been invoked by scholars since at least the 1980s.⁴ For example, in his article published in 1988, the Singaporean sinologist Wang Gungwu argues that:

The Chinese have never had a concept of identity, only a concept of Chineseness, of being Chinese and of becoming un-Chinese. [...] I believe that there were at least two ways the Chinese saw their Chineseness which we could call their sense of Chinese identity: one might be called Chinese nationalist identity; the other, more traditional and past-oriented, I shall call historical identity.⁵

The debatable nature of ‘Chineseness’ has also been discussed in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture*:

³ For a detailed discussion, see Weiming Tu, ‘Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center’, in Weiming Tu ed., *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 1–34.

⁴ Ming Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism* (Routledge Contemporary China Series, vol. 90; London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), p. 22.

⁵ Gungwu Wang, ‘The Study of Chinese Identity in Southeast Asia’, in J.W. Cushman and Gungwu Wang eds., *The Southeast Asian Chinese since World War II* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1988), pp. 1–21 (p. 1).

The 'national minorities' aside, the diversity of Chinese ethnicities sets the scene for discarding the notion of an essential and fixed Chineseness. Debates about what it means to be Chinese have raged for decades.⁶

Moreover, the Taiwan-born scholar Allen Chun points out a possible relationship between the changing definition to 'Chineseness' and its relationship to overseas Chinese communities:

[...] it is possible to show how notions of 'Chineseness' have changed throughout history as reflections from a sinocentric core to the evolution of the nation-state, and these notions contrast with the way they may be conceived by different communities of Chinese as a function of their geographical removal (Hong Kong, overseas) or sociopolitical disposition (class, gender).⁷

As the term 'Chineseness' has been in currency for some time, I have decided to adopt this terminology not only to signify an identity that is associated with 'being' Chinese but also to embrace the complex issues surrounding the ideas of what it is to be 'Chinese'. For this reason, the terminology is preferable to the more conventional 'Sino' which does not encompass the established debates among scholars about Chinese identity but merely refers to 'coming from China'.⁸

Since the beginning of my expatriate experience in 2010, I witnessed the rise of Chinese identities as it became more involved in the global exchange of culture. What I noticed from the Chinese diaspora societies is an interesting fact that, despite the complexity involved in defining authentic Chinese culture, the diasporas actively shape and promote what they deem the original 'Chineseness'. What the diasporas believe as authentic, however,

⁶ Kam Louie, 'Defining Modern Chinese Culture', in Kam Louie ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 1–19 (p. 8).

⁷ Allen Chun, 'Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity', *Boundary 2*, 23.2 (1996), pp. 111–138 (p. 131).

⁸ A similar case is argued by Ming Dong Gu on the conventional definition of 'sinology', see Ming Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism*, pp. 42–43.

can be different in many ways from what I have experienced in China. This discrepancy led me to initiate my doctoral research with a focus on defining my own ‘Chineseness’.

At first, I found the diasporic Chinese cultures stereotypical or outdated at least.⁹ However, my attitude changed as I gained more insights into the issues of stereotype and authenticity, which in turn prompted me to evaluate my own cultural upbringing and question my own definition of what might be called ‘authentic Chineseness’. What I later realised is how much of my own living environment lacked ‘authenticity’, which could have resulted in my understanding of ‘Chinese’ culture and therefore my ‘cultural practices being stereotypical.

According to Van Leeuwen, ‘[w]e [...] call something ‘authentic’ because it is ‘genuine’, because its origin or authorship is not in question, and it is not an imitation or a copy.’¹⁰ He further points out that ‘[to be authentic is] to be true to the essence of something, to a revealed truth, a deeply felt sentiment, or the way these are worded or otherwise expressed’.¹¹ In order to build an authentic self-identity in compositions, I set myself the first goal of my doctoral research: to acknowledge and address the ‘inauthentic’ and stereotypical parts of my existing cultural identity. Following this goal, two further important questions emerged: What issues are involved in my stereotypical identity, and how should I respond to them in my compositions so to form an authentic personal musical language?

My research addresses these questions by first looking into a number of stereotypical impressions I have on specific cultural and musical subjects, namely the local dialect, religion, and specific tonal, rhythmical and formal features of music. My personal reflections

⁹ For an explanation of stereotype and its functions to a society, see Craig McGarty, Vincent Yzerbyt, and Russell Spears, ‘Social, Cultural and Cognitive Factors in Stereotype Formation’, in Craig McGarty, Vincent Yzerbyt, and Russell Spears eds. *Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups* (London; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1–15 (pp. 2–7).

¹⁰ Theo Van Leeuwen, ‘What Is Authenticity?’, *Discourse Studies*, 3.4 (2001), pp. 392–97 (p. 392).

¹¹ Van Leeuwen, p. 393.

on these impressions correspond with my use of specific musical features in compositions, each of which the Commentary discusses in its corresponding chapters.

Take *Kill the Mosquitoes!* (2019) as an example. It is one of the vocal works discussed in Chapter 2, which addresses my relationship with my indigenous language — the Min-nan dialect, which I would have been fluent in if it was not marginalised by the governmental promotion of Mandarin happened when I was at the age of seven. My inability to understand Min-nan dialect but its stereotypical impression has caused a feeling of regret that sets the tone of this vocal composition. In the music, this regretfulness is implied by a strong sense of anxiety and awkwardness realised by theatrical vocal sounds and gestures.

Another example of the ‘identity samples’ featured in my Portfolio is the pentatonic scale or, specifically, the anhemitonic pentatonic subset of the diatonic scale. This particular ‘scale’ is devoid of details that can suggest a specific culture (such as intonational, timbral and harmonic nuances), rather than a stereotypical Chinese or Asian identity.¹² Nevertheless, such a clichéd impression of pentatonicism comes exactly from my existing identity which is shaped by the music I heard and the music education I received indigenously in China. For this reason, I use pentatonicism to signify my ‘past’, especially in compositions that are under the theme of nostalgia, memory, or dream.

One musical feature that I often associated with Chinese folk tunes, the quick pitch fluctuation of a major 2nd interval, has been used as the main motif of several compositions in succession. As demonstrated in Ex. 0.1, the motif was first employed in *Like a Dream, Not a Dream* (2019), then used in composing *From a Saturated Memory* (2019) and *Dream Nostalgic* (2019).

This succession of ideas and materials from piece to piece reflects on the second important research goal: to realise an ‘identity-in-progress’ in compositions by ceaselessly

¹² Also see discussion on ‘stereotypical pentatonicism’ in Chapter 1.

updating my understanding of the past, the present, and the relationship in between. I was inspired by Ien Ang in setting this goal, who argues that discourse on ‘Chineseness’ should not aim to fixate a set of attributes but to reflect a state of constant renegotiation and re-articulation in the forming or reforming of a Chinese identity.¹³ In Chapter 2 and 3, I discuss how I approach such a constant forming of identity when creating and performing my improvisation- and electronic- based compositions, the musical results of which are designed to evolve from performance to performance. For example, in *Dream Nostalgic*, the double bass player engages in a conversation with the randomly generated electronic sounds, thus realising a changing musical identity.

Example 0.1: Use of a major 2nd interval in successive compositions

Zhuo, *Like a Dream, Not a Dream*, bar 1



Zhuo, *From a Saturated Memory*, bar 51–52



Zhuo, *Dream Nostalgic*, 1'20"–1'30"



For an identity to be renegotiable, its ‘building bricks’ need to stay replaceable and the way these ‘bricks’ are put together should be adjustable. To reflect this flexibility in my music, I propose in Chapter 1 a non-linear way of structuring compositional materials which

¹³ Ien Ang, ‘Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm’, *Boundary 2*, 25.3 (1998), pp. 223–42 (p. 225) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/303595>>. [accessed 19 February 2021]

enables me to fuse musical elements together regardless of their existing musical and factual implications. This results in a key term — the ‘poetic space’ — which is an essential structuring concept of many of my portfolio compositions. By letting compositional materials into a space where they are free to combine and grow, I have been able gradually to form a new musical language during my doctoral research, just as my self-identity has moved beyond the stereotypical ‘Chineseness’ and ‘identity samples’.

That I describe musical non-linearity as ‘poetic’ and my music as a ‘space’ reveals the third important goal of my doctoral research: to invite the performers and audience into freely associating my music with their own thoughts and experience, which should be parallel to my own expression of identity and authenticity (see Chapter 3). In other words, it is my intention not to make my works explicitly about ‘my identity’ as it risks the musical discourse falling back onto the authenticity of cultural identities. Just as Samson Young argues in a case study of Tan Dun’s *Ghost Opera* (1994), a work well-known for its juxtapositions of musical quotations: an over-attention to the composer’s identity narrative distracts the audience from the music itself, which eventually (and perhaps ironically) hampers the composer’s individualism.¹⁴

Throughout my doctoral research, I have remained conscious of the likely discrepancy between what I express at the time of composing and what the audience (including myself) interpret at the time of listening. This is why I decided not to enforce any narrative in my compositions so I could free myself from realising a subject or narrative in my music, the authenticity of which would inevitably be questioned. This is the case even for my intentionally political works such as *Name It* (2020), the narrative of which expressed mainly through recognisable fragments of the names of the coronavirus rather than any intentional

¹⁴ Samson Young, ‘Reconsidering Cultural Politics in the Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Music: The Case of *Ghost Opera*’, *Contemporary Music Review*, 26.5–6 (2007), pp. 605–18 (p.616).

musical connotations. After all, is music capable of faithful expression of thoughts, if such expression is possible at all? These questions remind me of Stravinsky's words:

I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to *express* anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, or psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc. ... *Expression* has never been an inherent property of music. That is by no means the purpose of its existence.¹⁵

Some composers who hold a similar view have completely disassociated identity with their works. For example, in the composer's note for *Gougalon* (2009), Unsuk Chin writes:

Gougalon does not refer directly to the dilettante and shabby music of that street theatre. It would also be an error to believe that this piece is 'about' Korea or 'about' a certain era — I doubt that music is able to express anything other than itself.¹⁶

Such an emphatic statement first draws a clear line between the composer and her Korean identity then moves on to advice the audience not to engage in the national identity discourse. Interestingly, to achieve such disconnection with identity in her works, Chin has been consciously using cultural elements and instruments from many different parts of the world, such as in *Sŭ* (2009) for sheng and orchestra.¹⁷ Chin's works could thus be said to provide a practical example of 'negative identity': how a personal musical identity can be shaped out of the existing, fixed portraits of other identities.

As my research has developed, I have discovered a similarity between aspects of postmodernist thinking and my own creative practice, this reflecting Jonathan Kramer's remark that 'Music has become postmodern as we, its late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century listeners, have become postmodern.'¹⁸ Dirlik and Zhang's observation on Chinese postmodernist culture further validates my research goals, who note that Chinese identity has

¹⁵ Igor Stravinsky, *Igor Stravinsky, an Autobiography* (London: Marion Boyars, 1975), p. 83.

¹⁶ Unsuk Chin, programme notes in *Gougalon* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2009).

¹⁷ According to the preface to *Sŭ* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2009), 'Sŭ' is the Egyptian symbol for air. On the other hand, Sheng is a wind instrument originated from China.

¹⁸ Jonathan D. Kramer, *Postmodern Music, Postmodern Listening*, eds., Robert Carl (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 14.

become fragmented, and thus its authenticity has become contestable.¹⁹ Kramer has also suggested that postmodernists try to achieve a new kind of authenticity by embracing its contradictions — ‘high’ versus ‘low’ styles, past versus present, originality versus quotation, and more.²⁰ This approach has helped me to further articulate my compositional practice: only by moving beyond stereotypes and embracing a flexible and inclusive identity will I be released from a sense of constant doubt concerning the authenticity of my musical language.

Finally, to borrow the words of the Chinese-born American composer Liang Lei:

I admire the Chinese traditional culture and am deeply attached to it. But admittedly, my Chinese culture is an imagined one, which is not necessarily the China we see in reality. But once imagination becomes a part of the experience of reality, it may become more authentic than reality.²¹

Chapter overview

Fig. 0.1 lists the works included in my Portfolio of Compositions in chronological order. The remaining sections of this Commentary discuss these works in detail and argues for their importance in realising the research goals outlined above in this Introduction. To further elucidate the concepts of ‘identity sampling’ and ‘poetic space’, Chapter 1 discusses works that explore one particular identity sample — my stereotypical impression on pentatonicism — and the structural concept of non-linearity. Following this, Chapter 2 investigates the use of voice and related aspects such as language as a means of further exploring my cultural and personal identity. Combining outcomes from the previous sections, Chapter 3 delves into the world of improvisatory composition and investigates concepts of interaction in my more

¹⁹ Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, ‘Introduction: Postmodernism and China’, in Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang eds., *Postmodernism & China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 1–17 (p. 4).

²⁰ Jonathan D. Kramer, *Postmodern Music, Postmodern Listening*, p. 9.

²¹ Lixia Ban, Jie Yinyue Tiwen: Lianglei Yinyue Wenlun Yu Zuopin Fenxi [借音乐提问: 梁雷音乐文论与作品评析: Ask Through Music: Essays, Comments and Work Analysis of Lei Liang] (Shanghai: Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press, 2017), p. 47.

experimental works, these drawing on my experience not only of composing but also of performing my own music. This activity prompted me to consider the possibility of a renewed composer identity in which creative compositional thinking is informed, and to some extent inspired, by my parallel activities as a performer. Chapter 4 demonstrates my exploration of this new identity through my two final projects, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (2021) and *Sheng-sheng-man* (2021–2022): the first being a themed concert that reflects on identity, self-expression and life during the COVID-19 pandemic; the second being a work for mezzo-soprano and large ensemble that focuses on structuring and developing materials generated from the identity sampling process. Finally, the conclusion reviews the key concepts I employed in creating my Portfolio of Compositions and reflects on the musical language that has emerged from the experience, proposing directions for future research.

Figure 0.1: List of Works included in the Portfolio of Original Compositions

Date(s)	Title	Instrumentation	Duration	Recording supplied
2018-2019	<i>Door Gods</i>	Percussion duo	7'20"	Yes
2019	<i>Kill the Mosquitoes!</i>	2 sopranos and 1 alto	6'30"	Yes
2019	<i>Wind Spells</i>	6 performers	6'30"-9'00"	Yes
2019	<i>Tongue-Twister</i>	Solo percussions	3'40"	Yes
2019	<i>Like a Dream, Not a Dream</i>	Flute, Bb clarinet, violin, violoncello, percussions and mobile phones	10'00"	Yes
2019	<i>Dream Nostalgic</i>	Double bass, Japanese bells and live electronics	9'30"-11'00"	Yes
2019	<i>From a Saturated Memory</i>	Piccolo, viola and harp	6'00"	Yes
2020	<i>Dream - Pavilion by the Water</i>	Soprano and piano	8'00"	No
2020	<i>Sui</i>	Solo violoncello	6'00"	Yes
2020	<i>Name It</i>	Soprano and snare drum	5'20"	Yes
2020	<i>I-D-T</i>	Violoncello, joystick and electronics	9'50"	Yes
2020-2021	<i>Sound of Luck</i>	Jiao-bei and audio-visual installation	3'20"	Yes (video)
2021-2022	<i>Sheng-sheng-man</i>	Mezzo-soprano, flute/piccolo, oboe, Bb clarinet/bass clarinet, bassoon, horn in F, percussions, harp, violin, viola, violoncello, double bass	19'00"	No

Chapter 1

Poetic Space: Structuring Samples of Identity

This chapter introduces two essential concepts I have employed in my Portfolio of Compositions: (1) the ‘identity sampling process’, through which I locate ideas to reflect in my music, and (2) ‘poetic space’, a structural concept that guides me through the organisation and development of musical materials. After first accounting of the origins of identity sampling and poetic space with examples from two earlier compositional experiments, this chapter focuses on three portfolio works composed between 2018 and 2020, which strive to find alternative use of the stereotypical pentatonicism — one of the major samples from my existing cultural identity.

Identity sampling

A ‘sample’ is a part taken from the whole, which is examined as a representation of the whole. Identity, as the Introduction argues, is ever-changing; therefore the ‘whole’ we see as the identity is itself a sample of the true, dynamic one. My use of the term ‘identity sample’ is itself an act of sampling on my educational background: I studied for a BSc in economics and an MSc in management from 2011 to 2016, the knowledge and research experience gained from which inspired me in creating the term.¹

Identity sampling reveals a possible appearance of the underlying ‘truth’. According to Jonathan Harvey, ‘music explains that everything is shifting between two levels’: the ‘conventional’ and ‘ultimate’ realities. Therefore, to sample an identity that is ever-changing

¹ Influence from my social sciences background also resulted in, for example, the pre-concert survey that is discussed in Chapter 4.

— a seemingly self-contradictory act — actually serves to initiate a state of alternating realities in music. ‘It brings liberation’, says Harvey.²

To reflect as much as possible on the dynamic nature of identity, my sampling processes are ubiquitous and unremitting, and thus set the scene for my discussion on various aspects of my Portfolio of Compositions. During the compositional process, the continual sampling and validating of newly created musical materials helps achieve structural and contextual consistencies (see Chapter 2); during a performance of the finished work, the performers may also engage in sampling and reflecting on the sounds they immediately create (see Chapters 3 and 4). Furthermore, musical materials resulting from sampling may be transferred from one composition to another. Consequently, as it keeps recurring in and between different compositions, my sampling process could be said to evince a dynamic identity.

The concept of ‘identity-in-progress’ is important to my research because it emancipated me (during the first year of my doctoral studies) from a struggle in developing and structuring my music. For many years before my doctoral research, I had been employing a more linear, ‘section-by-section’ method of building a composition. Explicitly, I would usually start composing by securing the beginning and the end of a musical structure then move on to locate and connect all the other nodes in between. My experience with this strategy, however, was never completely successful as it often led to situations where at one section the connections between musical thoughts became so rigid that making a convincing merge with other sections was impossible, thus leading to the collapse of the entire line of thoughts. This difficulty in fusing different musical materials into a linear, ‘one-way’ music narrative resembled very much with that in fitting my identity into one of those cultural

² Jonathan Harvey, ‘Music, Ambiguity, Buddhism: A Composer’s Perspective’, in Max Paddison and Irène Deliège eds., *Contemporary Music: Theoretical and Philosophical Perspectives* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 281–82.

stereotypes. My urge to build a new, dynamic identity was thus reflected in my music as active research into new ways of conceptualising musical structure, which brought me to ‘non-linearity’ or, more explicitly, a non-linear organisation of musical materials.

To sample my existing identity was the first step away from linearity, as the sampling process break all links within my identity construct — the facts and presumptions, the understandings and misunderstandings — making each of its elements equally unrelated to others and thus abolishing linearity. To make an analogy using the ‘Big Bang’ theory: a singularity can be formed by stacking up all points of time in my life, just as the one which contained the entirety of our universe before the ‘Big Bang’.³ There, historical linearity does not exist: all events from the past, the present and the future become independent and free of time; all symbols point to all signs. Under this idealised context, a sample of identity *is* the identity; the identity ceases to be identifiable, and the Buddhist ‘no-self’ is achieved.

In reality, however, identity sampling is constrained by memory from the outset. To recollect memories is an action that inevitably involves historical cause and effect, the fact of which has led many composers into the so-called modernist’s struggle. ‘So: to remember, or to forget?’ asks Boulez, who continues:

The answer is neither one nor the other; it is to acknowledge a memory that is intractable, deceptive, treacherous, retrieving the ephemeral that it needs.⁴

Indeed, as I will discuss in this and later chapters, my memory is treated as it is when being sampled, no matter if it is an accurate realisation (linear) or a fantastical impression (non-linear) of my past; my analyses on personal memories never seek to claim ownership, authenticity or hierarchy. By accepting both linearity and non-linearity and thus the potential

³ Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Toronto; New York, NY; London; Sydney; Auckland: Bantam Books, 1989), p. 51.

⁴ Pierre Boulez, *Music Lessons: The Collège de France Lectures*, trans. eds., Jonathan Dunsby, Jonathan Goldman, and Arnold Whittall (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 409.

contradiction when they co-exist, the sampling process enables identity to be destroyed and reborn constantly in musical compositions. Just as Berio says:

It is precisely this detachment [from a linear and irreversible view of historical time] that allows us, on occasion, to forget or to attribute different and even conflicting values to musical works that detach themselves from the passing time.⁵

Poetic space

In 2018, the second year of my doctoral studies, I discovered the analogy to my concept of non-linearity, which I termed ‘poetic space’. In such space, that is, a free soundscape, musical ideas float around, resulting in constant fusion and fission of musical subjects, the process of which is then documented to form a composition.

The first time this concept materialised happened when I was translating from Chinese to English a poem called *Jiang-nan-chun*, or ‘Southern Landscape in the Time of Spring’, by Du Mu (803–852, Tang Dynasty).⁶ If we first translate the poem’s twenty-eight characters literally, it reads:

Figure 1.1: *Jiang-nan-chun*, Du Mu

thousand / mile / bird / chirp / green / shine / red water / village / mountain / city / wine / flag / wind southern / dynasty / four / hundred / eight / ten / temple more / less / building / palace / mist / rain / middle
--

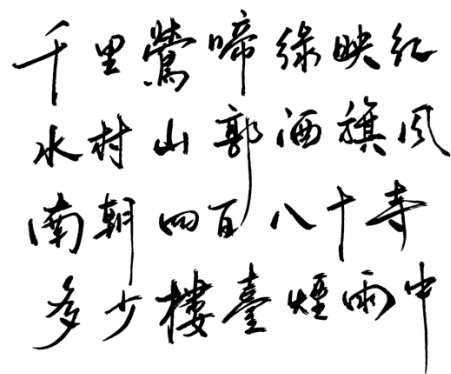
Between characters and across phrases, there is obviously considerable room for varying interpretations. I found it interesting how Du Mu managed to organise a wealth of

⁵ Luciano Berio, *Remembering the Future* (The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 64.

⁶ *Jiang-nan-chun* (江南春), Du Mu (杜牧).

subjects so they share an equal role in creating a coherent spring image. Because they originated from pictograms, Chinese characters are already rich in connotations of their own. Therefore, in the simplest terms, reading a Chinese text is like viewing a collage of pictures and interpreting their associated meaning, which could be different every time one reads it. In other words, although the poem reads from top-left to bottom-right, the connections among characters are free of order and direction, as if we can stay at a distance to the poem and view it as a unity representing a spring landscape:

Figure 1.2: *Jiang-nan-chun* calligraphy by He Qiwei



Looking at the calligraphy, an analogy between poetry and music arose in my head; although music must go through time, just like a poem in a Western language usually reads from the left to right, the way Du Mu presents materials does not need to conform to a linear narrative.⁷ For this poem, there is indeed a theme — spring — that binds all subjects in this imaginative space. Within the poem, however, the subjects are not fixed in position. How far are they from us, the birds, mountains, and temples? In such a space, the answer to this question is constantly changing. Similarly, musical ideas can be compared to the Chinese characters, each of which then becomes a distinctive symbol and an independent sample of identity.

⁷ In fact, Chinese characters are traditionally written from top to bottom, right to left. This practice was only changed after the beginning of the twentieth century.

In early 2019, I began my first experiment on ‘poetic space’. The title of the composition directly quotes the poem just discussed: *In the Mist Stand a Thousand Temples* (2019, hereafter *Temples*). As I consider this a transitional work, it has not been included in my Portfolio, but its composition provided an important stepping-stone in the development of my creative processes in relation to ideas of ‘poetic space’ which is why I include some discussion of the work here.

I set myself a clear goal from the beginning that *Temples* would seek to form a dynamic presentation rather than a still image of the poem. Thus, the focus was not so much on interpreting the individual subjects as on reflecting a changing impression of the work’s ‘poetic space’, which I constructed in three steps. First, my impressions of the poem’s subjects were collected and transformed into musical ideas, including specific intervallic colours, and harmonic and rhythmic gestures that served as ‘gem cells’ generating musical materials. Then, I explored ways of juxtaposing and combining different pieces of materials to create bigger ‘cells’. These more significant materials were put into order to form the composition’s structure.

Example 1.1:

Zhuo, *Temples*, original intervallic, harmonic and rhythmic materials

The diagram illustrates the transformation of an original musical material into three distinct motifs. On the left, the 'original intervallic, harmonic and rhythmic materials' are shown as two notes, F# and G, on a treble clef staff. A large black arrow points to the right, where three motifs are presented:

- motif 1**: An intervallic motif consisting of the notes F# and G, with a sharp sign above the G note.
- motif 2**: A harmonic motif consisting of a series of chords, each containing the notes F# and G, with a sharp sign above the G note.
- motif 3**: A rhythmic motif consisting of a series of notes, each containing the notes F# and G, with a sharp sign above the G note.

In Ex. 1.1, the minor 2nd interval shown on the left acts as the ‘gem cell’ in *Temples* in realising the titular poem’s ‘misty’ landscape. As examples, three further ideas derived from the interval are shown on the other end, namely an octave tremolo (motif 1), a chord featuring dissonant intervals (motif 2), and a rhythmic pattern played in the same pitch (motif 3). In *Temples*, juxtapositions of these materials of relatively more consonant or dissonant qualities result in a distinctive harmonic vagueness that helps the composition to achieve overall coherence.

Listening to the opening of *Temple* is like reading the poem for the first time (Ex. 1.2). This introductory phrase shows how this ‘poem’ could be read in the ‘usual order’. After this, the original materials start to appear out of ‘order’: they are passed around by the instruments, modified and combined in various ways, thus forming connections of many different kinds with each other.

Example 1.2: Zhuo, *Temples*, bars 1–5

Clarinet in B \flat

Violoncello

Piano

Left hand hitting upper rim

Right hand knocking lower board

as rapid as possible

8va

pp

mp

pp

mf

pp sub.

mp

pizz.

s.p. arco

mf

f

pp

mp

pp

mf

pp

mp

pp

mf

pp sub.

mp

To further emphasise a harmonic incongruity, a Chinese pentatonic melody can be heard at Figure C interfering with the clarinet’s statement and restatements of motif 3 (Ex.

1.3). This piano melody resembles a famous folk tune called *Yu-zhou-chang-wan*,⁸ which creates a consonant sonority that further complicates the work's harmony. Interestingly, the decision to quote folk music was initially fortuitous; when designing the intervallic material, the Chinese tune came into my mind as a sample and (rather unfortunately) a stereotypical representation of 'Chinese music'. As Ex.1.3 demonstrates, the piano melody in bars 45–48 owns a strong consonant quality (such as that created by intervals of major 2nds and perfect 4ths and 5ths) that 'compete' rigorously against the existing harmonic vagueness in bars 41–44 (of intervals such as minor 2nds and augmented 4ths), invoking a musical identity that reflects on my ambivalence towards 'traditional' music and its role in shaping a new musical language.

Example 1.3: Zhuo, *Temples*, bars 41–48

(Score in C)

41

Cl. *pp* *p* *f* *p sub.* *p* slap tongue

Vc. *p* *p* *f* *p sub.* *pp*

Pno. *mf* *p* *mf* *p* hit strings *mp*

45 **C Distantly**

Cl. *pp* *mp* *pp* *p* *pp*

Vc. *pp* *molto* senza sord s.p.

Pno. *pp* *p* *mf* *mp* (keep pedal)

⁸ Yu-zhou-chang-wan (渔舟唱晚).

Stereotypical pentatonicism

Temples explores the use of what I have called ‘stereotypical pentatonicism’, which essentially employs the anhemitonic pentatonic subset of the diatonic scale (pitch-class set 5-35, [0,2,4,7,9] with interval vector [0,3,2,1,4,0]). A class example of ‘stereotypical pentatonicism’ occurs in Debussy’s ‘Pagodes’ from *Estampes* (1903) — a harmonic construct employing a pentatonic scale built on the black keys of the piano — which is arguably the most stereotypical means of constructing the anhemitonic pentatonic scale in Western music with Western instruments tuned to Western equal temperament. Of course, if one is writing in this way, one cannot reproduce what may be possibly considered as ‘authentic’ Chinese pentatonicism, not mentioning all the nuances involved in different local variations of it.⁹ Since my adaptation of this harmonic colour of the authentic Chinese pentatonicism in *Temples* and my other compositions (such as those discussed in later sections of this chapter) aims to create an allusive and evocative atmosphere, it is arguably more a stereotype by definition rather than a quotation of original sound material.

When I first realised the stereotypical nature of some aspects of my own ‘Chineseness’, I started to become opposed to the use of ‘simple’ pentatonicism in my compositions, which risks ‘perpetuating a reductionist exoticism’ to any music that contain it.¹⁰ Having said that, I could not deny my fondness for the ‘pure sounds’ produced by the ‘pentatonic’ harmony — through juxtaposition of intervals of major 2nds and perfect 5ths — which in turn influenced my decisions on other compositional aspects, such as texture and structure. Boulez once said that we ‘create a personal language of references, a network of creative gestures that we tend to summon, and to which we refer in an emergency’.¹¹

⁹ For details of different variations of Chinese pentatonicism, see Zuyin Fan, *Pentatonic-Mode Harmony in Chinese Music: Theory and Practice* (Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, 2017), pp. 15–35.

¹⁰ Leta Miller, ‘Beneath the Hybrid Surface: Baban as a Tool for Self-Definition in the Music of Chen Yi’, *American Music*, 37.3 (2019), pp. 330–57 (p. 330).

¹¹ Pierre Boulez, *Music Lessons: The Collège de France Lectures*, p. 91.

Admittedly, the stereotypical pentatonicism had been one of the most frequently used tools in my creative ‘emergencies’. But I have strived continuously to move beyond the stereotype, as reflected through the harmonic vagueness presented in *Temples*.

During my doctoral research, I have studied a number of works by other composers featuring pentatonicism, each of which reflects the composer’s identity in a different way. Among them, Tan Dun uses some most candid quotes of folk tunes, such as those of the Western Hunan, where he was originally from, in *Ghost Opera* (1994). Compared to this, Bright Sheng’s quotation of folk tunes is more implicit. In his works, such as *China Dreams* (2001), Sheng develops a polytonal texture by juxtaposing pentatonic pitch set of different tonal centres, resulting in enigmatic, other-worldly harmonic colours. For non-melodic references, there is Chen Yi’s *Happy Rain on a Spring Night* (2004) which showcases how pentatonic-alluding intervals (major 2nd and minor 3rd) can be used idiosyncratically in delineating a chromatic soundscape.¹²

Moreover, pentatonic sonority can form part of more rigorous compositional methods, such as the one developed by Luo Zhongrong who integrates the anhemitonic pentatonic pitch set with serialism.¹³ In Luo’s method, twelve notes are divided into two groups, each forming a five-tone pitch set. Depending on how other notes are collected, the two remaining notes (the third group) will either form a perfect 5th or a tritone. These three groups of pitch materials can then be used in many different ways to reflect the composer’s identity.¹⁴

As the remaining of this chapter demonstrates, there are traces of all the above approaches in many of my portfolio compositions. Having said that, my interest in the anhemitonic pentatonic pitch set is not in inventing new material-generating devices; the

¹² Xiaoting Gong, *Shuxi Zhong de Jingqi — Chenyi Hunhe Shineiyue Chuangzuo Yanjiu* [熟悉中的惊奇—陈怡混合室内乐创作研究: *Familiar but Surprising — A Study on Chen Yi’s Mixed Chamber Compositions*] (Beijing: Central Conservatory of Music Press, 2013), pp. 43–44.

¹³ Luo’s earliest and best-known work is *She Jiang Cai Fu Rong* [涉江采芙蓉] (1979).

¹⁴ Nancy Yunwha Rao, ‘Hearing Pentatonicism Through Serialism: Integrating Different Traditions in Chinese Contemporary Music’, *Perspectives of New Music*, 40.2 (2002), pp. 190–231 (pp. 193–204).

more important question is how to use the stereotype itself in articulating a dynamic musical identity.

Pentatonicism as a structural device

A few months after completing *Temple*, I set to explore further ways in employing pentatonicism in another experiment called *Egrets* (2019). Though it is also a transitional work that I have not included in my Portfolio, *Egrets* presents my first step in integrating non-linear and linear structural concepts into one composition, the discussion of which thus provides the basis for analysing my portfolio works.

This composition uses sonic realisations of egret movements as the ‘building bricks’ and pentatonic sonority as the ‘cement’. On the one hand, my impressions of egrets (from my memories observing an egret habitat near my childhood home) are based on their movements, which naturally led to the linear transcription of visuals into sounds of different textures. For example, the beginning of the piece focuses on the egret’s wings on which feathers are gathered in folds. When wings flap, folds of feathers open and close in a chain reaction — this is represented by a sustained sound that slowly unfolds itself through textural expansion. Various rhythmic gestures, such as the feathered-beam *accelerando*, were introduced to connect between sounds. Extended techniques complicate the resulted timbres further: airy sound from the horn; the ‘slap piano strings’ effect; the ‘knock board’ and *molto sul ponticello* sounds from the cello; and so on. These contrasting materials form a useful tool in transcribing visuals into different, complex sounds. An example of this can be found in bars 19–22:

Example 1.4: Zhuo, *Egrets*, bars 19–22

19

Hn. *p* *mf* *pp*

Vln. *p* *mf* *mf* *pp*

Vc. *p* *f* *p* *f* *pp*

Pno. *p* *pp*

*pizz. while L.H. pressing the string firmly, creating a pitchless sound

molto vib. arco

Hit wood - see notes

L.H. knock upper wood

R.H. tap lower wood

L.H. relative pitch 6

L.H. relative pitch

R.H. slap strings

open

mf

tre corde

On the other hand, the structural organisation of sonic materials is informed by the concept of non-linearity and results in two correlated features. First, there are no deliberate motivic links between sections of materials to suggest an overall narrative. Second, and more importantly, an arbitrary plan of pentatonic pitch sets in the form of a chart was introduced with the aim to compensate the lack of narrative in maintaining structural coherence. As illustrated in Ex. 1.5, this chart is inspired by Zhongrong Luo's serialist method in organising pitch materials; each row contains all twelve tones divided into three collections: two pentatonic sets (both are transpositions of the pitch-class set 5-35) and a two-note group. For simplicity, I have grouped the twelve rows into three outer sets.

Despite its serialist-informed appearance, this chart is not presenting a fixed set of rules. When used, one set is chosen from the left; then, the counterpart set and the two-note group are picked from the right (within the bracket). The main interest is in how the resulting combination can form distinctive intervallic and textural materials. In the music, the establishment of one selected set would be immediately challenged by its counterpart, with

the remaining two notes either (1) forming dissonant intervals with other notes or (2) acting as ‘pivots’ to other sets containing the same note.

Example 1.5: Zhuo, *Egrets*, set chart

The image displays a set chart for a piece titled 'Egrets' by Zhuo. It consists of three main sections, each representing a different pentatonic set. Each section is labeled with a number (1, 2, or 3) on the left and contains a single musical staff followed by a brace grouping three additional musical staves. The staves are numbered 1 through 12 in total.

- Set 1:** The first staff shows a pentatonic scale starting on D4. The three staves to its right show the same scale transposed to G4, C5, and F#5.
- Set 2:** The first staff shows a pentatonic scale starting on E4. The three staves to its right show the same scale transposed to A4, D5, and G#5.
- Set 3:** The first staff shows a pentatonic scale starting on F4. The three staves to its right show the same scale transposed to B4, E5, and A#5.

Ex. 1.6 demonstrates how the pentatonic set chart is employed. The opening D and G suggest an ongoing use of ‘set 1’ from the section immediately before. However, it is swiftly replaced by ‘set 5’ which introduces new points of sonic interests. Notice the economical use of the two remaining notes F (bar 60, cello) and B (bar 63, piano); the first forms dissonant intervals with the notes that other instruments play, while the second triggers a transition to ‘set 2’ which also contains the pitch B. These actions represent one possible way of evocating a continuous stereotypical pentatonic soundscape without touching on the conventional logic of harmonic progression.

Example 1.6: Zhuo, *Egrets*, bars 60–65

The musical score for Example 1.6, Zhuo's *Egrets*, bars 60–65, is presented for five instruments: Horn (Hn.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vc.), and Piano (Pno.). The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is characterized by pentatonic sonorities and frequent set changes, indicated by arrows and labels such as 'Set 1', 'Set 5', and 'Set 2'. The Horn part begins with a box labeled 'D' and the instruction 'Spacious and warm'. The Violin part includes 'pizz.' (pizzicato) and 'arco' (arco) markings. The Viola part features 'non vib.' (non vibrato) and 'molto vib.' (molto vibrato) markings. The Piano part includes a circled section labeled 'B leads to Set 2'. Dynamics range from *p* (piano) to *f* (forte). The score includes various performance instructions like 'pizz.' (pizzicato), 'arco' (arco), 'non vib.' (non vibrato), and 'molto vib.' (molto vibrato).

While at first easily recognisable, the pentatonic sonority featured in *Egrets* become more and more fragmented as the music moves on. Set changes happen more frequently and directly, the fact of which reduces the role of the two remaining notes to pure intervallic decorations. The piece thus creates a poetic space in which the ‘bird movements’ are introduced here and there, seemingly fortuitously, via delicate streams of pentatonic ‘air’. In other words, musical representations of the bird movements are connected without deliberately suggesting a linear development at the structural level. Instead, my aim is to create music that expresses only a total, non-linear impression on egrets.

***Like a Dream, Not a Dream* (2019)**

The two compositional experiments discussed above, *Temples* and *Egrets*, suggest on potential directions to answer a key question regarding the poetic space: how to balance between linearity and non-linearity in realising a convincing musical structure. However, due to their short running time (both less than five minutes), the insights these two works could provide on shaping a more significant musical structure are limited. Hence, since the

completion of these two experiments in 2019, I gradually shifted my compositional focus onto the longer and larger works. The remaining of this chapter discusses three of such works from my Portfolio, which I wrote between 2019 and 2020.

The first piece under discussion, *Like a Dream, Not a Dream*,¹⁵ engages directly with my cultural identity by taking two identity samples, from which musical materials of different textures are generated and structured into an arc-form. Interestingly, the resulting musical materials would later be employed again for two other pieces: *From an Saturated Memory*, which is discussed in the next section, and *Dream Nostalgic*, detailed in Chapter 3. This work marks therefore the beginning of a higher-level identity sampling process.

As the title suggests, *Like a Dream, Not a Dream* aims at reflecting on the experience of an afternoon nap or siesta. As one who grew up in a near-tropical climate, I am accustomed to the siesta experience, during which sleep is light and the boundary between dreaming and awakening is most blurred.¹⁶ During a light sleep, my consciousness is present and can perceive what happens outside the body. Under this condition, I often hear a distorted mixture of real and dreamed sounds. Time becomes both faster and slower; past and present start to mingle.

When I reflected on the above experience, memories flashed back, and these became the source of the first identity sample: the village my grandparents live in and all those rustling sounds I used to hear every day around the farmhouse. When collecting memories of the sounds, I located the second identity sample, which is *Nan-yin* (or *Nan-guan*), a semi-oral music tradition rooted in my home area's culture, the performance of which I frequently encountered in the local countryside.¹⁷ Memories of these two identity samples helped me

¹⁵ Yue Zhuo, 'Experiencing Identity, Forming Poetic Space: Expression and Interaction in a Portfolio of Original Compositions' (PhD portfolio, Cardiff University, 2022), vol. 1, pp. 1–22.

¹⁶ Coincidentally, the piece was premiered in Spain during a summer afternoon, which perfectly suited the soundscape I intended to present.

¹⁷ Nora Yeh, 'Nanguan Music Repertoire: Categories, Notation, and Performance Practice', *Asian Music*, 19.2 (1988), pp. 31–70.

shape a particular soundscape that nevertheless features no direct quotes of those sounds, except that from the firecrackers. According to the village's religious practice, a strip of firecrackers should be let off after a ritual ('visiting the gods') is completed, even if it is during the village's common napping time. Therefore, my siesta dream is often disturbed by firecracker noises, making it — more than anything else — an indispensable part of my sonic impression of the half-asleep state.

By focusing on an impression rather than accurate documentation of sounds, *Like a Dream, Not a Dream* aims to reflect on my state of dreaming rather than its specific contents. To achieve this, the work borrows two features from *Nan-yin*. First, *Nan-yin* is unique for its slowly growing vocal melody, which effectively invokes a dreamy state. Specifically, in a typical work, each syllable of the vocal text is prolonged and decorated with pitch bends, usually by an interval of a 2nd, to an extent that pushes the textual meaning to the edge of falling apart. Second, within a *Nan-yin* ensemble, which usually has four instrumentalists and a vocalist, a leader will decide on the material to play and its entry point.¹⁸ Other players will then follow suit carefully, resulting in either a controlled heterophonic texture or a passing-around of musical materials.¹⁹ This particular texture suitably represents what I hear in a half-dreaming state as layers of murmuring.

In *Like a Dream, Not a Dream*, the first feature above is summarised into a major-2nd intervallic motif and its development. At the beginning, the flute introduces the motif, while other instruments sustain a quiet soundscape. The motif then develops slowly across different instruments, which hints on the second feature — a heterophonic texture. After the first climax, the music enters Figure E, where each instrument starts to loop its melodic pattern.

¹⁸ Frederick Lau, *Music in China: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Global Music Series; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 77.

¹⁹ See Yayi Cai, 'Zaixian Nanyin Changqiang Yishu Zhi Mei' [再现南音唱腔艺术之美: Reviving the Beauty of Nan-Yin Art Singing Style], in *Quanzhou Nanyin Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwenji* [泉州南音国际学术研讨会论文集: *Proceedings of Quanzhou Nan-Yin International Research Conference*] (Quanzhou: Xiamen University Press, 2014), pp. 330–36.

Since each loop has a different length, the resulting counterpoint keeps varying, thus creating a new texture that alternates between heterophony and layers of murmuring.

The texture changes again at Figure G: decorated by vocalisations, the solo cello melody introduces a contrasting pitch motif. The airy consonant noises of ‘si’ and ‘fei’ evoke an airy and mysterious atmosphere, the effect of which makes their original meanings nearly undetectable.²⁰ It is with this vagueness that, suddenly, the noises of firecrackers appear from behind the audience (Figure H, see Ex. 1.7).²¹ After the initial surprise, performers switch on their recordings on mobile phones and raise them one after one. Dramatically, the dream is interrupted by this distinctive, spatialised sonic impression of my cultural memory.

Following this, the music finally arrives at a fully heterophonic section (Figure I). The use of heterophony is more to allow organic expressions and interactions between performers than to quote the pentatonicism of *Nan-yin*. Practically, the *senza tempo* design also leaves room for contingency if anything unexpected results from the earlier use of mobile phones. After a sudden cut-off, the original half-asleep state comes back at Figure K, where the music starts preparing for its ending. Finally, at Figure L, a hardly noticeable firecracker sound appears again, which, to me, provokes a question: which sounds are from the dream and memory, and which are from the present?

From the above discussion, we see how *Like a Dream, Not a Dream* presents the siesta experience and quotes the local musical culture; the use of mobile phones is arguably the most notable form of realisation. The use of sample playback device is certainly not new: I was inspired by Rebecca Saunders’s application of radios and music box in her work *Molly’s Song 3 — Shades of Crimson* (1997) which ‘serve[s] to emphasise the provenance of

²⁰ ‘Si’(似) and ‘fei’(非) mean ‘like’ and ‘not like’, respectively; these two characters are used in the Chinese name of this piece. In the score, they appear as ‘sss’ and ‘phae’ to help non-Chinese performers to voice more intuitively.

²¹ This firecracker recording can be played by, for example, an informed audience member.

***From a Saturated Memory* (2019)**

The next portfolio work in discussion focuses on memory; it is a personal reflection on the identity sampling process and how it affects my perception of memory. The work features only one main melodic idea, a reference to the opening intervallic motif from *Like a Dream*, *Not a Dream*, which develops by constantly going back to itself. The discussion therefore focuses on how I use this single idea in structuring a poetic space.

Since the beginning of my doctoral research, the constant exploring and questioning of my existing identity has led to many new perspectives and creative possibilities. Nevertheless, I started to experience a *jamais vu*, the feeling of unfamiliarity with my daily surroundings, which is the opposite of the more familiar term *déjà vu*, the feeling of having already experienced a situation. One likely cause was the recollection of a large number of memories during the sampling process: modern technology has enabled me to access audio and visual memories in an instant. Full of these sounds and images, my mind was over-saturated; information kept flowing in and out quickly, so quickly that it became difficult to identify individual memories.

Memory, as demonstrated in previous sections, is closely related to the collection, development and organisation of musical materials. Given this, what does a ‘saturated’ memory imply? *From a Saturated Memory* was written under this condition.²³ The composition has its poetic space filled with one single idea — an unstable conglomerate of unidentifiable memories on the edge of falling apart. Each of the three instruments plays a fixed set of gestures, the free mixing of which results in changes and contrasts that shape the flow of sounds.

In order to present a state of blurriness, the music starts with a nearly monotonous pitch contour using a narrow range of pitches to form intervals of a 2nd and a 7th. Beyond

²³ Zhuo, vol. 1, pp. 23–34.

this, the bright and straightforward sound of the piccolo is constantly disturbed by the viola tremolos and harp sounds. Moreover, the piccolo line also causes constant insecurity, not only by occasionally releasing high-pitched energy (overblowing), but also by moving the stress of phrasing around via a combination of rhythmic and metric variations.

When the intervallic idea starts to develop, a musical identity begins to form. To quote Edgard Varèse: ‘Form is a result — the result of a process.’²⁴ This forming process is best observed by dividing the piccolo line into four sections. As demonstrated in Ex. 1.8, these sections all end with the same sighing, catharsis-like pitch E. One may ask: why use E? This was the outcome of sampling on my harmonic logic — with pitch C being the focal point of the pitch contour, E becomes a natural choice for ‘resolution’. The validation and acceptance of such spontaneous pitch usage were central to the update of ‘memories’ presented in this composition. This is why the pitch D, which first appears in the harp (bar 52), later becomes a part of the piccolo line. Such usages make the musical identity look both familiar and unfamiliar every time it presents, which, as Ex. 1.8 shows, results ultimately in an unstable conglomeration of sound:

Looking at the score excerpts in Ex. 1.8, one may ask: how do sections communicate with each other? Which materials develop first, and which are derived? Because *From a Saturated Memory* was very much through-composed, there is unlikely to be a straightforward answer of cause and effect to these questions. Nevertheless, it is precisely my goal to spontaneously create an unidentifiability. To quote Varèse again: ‘The entire work will be a melodic totality. The entire work will flow as a river flows.’²⁵ In the same way, I aim to present this composition as a total ‘poem’.

²⁴ Edgard Varèse and Wen-chung Chou, ‘The Liberation of Sound’, *Perspectives of New Music*, 5.1 (1966), pp.11–19 (p. 16).

²⁵ Varèse and Chou, ‘The Liberation of Sound’, p. 11.

Example 1.8: Zhuo, *From a Saturated Memory*, piccolo line in four sections

Section 1



Section 2



Section 3



Section 4



Sui (2020)

The final section of this chapter introduces one of the more experimental works in my Portfolio, which questions the meaning of structural coherence and explores an alternative way of material development. This experimental work seeks to answer the question: to what extent do I need to rely on pitch relationships, such as that form the stereotypical pentatonicism, to maintain the structure of a piece and, therefore, my musical identity?

So far, this chapter has discussed two early compositional experiments and two portfolio works. Specifically, the two small-scale experiments explore different ways to connect and re-connect different musical materials, such as by employing a plan of pentatonic pitch sets. The ideas from the experiments were then taken into the two more significant works, furthering my research in using stereotypical pentatonicism to reflect on a dynamic identity.

After two years (2018 and 2019) of engagement with the concept of ‘poetic space’, I realised that it is a ‘form of becoming’, which structures itself dynamically by constantly generating and validating the musical materials. In practice, my compositional process may start with a collection of musical materials but always not follow a fixed structural plan, or the order, of such materials. Indeed, *From a Saturated Memory* was composed without a linear structural plan while achieving connections between different musical ideas.²⁶ An interesting question thus arose: to what extent can I remove these connections? To maintain a structure — not only in terms of musical composition but also identity — how much binding force is needed?

To answer this question, I started to contemplate an extreme scenario in which the linear development of materials is at such a low level that it is only just enough to keep a from degrading into individual ideas. To use *Egrets* as an example: is it possible to remove the work’s analogy to bird movements, namely the linear development of pitch and rhythm, and still make it a work about egrets?

This question led me to musical aspects that are less associated with linearity, especially those of *Klang* — sound colours — such as timbres and sound spectrums.²⁷ These musical aspects deal with sounds at a physical level, or ‘microsound’ as Curtis Roads would

²⁶ Linearity *within* a musical idea, however, is always present.

²⁷ Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Stockhausen on Music: Lectures and Interviews*, ed. by Robin Maconie (London: Marion Boyars, 2000), pp. 65–66.

put it.²⁸ Thus they seem plausible acting as the minimum ‘binding force’ — the fundamental logic behind the organisation of musical materials, as, compared to pitch and rhythm, they are less likely to immediately suggest a linear structure.

To test this idea, I composed a piece for solo cello called *Sui* — the Chinese character for ‘fragmented’.²⁹ As its name suggests, this composition focuses on experiencing the fragmented ‘musical moments’. Stockhausen’s concept of ‘moment form’ is illuminative in this respect:

I form something in music which is as unique, as strong, as immediate and present as possible. Or I experience something. And then I can decide, as a composer or as the person who has this experience, how quickly and with how great a degree of change the next moment is going to occur.³⁰

Sui aims at preserving the experience of ‘moment’ during the compositional process. To achieve this, I made all creative decisions that I could envision at the planning stage. The first decision was on the work’s structure: each musical fragment is allocated a specific length of time. The second decision was on the musical aspect(s) to be involved in each fragment, following which I generated musical materials.

For the first decision, I developed a simple mathematic function that allows numbers (in seconds) to expand or shrink exponentially. I then decided on a structure of change and a total running time, using which I calculated the length of each fragment. Fig. 1.3 presents the overall shape, which has time in seconds as its horizontal axis; each dot on the graph represents the starting point of a fragment. To be specific, Fig. 1.4 lists the durations of the first eight fragments, which were used to estimate the number of beats to notate in each fragment, as shown in Ex. 1.9.

²⁸ Curtis Roads, *Microsound* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 20–21.

²⁹ ‘Sui’(碎); Zhuo, vol. 1, pp. 35–42.

³⁰ Stockhausen, *Stockhausen on Music: Lectures and Interviews*, p. 64.

Figure 1.3: Zhuo, *Sui*, temporal organisation of fragments

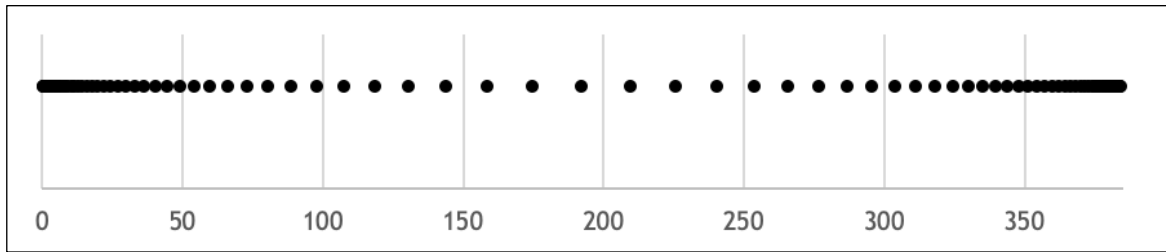


Figure 1.4: Zhuo, *Sui*, lengths of time assigned to fragments 1–6

Fragment number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Length for reference (second)	0.2	0.42	0.62	1.22	2.23	3.20	4.90	6.35

Example 1.9: Zhuo, *Sui*, application of temporal organisation, bars 1–3

Following this, I created a second model to determine each fragment's sound quality, which depends on the starting pitch, number of pitches, and timbre (realised through specific instrumental techniques). The first two variables come from the matrix shown in Fig. 1.5. Each cell consists of a letter (the starting pitch) and a number (the number of pitches), which are then used to determine the pitches to employ in each fragment in two steps: (1) the letter is taken as the starting pitch and an anhemitonic pentatonic scale is built from it; (2) the required number of pitches are then chosen randomly from this anhemitonic pentatonic subset.

To collect and organise different timbres, I made a diagram of timbral modulation, the idea of which came from Trevor Wishart's book *On Sonic Art*.³¹ This chart is used primarily as a reference rather than a 'rule' to follow. As shown in Fig. 1.6, boxes of timbres are arrayed based on affinities. Therefore, it is possible to form a 'smooth' modulation by going through boxes one by one, or to create a contrast by jumping from one box to another.

Figure 1.5: Zhuo, *Sui*, matrix of pitch and number of pitches

starting note number of notes											
G 2	C# 4	D 5	B 6	C 1	F 3	D# 5	A 2	G# 3	A# 1	E 4	F# 6
C# 6	G 2	G# 3	F 4	F# 5	B 1	A 3	D# 6	D 1	E 5	A# 2	C 4
C 3	F# 5	G 6	E 1	F 2	A# 4	G# 6	D 3	C# 4	D# 2	A 5	B 1
D# 5	A 1	A# 2	G 3	G# 4	C# 6	B 2	F 5	E 6	F# 4	C 1	D 3
D 4	G# 6	A 1	F# 2	G 3	C 5	A# 1	E 4	D# 5	F 3	B 6	C# 2
A 1	D# 3	E 4	C# 5	D 6	G 2	F 4	B 1	A# 2	C 6	F# 3	G# 5
B 5	F 1	F# 2	D# 3	E 4	A 6	G 2	C# 5	C 6	D 4	G# 1	A# 3
F 3	B 5	C 6	A 1	A# 2	D# 4	C# 6	G 3	F# 4	G# 2	D 5	E 1
F# 2	C 4	C# 5	A# 6	B 1	E 3	D 5	G# 2	G 3	A 1	D# 4	F 6
E 1	A# 3	B 4	G# 5	A 6	D 2	C 4	F# 1	F 2	G 6	C# 3	D# 5
A# 6	E 2	F 3	D 4	D# 5	G# 1	F# 3	C 6	B 1	C# 5	G 2	A 4
G# 4	D 6	D# 1	C 2	C# 3	F# 5	E 1	A# 4	A 5	B 3	F 6	G 2

Figure 1.6: Timbral modulation chart for violoncello



³¹ Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art*, ed. Simon Emmerson (Contemporary Music Studies, vol. 12, new and revised edn; Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), p. 84.

As a result, the juxtaposition of these musical fragments produces a coarseness that the audience could hardly miss. This coarseness results from a contrast between the more familiar successions of pentatonic sonorities and the more unfamiliar successions of timbres, which aims at creating a dynamic experience of non-linearity. Specifically, even though the successions of timbres were planned under a linear logic of ‘smoothness’ and ‘contrast’, the sonic results may not be easily perceptible. The audience may also look for linearity from the successions of pitches and rhythms, which can be an equally difficult endeavour. This lack of connections is intended to encourage the audience to explore actively the work’s poetic space. By the end, no matter what connection will be found or not found, the work will be considered to have achieved its goal as long as the audience has been engaging in the search for such connections.

Sui was composed in June 2020 during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Wales. That is partly why it was written for solo cello, so that I could play through and test the resulting composition myself. Switching into the performer’s mindset, I found myself looking for connections between the fragments, so that memory could form to help faster reactions to the score. This manifested in the recording as added expressiveness, random pauses between fragments, and some other deviations from the notated materials. Of course, the fact that I am the composer means that this freedom of interpretation may not be felt by another performer. Nevertheless, with its deliberately fragmented nature, *Sui* invites all future performers to engage in interpretation and thus to experience non-linearity — just as is hoped for the audience of the piece.

Sonically, *Sui* displays influences from some existing works, such as Chinariy Ung’s *Khse Buon* (2006). In his piece, Ung presents his interest in different Asian stringed instruments and organises the sound characteristics of the instruments with improvisatory

gestures in an open-ended form.³² I was particularly informed by the work's free interchange between pentatonic and chromatic sonorities, which demonstrates the plausibility of making pentatonic sounds a non-symbolic feature to support the development of other more fundamental musical functions, such as rhythmic gestures. Ung's composition thus inspired me in confirming my way of composing 'fragments', which is not to make a caricature of pentatonicism but to accept it as essential to my musical language, thus emancipating it from the shackles of stereotype.

Concluding remarks

Arguing the importance of identity sampling in generating and developing musical materials in my compositional practice, this chapter considers 'poetic space' an essential concept of non-linear structure that helps to articulate the rationale behind the way that musical materials are organised in my portfolio works. The small-scale experiments discussed earlier in this chapter use a more metaphorical approach to delineate the poetic space's possible 'appearance'. However, when writing the three portfolio works, I realised that non-linearity should be treated as a tool for expression rather than the ultimate goal. This realisation led to some more idiosyncratic approaches focusing on the experience of identity, such as that presented in *Like a Dream, Not a Dream* and *From a Saturated Memory*. Finally, the chapter closes with *Sui*, a piece that embraces the contradiction between linearity and non-linearity.

³² Adam Greene, liner notes to *Music of Chinary Ung*, vol. 1, CD, Bridge 9277 (2006), p. 3.

Chapter 2

Voice, Language and Expression

This chapter focuses on my ‘vocal identity’, an essential constituent of my perception of ‘self’: what I *voice*, including language and non-language, intelligible and unintelligible expressions, and the pure sonic features of all these voices. The discussion begins by defining human voice and introducing a relationship framework of the various concepts involved. Based on this framework, it goes on to describe the sampling process of my vocal identity. Four portfolio works are introduced along the way to demonstrate how I have reflected upon the samples of my vocal identity and how I have expressed them musically.

Sampling vocal identity: a framework

The human voice is one of the most natural and effective tools for expression. It is vital to my identity research since, as Utz and Lau suggest, how and what I voice are direct results of my identity.¹ Philosophically, when it comes to defining how we perceive the human voice, I found Roland Barthes’s categorisation helpful, which separates the voice into *pheno-song* and *geno-song*:

- *pheno-song* — ‘communication, representation, and expression’
- *geno-song* — the above’s counterpart, the ‘apex [...] where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work’²

Essentially, *pheno-song* includes language and emotional expression, while *geno-song* focuses on the sonic and musical aspects of the voice. It is important to note that emotion and

¹ Christian Utz and Frederick Lau, ‘Introduction: Voice, Identities, and Reflexive Globalization in Contemporary Music Practices’, in Christian Utz and Frederick Lau eds., *Vocal Music and Contemporary Identities: Unlimited Voices in East Asia and the West* (New York, NY; London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1–22.

² Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1987), p. 182.

language are both *pheno-song*. Meanwhile, the perception of *geno-song* must involve analyses on many factors such as pitch, speed, loudness and sound quality.³ This analysis invites one to treat vocal sounds as any other sounds used in musical expression, on which Hanslick's thought applies:

[...] music expresses neither definite nor indefinite emotions; if it expresses anything it is the shaping of the musical idea, in purely musical terms. Because this is a dynamic process, it appears also to evoke the dynamic character of the emotions.⁴

Following Hanslick's idea, it can thus be argued that the process of associating *geno-song* with *pheno-song* can result in a dynamic musical expression that I can use to reflect on a dynamic identity (the concept of which explained in Chapter 1).

How does the above process apply to my perception and interpretation of voice? First and foremost, my perception is undoubtedly framed by the logic of the Chinese languages, for which one of the most distinctive elements (in terms of *geno-song*) is intonation. Simply put, in Chinese languages, intonation is a separate and equally important system of meaning to that of pronunciation. This attribute leads to a profound implication: for example, there is research suggesting that, upon hearing different versions of an English utterance, native Chinese speakers will pick up differences in intonation contours, even though intonation is not crucial to the literal meaning of English.⁵ Such research suggests that intonation can play an essential role in understanding the voice under both *pheno-* and *geno-song*, which has prompted me to explore the potential of intonation in infusing lingual and musical expressions in works such as *Kill the Mosquitoes!*. Sonically, intonation is about pitch level

³ Norman D. Cook, *Tone of Voice and Mind: The Connections between Intonation, Emotion, Cognition, and Consciousness* (Advances in Consciousness Research series, vol. 47; Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Pub, 2002), p. 101.

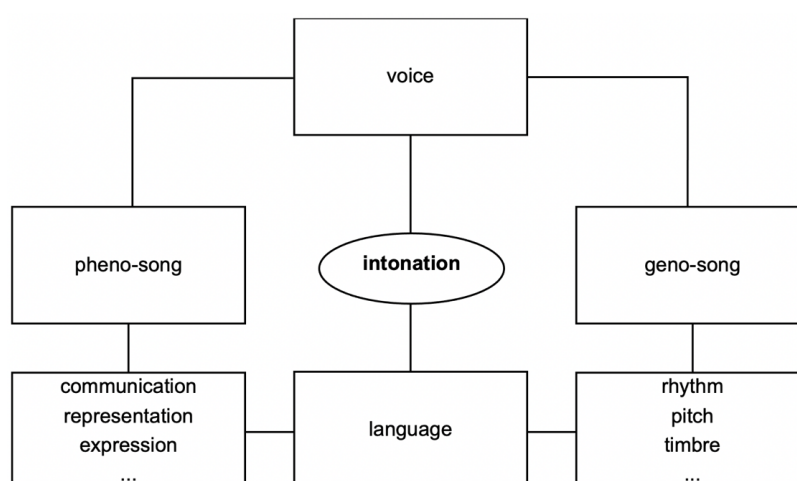
⁴ Nancy Kovaleff Baker, Max Paddison, and Roger Scruton, 'Expression', *Grove Music Online* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09138>>. [accessed 4 May 2020]

⁵ Esther Grabe et al., 'Perception of English Intonation by English, Spanish, and Chinese Listeners', *Language and Speech*, 46.4 (2003), pp. 375–401 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/00238309030460040201>>. [accessed 6 May 2020]

change in voice at a specific rate.⁶ Based on this definition, one may infer that each particular combination of these two factors — pitch and speed — can be associated with a *pheno-song*. On the contrary: since Chinese dialects feature a system of relative intonation, a specific intonation may be interpreted differently, depending on its relative position to the entire pitch contour of a vocal passage rather than its absolute pitches. In my portfolio compositions, there are various applications of the idea of relative-pitch intonation such as those in *Tongue-Twister* and *I-D-T*, which also explore the potential of instrumental sounds in realising intonations and therefore voice and language.

Fig. 2.1 is a diagram that summarises a possible relationship framework of voice, including *geno-song*, *pheno-song* and other related concepts mentioned before. As shown, intonation is in the middle, acting as the point of interest — a sample of my vocal identity. Naturally, other vocal features have taken that place during my PhD research; this is self-evident from the following discussion of my portfolio works. Nevertheless, intonation as an identity sample is discussed first, since it has played an essential role in connecting all other points of interest.

Figure 2.1: Framework of voice



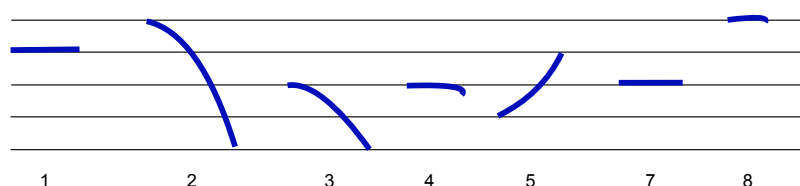
⁶ Daniel Büring, *Intonation and Meaning* (Oxford Surveys in Semantics and Pragmatics, vol.3; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1–6.

Kill the Mosquitoes! (2019): intonation as geno-song

When I first started sampling my identity, I became especially interested in the Min-nan dialect of my home city Xiamen.⁷ My original attitude towards the dialect was nevertheless ambivalent. Despite growing up in Xiamen, I cannot claim the dialect as my first language: I was born in the early 1990s when Chinese Mandarin was heavily promoted all over China (People's Republic of). The promotion of Mandarin relegated the dialect to the 'earthy' and 'uneducated', effectively removing the dialect from most corners of my life.⁸ Meanwhile, language influences from foreign cultures such as British (through mandatory English class in school) and Japanese (through cartoon and pop music) drew my attention further away from the local dialect. Consequently, when I started to realise its fundamental importance to my vocal identity and decided to compose vocal works using the dialect, I had to rediscover this 'familiar stranger'.

The Min-nan dialect has eight tones, making it more versatile than the four-tone Chinese Mandarin and more challenging to articulate accurately.⁹ The simplified diagram Fig. 2.2 shows a scientific approach to analysing the dialect by intonational phonologists. Essentially, the diagram delineates the contour of each intonation:¹⁰

Figure 2.2: The Min-nan dialect tone diagram



⁷ 'Min-nan-hua' (闽南话: Min-nan dialect). 'Min' is the short name for Fujian province, where traces of many ancient Chinese cultures are preserved. Users of the Min-nan dialect can also be found in south China and worldwide, especially in Southeast Asian countries.

⁸ Fortunately, the government eventually decided to revive it later in the 2000s.

⁹ See Changji Zhou, *Minnan Fangyan Yu Wenhua* [闽南方言与文化: Min-Nan Dialect and Culture] (Beijing: Zhongguo Guoji Guangbo Chubanshe, 2014).

¹⁰ This diagram only shows seven tones, which represents the dialect's use in the Xiamen area. The sixth tone is missing as it is only used in Quanzhou, a specific city.

Upon discovering such a diagram, I immediately noticed the potential of transcribing it into musical notations. Furthermore, since intonation is perceived relatively, it is more intuitive to present it with relative pitch notation. This idea is certainly not new: many contemporary vocal compositions feature the relative pitch notation, such as Berio's *Sequenza III* (1965). Some instrumental compositions notated with relative pitch also caught my interest, such as *Workers Union* (1975) by Louis Andriessen. What I found the most relevant, however, are some Chinese vocal compositions that use relative pitch *de facto*. A good example of this is Chen Qigang's *Poème lyrique II* (1990), in which Chen notates the shapes and lengths of the numerous operatic pitch shifts accurately. These pieces (and many more) have helped me establish my method of relative pitch notation quickly.

Kill the Mosquitoes! for two sopranos and one alto is the first portfolio composition resulted from the above research.¹¹ This composition has two objectives, which my discussion will address separately:

1. To create an impression of Min-nan intonation rather than an imitation.
2. To reflect on my experience of relearning the Min-nan dialect.

To be more specific on the first objective: when designing the pitch contours, I consciously disregarded the *pheno-song* of intonation, removing links between texts and their associated vocal sounds. It can be noticed from the score that the piece achieves intonation through:

1. Direct imitation of pitch contours: portamenti (with different speeds and intensities) enclosed by solid noteheads with crossed stems.

¹¹ Yue Zhuo, 'Experiencing Identity, Forming Poetic Space: Expression and Interaction in a Portfolio of Original Compositions' (PhD portfolio, Cardiff University, 2022), vol. 1, pp. 43–66.

2. Dynamic perception of pitch contours: discrete notes (in groups) with crossed noteheads.

The first method is common compositional practice and can easily lead to association with obviously emotional or dramatic contents. I was very much aware of the possible risk of myself being considered as outright expressive. Therefore, I was determined to focus only on the sonic outcome rather than its emotional content when designing the shape of portamenti, experimenting with different inner structures by layering portamenti vertically. Ex. 2.1 shows how possible associations with expressive meaning are ‘smudged’ by juxtaposing contours of different lengths and directions. This technique is used chiefly in the first half of the composition. On the other hand, the second method, employing crossed noteheads, is used more widely in the piece, saving the potentially more expressiveness-causing portamenti for the most important places.

Example 2.1: Zhuo, *Kill the Mosquitoes!*, bars 10–12

10 **A**

mp *f* *mp* *sf* *p*

long sa oh ya! pa hsi tse lor

p *sf* *mf* *f* *sfz*

heh ong heh ong ya

p sub. *f* *p* *mf* *f* *mf*

bong heh bong ong dong bong bong

More Stable
♩ = 72

♩ = 72

♩ = 72

The flexibility presented in *Kill the Mosquitoes!* is deeply connected with the way the music is notated. Firstly, the crossed noteheads represent *Sprechstimme* with a ‘more speaking-like sound’. This instruction inevitably results in indeterminacy in pitch changes, as the exact way a singer enters and leaves a note is not specified. Thus each *Sprechstimme* note represents an indeterminate intonation. Evidently, Schoenberg noted this possibility in the

performance notes of the first printed edition of *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912): '[...] speaking tone gives the pitch but immediately leaves it again by falling and rising'.¹² Interestingly, when these intonation-like gestures are juxtaposed, they create possibilities for unexpected textural and timbral outcomes even if singers have the same notated materials (such as in bars 5–8) since different singers have different vocal characteristics and pitch ranges.

Secondly, having realised the inevitable indeterminacy in intonation, I designed the pitch contours to provide a certain amount of mental guidance to help the singer to 'stay on track' while producing Min-nan-style intonations. Without going into too much detail in a tedious demonstration of how I match the contour with every single intonation, a critical observation from the dialect's tone diagram (Fig. 2.2) can help to summarise my effort succinctly: note that there are more falling tones (four out of eight, either continuously or towards the end) than rising (only one) or flat tones (two). Consequently, the piece features more falling gestures.

The alto line in bars 20–23 can serve as an example (Ex. 2.2). In the first bar, the accents on the two highest notes 'force' the vocal pitch to fall because a rising voice would otherwise require more energy towards the end. The *subito piano* further enhances this effect. In contrast, the second bar presents a case in which the resulting intonations are hard to predict, as the dynamic is now working against the pitch contour. After this, the much more stable third and fourth bars feature three flat tones and a contour that leads to a rising tone by the end.

¹² Arnold Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op.21 (Los Angeles: Belmont Music Publishers, 1990), preface, quoted in Aidan Soder, *Sprechstimme in Arnold Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire: A Study of Vocal Performance Practice* (USA: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), pp. 10–11.

Example 2.2: Zhuo, *Kill the Mosquitoes!*, bars 20–23, alto



So far, I have demonstrated how I achieve the piece’s first objective by focusing on presenting the *geno-song* of Min-nan intonation. The discussion now moves on to comment on the second objective — to reflect on the language-learning process, which is inherently expressive.

A summary of this work’s expression is *anxiety*. Sonic materials and texts are organised in a structure that reflects on what Aperghis called ‘mental miniatures’ when discussing his *14 Récitations* (1977–78):

We see people in their daily life struggle, people who are fragile, people who have trouble expressing themselves — elusive mental portraits en miniature.¹³

In my case, I struggled with speaking the Min-nan dialect, something I had hoped would articulate my identity better. Consequently, the text I designed for the piece reflects on my fragile and vague vocal identity. It demonstrates influences from multiple languages such as Chinese Mandarin and Japanese, for the historical reason discussed earlier in this section. When designing the text, I chose to be frank about these influences on my existing identity, therefore reflecting on the difficulty I experienced in pinning down the Min-nan dialect.

The distinct features of these languages are often subtle and difficult to identify. For example, the syllables ‘bong’ and ‘dong’ are exclusive to Mandarin but can be easily mixed up with the Min-nan dialect’s ‘long’ and ‘ong’. More open to the performer’s interpretation

¹³ Erin Gee, ‘The Notation and Use of the Voice in Non-Semantic Context: Phonetic Organisation in the Vocal Music of Dieter Schnebel, Brian Ferneyhough, and George Aperghis’, in Christian Utz and Frederick Lau eds., *Vocal Music and Contemporary Identities: Unlimited Voices in East Asia and the West* (New York, NY; London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 175–99 (p. 194).

are syllables such as ‘pa’, ‘sa’, ‘la’, ‘ya’ and ‘ka’, which deliberately leave out features that could imply any specific language, resulting in flexibility for the vocalists to associate each syllable with their own language background. For example, ‘la’ could be associated with the Mandarin ‘la’, the Min-nan ‘lah’ or the Japanese ‘ra’ — the rich possibilities of interpretation can arguably result in a multifaceted vocal identity.

Figure 2.3: Source languages of the text *Kill the Mosquitoes!*

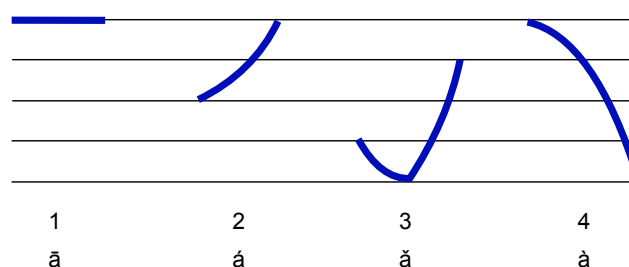
Syllables	Min-nan dialect	Chinese Mandarin	Japanese
ai	•	•	•
ang	•	•	
buo		•	
bong, dong, pong		•	
dou		•	
hsi	•		
long, ong	•	•	
loh	•		
mae	•	•	•
mang	•	•	
mee, yee	•		
meh	•		•
pa, sa, la, ya, ka	•	•	•
tsu			•
tse, tsey	•		

Fig. 2.3 provides a further summary of the possible source language(s) of each syllable. Notice that, apart from the three Min-nan words ‘pa’ (to hit), ‘hsi’ (dead), and ‘mang’ (mosquito), all other syllables do not intend to deliver specific meaning. Moreover, the vocalisation is at place aided by clapping. When this action occurs, ‘pa’ is also voiced by the singers; this word means ‘to hit’ but can also be treated as an onomatopoeia to the clapping sound. This creates an interesting case of ‘mutual reference’ between ‘instrumental’ (clapping) and vocal sounds, which is addressed in detail over the next section.

***Tongue-Twister* (2019): instrumental pheno-song**

Kill the Mosquitoes! explores the possibility of employing only the *geno-song* of intonation. Continuing from this, the next work under discussion, *Tongue-Twister*,¹⁴ looks into the potential of non-vocal instruments in representing intonation *pheno-song*. This composition is for solo percussionist, which was written a few months after *Kill the Mosquitoes!*, and demonstrates a further interest in intonation. This time, I used the four tones of Chinese Mandarin in creating materials (see Fig. 2.4 for its intonation chart).¹⁵ One notable feature of this work is its rhythmic-structural design, which was first a response to the titular subject, but later retained as a feature for further exploration. Thus the discussion about this work also provides a background for later discussion on rhythmic topoi in this chapter.

Figure 2.4: Tone diagram for Chinese Mandarin



Tongue-Twister came out of an opportunity to write for a percussionist. This time, I faced a new challenge, as the event organiser provided only a limited list of percussion instruments, including marimba, pairs of woodblocks, temple blocks and bongos. I was fortunate to have the percussionist agree to do vocalisation, but this did not stop me from taking up the challenge of realising the idea of intonation using percussion instruments.

¹⁴ Zhuo, vol. 2, pp. 1–8.

¹⁵ The Chinese *Hanyu Pinyin* system labels the intonations over the vowels, as demonstrated in Fig. 2.4 on the four /a/.

When contemplating the exact format of realisation, I recalled a sound installation created by Peter Ablinger that I encountered at the 2014 Shanghai Biennale. The work is titled *The Truth or: How to Teach the Piano Chinese* (2014). It features a piano controlled by a computer programme that ‘teaches’ the piano to mimic human sounds from reading a Chinese phrase that means ‘truth’, which is realised by clusters.¹⁶ What I found interesting is the relationship between language and the instrumental sounds, which, according to Ablinger, served as an analogy to the relationship between language and ‘speech’:

Language appears to want to teach its opposite ‘truth’ – or more generally ‘speech’. But this opposite – the piano? – responds only with simple musical figures that do not sound even remotely like language; this in turn drives language – the ‘governess’ – to ever greater zeal. But the louder and more hysterical the indoctrination becomes, the quieter – ‘dumber’ – is the musical response.¹⁷

From Ablinger’s description, we can conclude that his work presents a failed case of deliberate language learning, that the sounds generated on the piano ‘do not sound even remotely like language’. Ablinger’s idea resonates with my observation on the relationship between the identity given to a person (through education, culture and nationality) and constructed by the person (from unique experience). On the one hand, language is first and foremost a ‘given’ identity. On the other, as I have demonstrated in *Kill the Mosquitoes!*, this given identity may dissolve into a more complicated and difficult-to-articulate ‘speech’ construct.

A similar situation occurred again when composing *Tongue-Twister*. Initially, I attempted to use the marimba — the only pitched instrument on the list — to produce tone clusters mimicking voice with different intonations. But I quickly found myself spending much time configuring the likeness of clusters to Chinese Mandarin, a process that never

¹⁶ ‘Shí-shì-qiú-shì’(实事求是).

¹⁷ Peter Ablinger, ‘The Truth or: How to Teach the Piano Chinese’, Peter Ablinger website (2014) <https://ablinger.mur.at/txt_qu3truth.html> [accessed 28 June 2021].

produced a satisfactory outcome. At that point, I realised I had essentially proven Ablinger's conclusion again: ironically, in trying to 'teach' the instrument, I became the 'governess'.

Coincidentally, the texts Ablinger and I used share one important commonality: they both use only the second (rising) and fourth (falling) tones in Mandarin Chinese. This limitation may explain why both of us failed (though intentionally on Ablinger's part), considering we were both trying to use fixed-pitch instruments to imitate continuous pitch shifts. Yet the real question here is: what is the point of imitating voice? To ask a more general question: should I associate instrumental sounds with vocal expression and language when composing and listening to music?

Adorno has provided a decisive answer to these questions:

Music suffers from its similarity to language and cannot escape from it. Hence, it cannot stop with the abstract negation of its similarity to language. The fact that music, as language, imitates — that on the strength of its similarity to language it constantly poses a riddle, and yet, as nonsignifying language, never answers it — must, nevertheless, not mislead us into erasing that element as a mere illusion.¹⁸

He further pointed out that

[a]rt comes closer to the idea of freedom from appearance by perfecting that appearance than it would by arbitrarily and impotently suspending it. Music distances itself from language by absorbing its peculiar strength.¹⁹

Powered by Adorno's point of view, I reconfirmed my motivation in composing a piece on a tongue-twister. The following discussion shows how I achieved the updated objective in the completed work: to build a musical subject based on the essence of a tongue-twister (i.e., the 'peculiar strength') rather than a pure imitation of it.

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno and Susan Gillespie, 'Music, Language, and Composition', *The Musical Quarterly*, 77.3 (1993), pp. 401–14 (p. 410).

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno and Susan Gillespie, 'Music, Language, and Composition', p. 410.

Tongue-Twister presents an impression of the chosen text’s intonation, primarily through a pair of woodblocks and a pair of bongos. They can present the most crucial element of the Mandarin’s *geno-song* — the immediate pitch that happened at the instant of producing an intonation, for they produce relative pitches that come with short attack and decay. This idea follows Barthes’s definition of *geno-song* — the melody heard at the ‘apex’ of its work on language; it also confirms Schoenberg’s idea of a pitch resulting from *Sprechstimme*, which appears only instantly, before a rising or falling of pitch happens.

The tongue-twister I chose for the composition is ‘*Four is four ...*’. It uses two tones from the Mandarin intonation — the rising and falling tones. Fig. 2.5 shows the complete tongue-twister:

Figure 2.5: Source text of *Tongue-Twister*

四是四	Sì Shì Sì	four is four
十是十	Shí Shì Shí	ten is ten
十四是十四	Shí Sì Shì Shí Sì	fourteen is fourteen
四十是四十	Sì Shí Shì Sì Shí	forty is forty

As shown, the challenge of this tongue-twister lies in the fast alternations, not only those between the rising and falling tones but also those between the flat ‘s’ (/s/) and retroflex ‘sh’ (/ʃ/) sounds. Therefore, it can be argued that tongue-twisters are natural irony on the source language, as they highlight the difficulty of using the language to articulate some specific meanings. Furthermore, Somoff suggests that

[G]iven the requirement of the genre for repetition and acceleration, no one is exempt from inevitable failure. This failure, however, is a significant one, evincing as it does the tongue twister’s connection to the process of child language acquisition.²⁰

²⁰ Victoria Somoff, ‘Four Is Not Fourteen: Tongue Twister Patterns and the Unmastery of Language’, *Western Folklore*, 73.2/3 (2014), pp. 195–215 (p. 211).

In the political context, tongue-twisters celebrate the inability to use a language correctly: when one makes a mistake reading a tongue-twister, it is considered comical, which arguably has more social value than an attempt without mistakes. Consequently, *Tongue-Twister* ‘celebrates the mistakes’ — not by asking the percussionist to make real mistakes but to play through a designed narrative that signifies difficulty in learning the tongue-twister. This difficulty reflects yet another, rather political issue of my vocal identity — an ambivalence towards Chinese Mandarin, whether it is possible to articulate my self using this ‘official’ language that is hard to master.²¹

Tongue-Twister presents the percussionist as a ‘learner’ who shares my concern about vocal identity. The work is notated using a three-staff system, which divides the learner’s experience into three parts: learning of the tongue-twister from the unpitched percussions, musical comments from the marimba, and the expressive response from the vocalisation. The following discussion will show how the latter two parts serve to reflect and further interpret the first ‘learning’ part.

To begin with, temple blocks and bongos appear on the middle staff, which represents the sounds articulated by the learner. The illustration of the work’s opening in Ex. 2.3 provides an example of the musical materials derived from the intonations of the tongue-twister. The corrupted instrumental impression of the intonations plays a major role in signifying difficulty in language learning. On the other hand, the marimba (on the bottom staff) reacts to the ‘learner’s voice’ in a reflective manner, providing either melodic contours that signify intonations, or intervallic ideas that are open to interpretation. In Ex. 2.4, the marimba always reacts to the top two lines with falling intervals.

²¹ It is especially hard for people living in South China to articulate Mandarin — originally a northern dialect — perfectly, due to influences from their own southern dialects. This fact often leads to implicit discrimination, however subtle.

Example 2.3: Zhuo, *Tongue-Twister*, bars 1–4

Temple Blocks
Bongos

4 4 4
mf < *f*

2 4 2
p

2 4 4 2 4
f 3 *mp* *f*

4 2 4 4 2
p

2 = rising tone, 4 = falling tone

Example 2.4: Zhuo, *Tongue-Twister*, bars 21–23

f
hmm?

mf < *f*

p

f

whisper
p
ahh

gibberish
p
...

whisper
mf
ahh

3 3 3
p

mf

Figure 2.6: Vocalisation text, *Tongue-Twister*

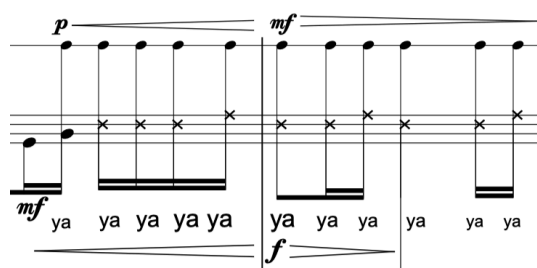
Allophones	Intonation
hmm	rising
sss	flat
ya	falling
ahh	quick falling (whisper)

On the top staff, the performer’s vocalisation provides some of the most expressive materials. As shown in Fig. 2.6, the vocalisation features only four allophones, each assigned to a particular intonation. Since allophones present no linguistic meaning themselves, they can potentially lead to associations with different emotions and contexts. As a result, the

audience can interpret the vocalisation freely to form their own impressions on the learning process.

Corresponding to this limited collection of vocal materials is a deliberate visual simplicity in vocal scoring (see Ex. 2.5). This feature aims to keep the score easy to understand for the percussionist. Specifically, to avoid overloading the performer with information, the top staff for vocalisation uses only one line, thus providing no detail of pitch levels. Instead, the line features a mixture of vocal gestures, such as whispering and specific dynamic changes, which intuitively suggest the direction of intonations. A follow-up feature is the changing font sizes of the texts, which correspond to the changes in vocal dynamic. With these assistances, the percussionist is able to achieve the desired vocal expressions while focusing on the more demanding instrumental parts.

Example 2.5: Zhuo, *Tongue-Twister*, bars 16–17



Structurally, the composition comprises two sections. In the first section (bars 1–38), the imagined learner tries out the tongue-twister time after time. The same musical material thus occurs repetitively in different variations. After this period of ‘trial-and-error’, the learner finally decides to put the tongue-twister into practice. The second section starts from Figure C, which begins with five rounds of accelerando that brings the tongue-twisting to double speed and ultimately ‘as fast as possible’. Regardless of the thin texture resulting from the economical use of instrumental and vocal sounds, this ever-accelerating passage builds up

a sense of tension before being cut off unexpectedly. The resulting theatricality makes the passage an important part of the work's overall structure.

The above discussion demonstrates, in terms of both *pheno-* and *geno-song*, how *Tongue-Twister* creates multi-layered impressions of a language and its learning process. At first, the temple blocks and bongos represent the actual tongue-twister, which, upon being heard, suggests a semantic meaning to those who are Chinese speakers. Even so, this *pheno-song* may be hard to perceive for non-Chinese speakers, at least at the beginning of the piece.

Later, as the tempo and rhythm intensify, a dramatic tension builds up and establishes a layer of *pheno-song* that is not language-specific. This *pheno-song* comes from the social and political implications of the 'tongue-twister' as a cultural product. In other words, instead of the instrumental impression of intonation, it is the changes in rhythm and tempo that all listeners may be able to associate with the *pheno-song*: expressions, emotions and meanings.

Name It (2020): a vocal–instrumental caricature

The experience of composing the above two works has made me more aware of the importance of rhythm, tempo and metric designs and their relationships to the voice in terms of expression. In *Tongue-Twister*, the use of accelerating gestures was at first a structural idea. Nevertheless, the dramatic effect inherent to such a gesture soon caught my interest, as it demonstrates influences from the 'rhythmic topoi' used in Chinese operatic and musical art.

Acceleration is a common feature of many traditional vocal art forms across the world. It is also commonly found in the performance of a tongue-twister, with the apparent purpose to achieve theatricality. In many branches of Chinese operatic art, the use of rhythmic acceleration and deceleration is essential in achieving a smooth transition of emotional energy. Different narrative situations and their corresponding rhythmic patterns are summarised into rhythmic topoi, each of which comes with a specific name.

For example, in Chen Qigang's *Poème lyrique II*, the composer uses an accelerating rhythm inspired by the 'Ji-Ji-Feng' topos from Beijing opera. It appears first as individual rhythmic gestures in the vocal line and then develops into a structural device, driving the entire ensemble to the piece's emotional climax.²² A much more straightforward use of the 'Ji-Ji-Feng' topos is found in the fifth movement of Guo Wenjing's *Parade* (2003) for three pairs of bo (hand cymbals), a piece informed by Guo's experience with Sichuan opera.²³ Here, the rhythmic material is shared among all three players in both cymbal playing and vocalisation, achieving a similar exchange of musical identities to that in *Tongue-Twister* between the instrument and voice.²⁴

Compared to these more senior Chinese composers, my roots in the operatic tradition are admittedly superficial, as I grew up without much chance to watch traditional opera in person, not to mention the chance to participate in its creation. My knowledge of Chinese operatic art came mainly from textbooks, television, and popular cultures that quote (often stereotypically) the art. With these limited pieces of information, I was at least able to notice the connections between the operatic tradition and some more prevalent vocal practices, such as poem reciting and religious chanting, which I had observed or participated in before.

Traces of exploration of the rhythmic topoi can already be found in works I completed before *Name It*, both in and out of my portfolio. *Egrets*, the compositional experiment discussed in Chapter 1, employs rhythmic materials with feathered beams throughout the piece; *Door Gods*, which Chapter 3 discusses, contains some more expressive and even stereotypical usages, such as the 'laughing' gesture immediately before timecode 5'50".

²² Nancy Yunhwa Rao, 'The Tradition of *Luogu Dianzi* (Percussion Classics) and Its Signification in Contemporary Music', *Contemporary Music Review*, 26.5–6 (2007), pp. 511–27 (pp. 517–19).

²³ Jiti Li and Xin Tong, 'Sanchongzou Xi De Yinyue Yuuyan Fenxi' [三重奏《戏》的音乐语言分析: Analysis of Musical Language in *Drama* for Percussion Trio], *Journal of Central Conservatory of Music*, 3 (1999), pp. 88–94 <<https://doi.org/10.16504/j.cnki.cn11-1183/j.1999.03.012>>. [accessed 7 July 2020]

²⁴ Luxin An, *Guowenjing Yinyue Chuangzuo Yanjiu* [郭文景音乐创作研究: *A Study on Guo Wenjing's Musical Compositions*] (Beijing: Central Conservatory of Music Press, 2012), p. 41.

These references to rhythmic topoi reflect my earlier interests in drama and theatricality, which I explored further in the new composition.

Name It, for soprano and snare drum, can be considered the third ‘episode’ of my experiment using voice and percussion instruments,²⁵ following *Door Gods* (for nine instruments) and *Tongue-Twister* (for three instruments). Interestingly, the number of available instruments decreased once again — this time to only the snare drum. The COVID-19 pandemic was the cause of this limitation, which also resulted in the rehearsals and final performance of the work being carried out online.

Name It expresses my concern for the controversies involved in the naming of the new Coronavirus. Despite the official name being COVID-19, the virus received all kinds of discriminatory epithets. I was especially concerned with the ones that involved ‘Wuhan’ and ‘China’; the more I felt against these discriminations, the more I noticed and struggled with them. Under this situation, I experienced again what Adorno says: ‘[I]dentities are always the result of a negation, a recoil from an unreconciled, unemancipated state.’²⁶ In other words, the struggle with discrimination catalysed the formation of a clear Chinese identity.

In the Introduction, I have discussed ‘Chineseness’, the negation of which has resulted in works such as *Sui* that employ stereotypical texts and sounds to create a satire on the stereotypical identity itself. Similarly, *Name It* aims at presenting a caricature, but this time in defending the Chinese identity from COVID-related discriminations.

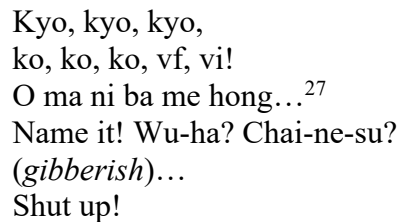
In order to express such strong emotions, I first resolved to deconstruct the language. I deliberately used fragments of the discriminatory names as materials to provoke a sense of irony. Syllables from the three names of the virus — including ‘COVID’ — are sung by the

²⁵ Zhuo, vol. 2, pp. 9–20.

²⁶ Eric Oberle, *Theodor Adorno and the Century of Negative Identity* (Cultural Memory in the Present series; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), p. 4.

soprano and occasionally the percussionist. As shown in Fig. 2.7, the constructed lyrics reflect on a sense of anger, anxiety and helplessness:

Figure 2.7: Text for *Name It*



Kyo, kyo, kyo,
ko, ko, ko, vf, vi!
O ma ni ba me hong...²⁷
Name it! Wu-ha? Chai-ne-su?
(gibberish)...
Shut up!

Next, I created an emotional space by combining the lyrics in Fig. 2.7 with pitch and rhythmic gestures learned from earlier compositional experiments. For example, the piece begins with ‘kyo’, which the soprano iterates faster and faster, building up a dramatic expectation immediately. This idea was taken from *Tongue-Twister* in presenting a speaking task that one will inevitably fail: when a syllable is iterated so quickly, it is naturally impossible to keep each articulation clear, thus creating an irony of the name that the syllable implies. Later in the piece, the inability to articulate is realised through undetermined ‘gibberish’ that often mixes with a quick shift of pitches (such as at Figure D). Together, these features form a quarrelsome, anxious musical identity.

The percussionist is vital to the creation of ‘quarrels’; he or she competes against the soprano throughout the piece in various ways. At the beginning of the piece, the first accelerating vocal gesture is disrupted by a percussion attack, so that the vocal energy can build up again in the second bar before the percussion disrupts it a second time. This repetition is not continued: in bar 3, the snare drum joins the soprano to produce the same rhythmic gesture, which effectively merges the two sound identities into one, however temporarily.

²⁷ See p. 60 for an explanation of this line of text.

At Figure A, the source of drama changes again: the drum roll acts as a background to the vocal conversation between the soprano and percussionist, heralding, in a stereotypical fashion, the arrival of some dramatic event. To the contrary, the music moves on to complicate the conversation further. The different textures, timbres and contrapuntal designs featured in the conversation take lessons from works such as Beat Furrer's *Lotófagos* (2006), which combines the musical identities of the soprano and double bass to form a peculiar 'voice' that is pure and distorted at the same time. In Furrer's piece, it is impossible to tell if the voice is imitating the instrument or vice versa; actually, such distinction is unnecessary as the combined identity is convincing. In contrast, my piece intends to keep the identities of the soprano and percussionist in conflict or, at best, confused.

During the first half of *Name It* (before Figure D), the important syllables from the names of the virus are all introduced. The epithets were deconstructed in the lyrics to avoid obvious associations: /kyo/ was created by inserting a vowel /i/ into 'CO'; 'VID' is separated into /vf/ and /vi/; and 'Wuhan' was fragmented into /wu/ and /ha/, which are shouted at times by the percussionist. In spite of all these efforts, it is doubtful whether fragmentation will be always effective in dissociating meanings from sounds, especially when it comes to 'Wuhan'. Since the discriminatory name for the Coronavirus based on 'Wuhan' has resulted in much negative impact, audience members are unlikely to be unaware of the association.

Nevertheless, I would argue that it is exactly this 'pointless' act of fragmentation that contributes to the expression of irony and helplessness. To enhance this expression, I introduced 'O ma ni ba me hong' (a 'corrupted' version of the more commonly known '*Om mani padme hum*') in bars 39–71; this is arguably one of the most frequently recited Buddhist mantras that I would hear as a kid in any ritualistic situations, making it one of my identity samples and, indeed, a stereotypical impression of Buddhism. This text and the new rhythmic

idea presented by the snare drum introduce collectively an irrelevant, if not confusing, context into the discourse, which aims at reinforcing the sense of irony.

The remaining non-fragmented texts — ‘name it’, ‘chai-ne-su’ and ‘shut up’ — are saved for the most crucial points of the drama. Among them, ‘shut up’ is perhaps the most conspicuous, the occurrence of which brings the tension to its overdue release. The final ‘coda’ section (Figure H) emphasises again the conflicting relationship between the soprano and percussionist, during which the tension escalates again for one last time. Before the end, a decelerating figure — quoting the drama-ending rhythmic topos — is heard from the snare drum. Following this, a final layer of irony reveals itself to the audience.

A reflection on language deconstruction and reconstruction

The experience of composing the above three works helped me to locate my own vocal identity, which, as it turns out, features a complex and dynamic mixture of different languages and linguistic subjects. Arguably, this dynamic vocal identity is a direct reflection of my overall personal identity, which is constantly deconstructing and reconstructing itself.

The text design featured in *Kill the Mosquitoes!* clearly shows that I did not try to avoid nor deny the different cultures rooted in my vocal identity. Interestingly, this was deemed something to overcome for composers such as Unsuk Chin. In her works, such as *Cantatrix Sopranica* (2004–2005), she ‘selects texts from well-known literary works, often in several different languages, and carefully reworks them to remove their semantic referents’.²⁸

This concern over language being an identity ‘fossil’ of history and culture is shared widely by composers. Nevertheless, from my experience, so long as expression is the aim of

²⁸ Jung-Min Mina Lee, ‘National Identity Formation and Musical Modernism in Post-World War II Korea’ (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 2017), p. 277 <<https://hdl.handle.net/10161/14509>>. [accessed 20 April 2020]

a composition for voice, there is no significant benefit in reconstructing vocal sounds or languages. On this subject, Berio says:

[T]he voice, whatever it does, even the simplest noise, is inescapably meaningful: it always triggers associations and it always carries within itself a model, whether natural or cultural.²⁹

Even though I have indeed deconstructed language into many pieces, the purpose was only to make room for more instinctive expression that language is not capable of. In effect, I hope to transform the languages I have been using for personal musical expression rather than creating new ones.

George Aperghis's works have demonstrated the plausibility of my objective. To use his *14 Récitations* again as the example: 'Syllables from the French language are recombined to create French-sounding words with no meaning'.³⁰ Furthermore, the transformation of my personal language should be dynamic in order to reflect on the equally dynamic identity-forming process. Such a feature can be found in Lachenmann's *Consolation I* (1967):

[Lachenmann] deliberately pulls apart language to create musical material from its constituent parts but also makes the deliberate obscuring of meaning and intelligibility the technical and expressive basis of this piece.³¹

Dynamic transformation of language is a common feature in my portfolio compositions. For example, in *Door Gods* (2018), nearly all vocalisations are done without any semantic significance. As a result, even though there are two words with specific meanings — 'lai' (come) and 'chyu' (go) — the lack of context brings our attention to their *geno-song*. The improvising games, during which words are uttered in different tones from

²⁹ Luciano Berio, *Remembering the Future* (The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 50.

³⁰ Gee, 'The Notation and Use of the Voice in Non-Semantic Context: Phonetic Organisation in the Vocal Music of Dieter Schnebel, Brian Ferneyhough, and George Aperghis', p. 193.

³¹ Trent Leipter, 'Lachenmann's Silent Voices (and the Speechless Echoes of Nono and Stockhausen)', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 16.3 (2019), pp. 589–619 (p. 593).

the correct, semantic ones, push this further (see Chapter 3). Without a specific narrative, vocal sounds that signify different expressive meanings can establish links freely with each other, thus creating a poetic vocal space.

***I-D-T* (2020): expressing self-consciousness**

So far, this chapter has discussed various aspects of my vocal identity and how my portfolio compositions reflect upon them. *I-D-T* for violoncello, joystick and a pre-recorded track brings these different aspects together while also incorporating a new element: electroacoustic performance.³² As its name suggests, this composition tackles ‘identity’ directly. Composed in May 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdown in Wales, *I-D-T* is profoundly personal as it reveals my state of mind during this special time. Living alone during the lockdown, I had extended periods of time in which to meditate and observe my own thoughts, which raised an interest in how thoughts work in forming self-consciousness, a process closely related to the formation of identity.

In my experience, self-consciousness is a multi-layered construct where different streams of thought run simultaneously. It is in this construct that the three steps of the identity-forming process — sampling–reflecting–updating — work seamlessly towards a dynamic identity. The question is, then, whether the different streams of thoughts interact and how. However, to answer this question requires a scientific research which is obviously outside of the scope of this Commentary. Furthermore, as discussed in previous sections, it can be as difficult to interpret self-consciousness as to articulate an identity. With this thought in mind, I decided to compose a piece that embraces the complexity involved in self-consciousness, connecting the ‘What do I think?’ question with the ‘Who am I?’ question.³³

³² Zhuo, vol. 2, 21–40.

³³ Interestingly, the two questions together resemble the statement *Cogito, ergo sum*.

Against the background of the COVID-19 situation, the piece, *I-D-T*, presents three streams of thoughts from self-consciousness, each of which is represented by one voice.

The first two voices, the joystick part and the backing track, generate electronic sounds. During the performance, the joystick player needs to use sounds from the backing track as temporal references. On the other hand, the cello represents the third voice, which comments on the previous two with acoustic sounds. While complementing the other two voices, the cello line can be heard growing in its own way, thus presenting an independent stream of thoughts that does not interact with the electronics intentionally.

The cello line was composed first, the pitch and timbral materials of which were determined by the method used in *Sui* (see Chapter 1). The method features a non-functional tiling of pentatonic notes, which results in instability and a distinctive musical character. In the score, the cellist is instructed to play independently in strict tempo, yet the line is frequently disturbed by improvisatory sections. At these temporary *senza tempo* sections, the running time of the backing track (shown on the Max/MSP patch interface) becomes a useful temporal reference. It, however, does not encourage interaction between the two voices *per se*. Furthermore, in comparison with scores to be discussed in Chapter 3, it is clear that there are very few vertical lines matching the temporal positions of different materials in *I-D-T*. Arguably, this lack of alignment prompts the cellist to be more independent.

After completing the cello part, I moved on to design the backing track, in which the manipulation and organisation of samples took inspiration from existing electronic works such as Trevor Wishart's *Red Birds* (1973–1977) and Berio's *Visage* (1961). Firstly, Wishart's work prompted me to consider the collective semantic meaning resulting from the juxtaposition of vocal and sound samples. In *Red Birds*, Wishart 'establish[es] a whole system of relationship between sound-images, each having strong metaphorical implications.'

From this, a ‘sonic structure’ and a ‘metaphorical discourse’ can be achieved through the dynamic process of listening.³⁴

On the other hand, Berio’s use of non-semantic vocal sounds, as Griffiths describes, creates ‘[a] kind of indeterminacy — an indeterminacy of meaning, brought about by a use of languages (verbal and musical) of high ambiguity, by an avoidance of finality in any statement’.³⁵ To me, this ambiguity (which can also be found in Wishart’s work) represents well the complicated nature of self-consciousness.

No matter how inspiring these works are, *I-D-T* is fundamentally different as it uses a limited number of samples. This limitation lessens semantic associations that arise from combining highly contrasting vocal or sound samples. I found a similar idea in Joan La Barbara’s *Twelvesong* (1976): a certain number of vocal techniques are presented, varied and layered in an almost stationary soundscape. Similarly, my piece relies more on variations *within* each sample rather than on successions and contrasts between samples. Consequently, when the same syllables, such as /i/, /den/, and /ty/, are repeated enough times, the possibility of associating them with semantic meanings is effectively suppressed, which enables the music Ross to focus on the development of *geno-song*.

Having outlined the desired soundscape of the backing track, I started to compose it in tandem with the joystick part. Naturally, the two voices became connected in many different ways. From the joystick player’s point of view, the backing track provides not only temporal but also expressive references. For example, between 5’37” and 6’21”, the track contains a significant use of thick glissandi in shaping the direction of sonic energy, which the joystick materials follow. In contrast, in some places, the backing track may sound as if it is fuelled by

³⁴ Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art*, Simon Emmerson ed. (Contemporary Music Studies series, vol. 12, new and revised edn; Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), p. 163.

³⁵ Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 3rd edn (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 118.

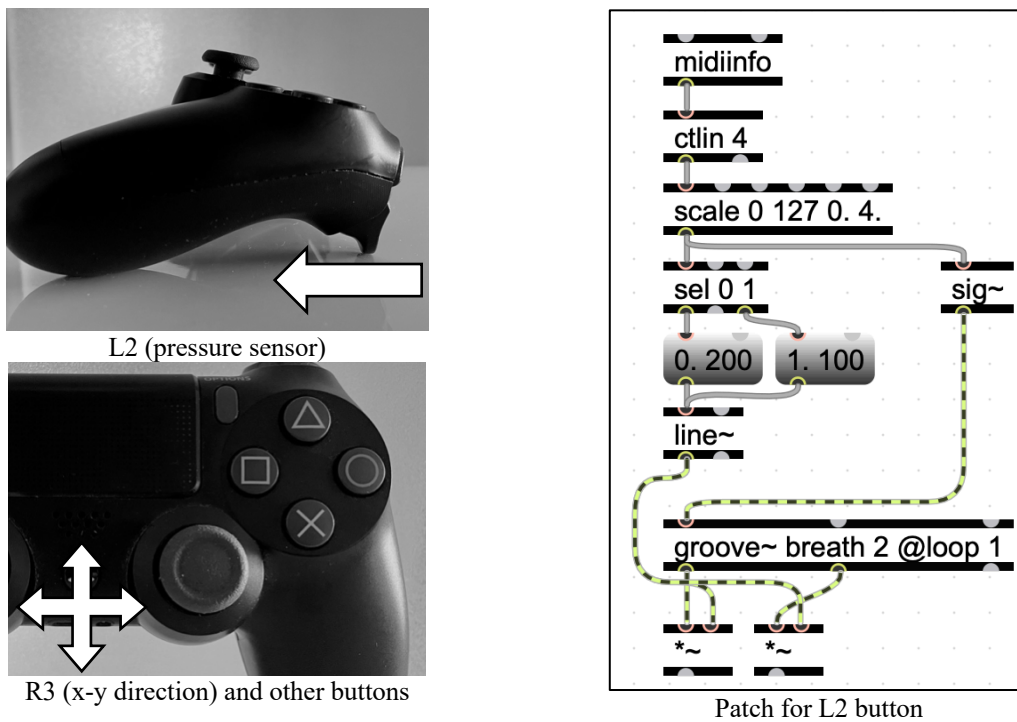
the joystick materials. This can be found between 0'45" and 1'05", where the emerging joystick passage heralds the backing track entry:

Example 2.6: Zhuo, *I-D-T*, 0'45" to 1'05"

Behind the buttons and triggers of the joystick is a Max/MSP patch that provides the joystick player with expressive power. This spontaneity originates from the indeterminacy embedded in the sub-patches that control the playback of samples, similar to those employed in *Dream Nostalgic* (see Chapter 3). On the one hand, samples controlled by the on/off buttons (see the second image of Fig. 2.8) are configured to start at random positions or pitches when they are triggered, such as the ‘bell sound’ and ‘cello note’. A contextually more recognisable sample is ‘Wa-hsi-hsiang’, which means ‘Who am I?’ in the Min-nan dialect, the fragments of which often interrupt the soundscape at structurally important places.

On the other hand, the ‘pump’ and ‘stick’ triggers make versatile sample manipulations possible from the player’s side. To further that flexibility, materials for these triggers are mainly improvisatory, notated as shapes and directions on the score. For example, the sample called ‘fainted breath’ is controlled by the pressure sensor module (trigger L2): the more pressure is given, the faster the breath, and the higher the pitch. Essentially, the ‘pump’ design of trigger L2 makes it possible for the player intuitively to control the sample’s playback speed and to create a timbral modulation. Controlled by the other hand is the dual-axis module (trigger R3, x-y direction sticks) which changes the sample’s pitch.

Figure 2.8: Joystick buttons and an example patch



When combined, the pressure sensor and dual-axis module allow for a three-dimensional change to any vocal sound samples, making the joystick a practical and intuitive tool for creating freely formed vocal *geno-song*. Fig. 2.9 is a summary of the five most-used samples in the joystick patch.

The above discussion has introduced details of each of the three voices and their assigned roles in the composition. The cello was designed as an independent voice, while the two electronic voices were set to interact and form materials that could be associated with different emotions and semantic meanings. During the performance, the joystick player may also react to the cello; the different qualities of the sounds — cello pitches versus joystick vocal noises — may lead to some interesting points of conflict. Thus the work presents a dynamic model of self-consciousness that comprises streams of thoughts with different characteristics. Fig. 2.10 summarises four major features of this model.

Figure 2.9: Details of selected electronic samples featured in *I-D-T*

Sample name	Description of sound	Manipulation
Fainted breath	An extremely heavy breath	Speed, pitch bend, length
Muffled shout	A struggling ‘hmm’ sound voiced with hands covering the mouth	Length
Cello pitch	One cello tone	Pitch bend
Chanting ‘I’	A four-voice sample; each voice is triggered, sustained and layered with another voice	Speed, pitch bend, length
‘Wa-his-hsiang’	A crying Min-nan voice repeating the question of ‘Who am I?’	Speed, pitch bend, length

Figure 2.10: Features of the model of self-consciousness

Features of self-consciousness	Represented by...
Layering of thoughts	Combining three voices
Independent thought	The cello line
Observation of the independent thought	The joystick player’s reactions to the cello materials (one-way)
Interaction between thoughts	The communication between the joystick and backing track

Lastly, for audiences, the room for interpretation is more considerable, since they are not bound by the roles assigned to the performers: audiences may pick up a communication between the cellist and joystick player, or even a link between the cello and electronic sounds. Consequently, by presenting one possible model of self-consciousness, the piece may actually induce the creation of many more such models.

Chapter 3

Improvisation and Interaction

This chapter focuses on interaction: the feedback network of agents in the performing space, which primarily manifests itself in the improvisatory parts of my portfolio works. Four of these works are discussed here; while further exploring subjects and concepts from previous chapters, I also investigate the plausibility of improvisation as a structuring device to achieve the ‘poetic space’.

Since the beginning of my musical journey, improvisation has been an indispensable form of self-expression. Before my doctoral research started, I had already been building a theoretical connection between improvisation and the musical presentation of self-identity. After being introduced to the relevant experimental music, as well as similar developments in the visual arts, and electronic music — especially live processing through Max/MSP — my definition of, and approach to, improvisation became more focused; originally a material-generation tool, improvisation has more recently become a basis of my new notation-based compositions presented in the Portfolio.

When I first started improvising on the piano at a young age, I would equate improvisation with ‘free’ and even ‘chance’ performance. Beginning with a melody, harmony or gesture from memory, an improvised performance can lead to pleasingly unexpected musical results. Later, when I started my researches into identity, it occurred to me that my improvisations might not be ‘free’ but ‘framed’; my intuition was rooted in the music and culture I have experienced. In other words, improvisation as a tool to generate compositional materials is also bound by ‘rules’, however implicit. Regarding this, Derrida once said in a documentary interview:

All the names are already pre-programmed. It’s already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise. One can’t say whatever one wants; one is obliged

more or less to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so, I believe in improvisation, and I fight for improvisation. But always with the belief that it's impossible.¹

What Derrida argues for — improvisation to 'reproduce the stereotypical discourse' — presented to me the potential of improvisation in reflecting my own stereotypical identity, elements of which I employed in creating improvising materials and thus the compositions discussed in this chapter, especially *Wind Spells*. Meanwhile, the 'free' and 'unpredictable' nature of improvisation suggests its ability to evoke a 'poetic space', the equally important subject of my doctoral research, in which the performer(s) would be able to freely interpret the music and the listeners associate it with their own identities. This liberty to interpretation is more pertinent in compositions such as *Door Gods* and *Dream Nostalgic*.

When improvising alone on a solo instrument, one interacts with the sounds they produced. As the number of performers, instruments and sources of sounds increase, the opportunities for a greater range and diversity of interactions also increase. What might be called an 'interaction network' is further complicated when we take environment — including all the ambient sounds and the audience — into consideration. In his book, *The Field of Musical Improvisation*, Marcel Cobussen argues for the appropriateness of using Bruno Latour's 'actor-network theory' to systemise such a network of interactions. According to Latour, each 'agent' involved in improvisation — a performer, or any other human or inhuman subject — is itself both a network and a 'network of mediations'.² In other words, an improvisatory act is not complete without participation by all agents; they contribute simultaneously to the formation of a collective act. This idea, as Cobussen argues,

¹ Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, *Derrida* (documentary, Zeitgeist Video, 2002), 59:32–60:07.

² Marcel Cobussen, *The Field of Musical Improvisation*, e-PDF (Leiden University Press, 2017), p. 46 <<https://cobussen.com/2017/10/04/free-e-pub-the-field-of-musical-improvisation-by-marcel-cobussen/>> [accessed 27 August 2021].

opens the possibility to regard musical improvisations as circles or spirals, where both human and non-human actors ‘might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on’.³

My personal conclusion follows on from this: improvisation as an act is predictable at the outermost level, with a predetermined beginning and end; yet during the improvisatory process, all agents interact with each other to collectively produce unpredictable actions. Improvisation under this definition can help achieve a ‘poetic space’: on the one hand, the collective improvisatory process and its unpredictable results contribute to the perception of non-linearity; on the other, a predictable or controlled structure ensures the preservation of a distinctive musical identity. As presented in Fig. 3.1, different forms of improvisation emphasise different actions and events, resulting in associations with different points of time:

Figure 3.1: A framework of time and improvisation

Corresponding point of time	Forms of improvisation
Past	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpret already notated materials, including notes, texts and graphs. • Quote sounds and materials from memory. • React to pre-recorded materials following the given rules or instructions (in an electronic piece).
Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuously observe and react to the currently heard sounds without an analytical mindset and accept any possible consequence.
Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse the sounds generated from the Past and Present groups and decide what to play in the immediate future, creating interest from material development.

In an ideal situation, if different points of time can be freely associated with each other, a dynamic presentation of identity can be achieved (as discussed in Chapter 1). Resulting from this is a critical hypothesis: different forms of improvisation can engage with different points of time. If this is true, then a piece that comprises different forms of

³ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies; Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 72; quoted in Cobussen, *The Field of Musical Improvisation*, p. 48.

improvisation can represent a musical identity that is not limited to linear cause and effect, thus achieving a ‘poetic space’.

The compositions presented in this chapter have all employed improvisation as a formal tool and strived to keep a balance between improvisatory and notated elements to form their unique ‘poetic space’. Furthermore, each work reflects the identities of specific agents in the performing space and explores the potential of interactions between different agents. Specifically, how can the identities of the composer and performers be balanced in a work? What can a piece achieve in audience interactions and performing space interactions? What relationships can performers build among themselves? Questions like these are discussed at appropriate points throughout this chapter; the actor-network theory is applied in assessing the relationships between different agents involved in the performance of each work. Consequently, the portfolio works under discussion are ordered by the size of the ensemble, starting from the largest.

***Wind Spells* (2019): Group improvisation and interactions**

The first composition to discuss in this chapter is *Wind Spells* for six performers.⁴ This work was written for the Hooting Cow Collective, an experimental music group, as part of a themed concert focusing on deep listening. Thus, this work reflects on my study of twentieth-century experimental works, including those by Oliveros, Stockhausen, Wolff, Lucier, and many others. The score places different forms of improvisation side by side in blocks of texts and notes, the design of which, despite being uncomplicated, opens up potential for interaction. Such a design makes *Wind Spells* a suitable piece with which to begin my discussion on the different types of improvisation.

⁴ Yue Zhuo, ‘Experiencing Identity, Forming Poetic Space: Expression and Interaction in a Portfolio of Original Compositions’ (PhD portfolio, Cardiff University, 2022), vol. 2, pp. 41–46.

As Fig. 3.2 shows, the design of this one-page score takes inspiration from ‘spells’ (patterns and symbols) featured on the Taoist *fu*,⁵ a kind of magical paper talisman used by Taoists to achieve certain supernatural outcomes. I imagined the entire score as a *fu*, and the blocks of text and musical notes as its spells. These spells are represented by the performance materials, which activate and stimulate a sound world that embodies the wind, as the piece’s title suggests.

The score is in two halves: the lower half is for one player on the piano, and the upper half is for the other five on any instruments suitable for producing sustained sounds. This design does not intend to suggest a leader-follower relationship. On the contrary, players are treated as agents in an interaction network; all of them are equally important in forming a collective identity — the wind spells.

Figure 3.2: Comparing a Taoist *fu* with the score for *Wind Spells*

Since no player takes the lead, the performance often results in an interesting chain-reaction effect. For instance, at the beginning, it is impossible to predict which of the five upper players will start first and for how long they will play. Therefore, when the first sound

⁵ ‘Fu’(符).

occurs, it is up to the players to follow or stay independent. This is the same for the pianist, who needs to play the chord at some point after hearing the initial sound. Consequently, the exact time for each player to trigger an event depends on everyone else's decisions. This feature prompts the players to focus on the present.

On the other hand, section 2 uses a different form. The pianist plays through an extended passage on his or her own, while others engage in 'chanting'; the two groups may or may not correspond with each other. The vocalisation features a list of allophones that imitate the sounds of wind, and another list of rhythmic options featuring different tempo and dynamic instructions. During the performance, an option is picked from each list to form a distinctive vocal gesture, the action of which is repeated until the end of the section. As a result, players are constantly coming back to past materials in this section.

The third section requires all players to generate percussive sounds, thus representing the arrival of 'wind' directly. The physical actions involved in this section are also open to improvisation, as the instruction says: 'keep changing your object'. The effectiveness of these actions is evident from past performances, during which the players knocked on each other's instruments, music stands and on trivial objects on the stage, thus creating visual and even narrative interests that are unique to the section. During the improvisation, players can also reflect on the sounds produced previously, such as a specific rhythmic pattern from section 2. Therefore players focus on both the past and future in section 3.

Materials in the last two sections are of the same types as the first two, completing the piece's arch form. The piano improvisation in section 4 is changed to producing random black-key clusters, which delays the returning of the past — the initial idea of interaction — in section 5.

Through the above analysis, I have demonstrated the following: (1) the different types of improvisation used in the work and how they form a network of interaction that represents

a *fu* of wind spells; (2) how the ‘past–present–future’ analogy may apply to these improvisatory activities in forming the work’s ‘poetic space’. To conclude, *Wind Spells* presents a collective musical identity in a ‘poetic space’ that consists of dynamic intra-communication among its constituent agents.

***Dream: Pavilion by the Water* (2020): Interaction and exchange of identities**

Dream: Pavilion by the Water (hereafter *Pavilion*) is scored for mezzo-soprano and piano.⁶ The work originated from a cooperation with Yajie Ye, a mezzo-soprano, in experimenting with new forms of stage actions in a musical composition, which resulted in a series of interactive actions between performers that are presented in the score as notation-based instructions.

Contextually, the composition continues my interest in Chinese poetry, which was first explored in *Temples*. This time, I chose a poem from the Song dynasty called *Ru-meng-ling*, written by Li Qingzhao (Fig. 3.3),⁷ in which the poet recalls a story from her youth using a colloquial tone, guiding the reader through a deeply personal and nostalgic emotional space. Yet this story is abstract, as it only uses thirty-three Chinese characters; this encourages the reader to imagine his or her own detail of the story. Consequently, *Pavilion* reflects this abstractness in its *senza tempo* organisation of sounds and actions, leaving the performers and the audience with considerable room for interpretation.

In *Pavilion*, I imagined the piano as a ‘boat’ in which the mezzo-soprano and pianist sit — the idea taken from the original poem (as in ‘we turned the boat around’) — transforming the instrument into an agent of the work’s interaction network. The two performers collaborate in a much more intimate way than in *Wind Spells*. For example, the

⁶ Zhuo, vol. 2, pp. 47–58.

⁷ *Ru-meng-ling* (如梦令), Li Qingzhao (李清照).

first collaborative feature asks the soprano to press the sustain pedal while seated, which was originally intended to save the pianist from being visually awkward when swiping the inside of the piano while pedalling. Since it occurs at the beginning, this collaboration helps establish the interactive nature of the piece. Furthermore, this opening scene strongly suggests the ‘boat’ analogy: in the score, the performers are instructed to sit ‘on the same stool/bench’, and the act of swiping piano strings is referred as ‘rowing the river’ (see Ex. 3.1). By connecting the two performers with the piano in a non-conventional way, a unique network of interaction is established.

Moreover, the level of interaction is amplified both functionally and symbolically at various places where the players exchange roles. One consequence is the blurring of existing musical identities, which is evident right from the beginning: the pianist vocalises first, followed by the mezzo-soprano who plays the piano while singing the same notes, as if singing is only a by-product of the playing. Notation-wise, the work also refuses a clear distinction between the ‘leader’ and ‘follower’, which is otherwise typical in a conventional vocal score. This weakening of individual identity brings the poet’s memory, a sample of her identity, into focus.

The two performers start to communicate with each other as soon as the singer arrives at the normal singing position in line 2. The arrow-connected notes specify the directions of communication, while the free-standing notes do not require accurate entries (see Ex. 3.2). This notation method allows the performers to control the pace and manner of their interactions in an organised yet flexible way.

On the other hand, exact lengths of time are required occasionally in the work. Time in seconds can be found in boxes on the score, which serve to compensate for the absence of tempo markings and time codes (see Ex. 3.1 again). Other than this, the tempo has been kept

indeterminate. This ensures room for improvisatory performance since the pitches, lyrics, and direction of development are already determined.

Figure 3.3: *Pavilion*: a translation of the poem

Dream
 Li Qingzhao (1084–1155)

I often recall
 that pavilion by the water.
 Once, at dusk, we were so drunk
 and forgot the day was over.
 Long after the joy had gone,
 we turned the boat around, but find us lost
 in a field of lotus.
 ‘Can we go there? Can we go there?’
 Flapping and squawking,
 a flock of scared birds!

translated by Jerry Yue Zhuo © 2020

Example 3.1: Zhuo, *Dream: Pavilion by the Water*, line 1

Non-strict tempo (1 cm = circa 1 second)

Example 3.2: Zhuo, *Dream: Pavilion by the Water*, line 12

Stage actions provide another channel for improvisation, as discussed above. To complete the network of interaction, the performers are instructed to engage with the entire performing space, including the audience. In line 3, for example, the soprano, who has been facing the piano, turns to the audience. Was she singing to herself beforehand, and is she now telling the story to the audience? Is the soprano representing the poet as the storyteller or herself and her own memory? An array of questions may be raised, making the exact identity presented here open to interpretation. For example, while the audience can view this story — the memory and identity of the poet — from a third-person perspective, they may also imagine themselves being the poet, therefore experiencing the poet's memory directly.

To summarise using Latour's theory: every agent in this piece — including the performers, piano, and even audience — is both a network and a 'network of mediations'. Consequently, the piece makes it possible for a dynamic interaction to form within the performing space.

***Door Gods* (2018): Composer-performer collaboration**

*Door Gods*⁸ is for two percussionists and employs features from both *Wind Spells* and *Pavilion* while exploring the potential of composer-performer collaboration. Since I was one of the performers in the work's premiere (and second performance), my own on-stage experience will also be considered when evaluating the work's effectiveness. In essence, the following discussion will try to answer three questions:

1. How can the composer collaborate with the performer(s)?
2. How do the different types of improvisation contribute to forming a network of interaction?

⁸ Zhuo, vol. 2, pp. 59–68.

3. How strong is the presence of the composer's identity in the piece, and how much room is left for the performers to express their own identities?

In spring 2018, I participated in a compositional project with the theme 'celebrating collaboration', for which I was paired with a percussionist to conceive a piece from scratch. To reflect on the spirit of collaboration, we set two goals for this project: first, the piece should reflect an exchange of knowledge and culture; second, the piece should demonstrate a dynamic exchange of thoughts between the performers on stage, thus extending the collaboration into every future performance.

To begin with, I addressed the first goal when collecting compositional materials. At our first meeting, the percussionist demonstrated a variety of percussion instruments and their sonic possibilities, after which I decided to use only the unpitched ones. Interestingly, what we first tried on the unpitched instruments were ways to create pitch or, at least, relative pitch. The purpose was to find ways of integrating vocal and instrumental sounds, thus blurring and transforming the identities of both sounds.

This idea became even more interesting when I incorporated Chinese languages, which are based on intonations and could be associated with instrumental sounds in more different ways.⁹ For this, I was inspired by the percussionist, who showed me how he could quickly produce rising and falling pitches on a snare drum by changing its membrane pressure using one stick while hitting the membrane with another stick. I associated these sounds with a number of discourse markers featured in Chinese languages: with a rising tone, they signify a question; with a falling tone, they signify an exclamation. Having realised the potential of such associations, I asked the percussionist to pick some words from his British language background. Two examples from him were: 'ding' for the triangle and 'sa' for the

⁹ See Chapter 2 for more detail of my use of voice and language in compositions.

shaker, both onomatopoeias. When combined, these words and the corresponding percussive sounds result in an intriguing interchange of identity, both musically and culturally.

The realisation of the second goal — a dynamic exchange from performance to performance — was informed by the titular subject of *Door Gods*. The subject originated from the traditional polytheist belief in my home area, where people draw the two door gods on doors to deter the invasion of evil spirits (see Fig. 3.4).¹⁰ Their images came to mind when I was looking for a context for the piece in progress: two percussionists on stage serve to conjure up the image of the door gods. Upon realising this, I decided to employ this analogy when collecting materials including sounds and text for vocalisation. Nevertheless, I set a clear objective that these materials should not be organised to form a narrative but an impression of the door gods.

During a ritual, an exchange happens when the believer performs a task to request guidance from the divine.¹¹ This dialogue between the believer and (the puppets of) divinity happens in a spiritual domain, as there is no material exchange but only a symbolisation of it. The atmosphere is quiet enough to notice every piece of sound: chanting, sounds from the bells and woodblocks, and the outdoor noises from firecrackers and the market vendors. Through sounds, the self, divinity and the outside world form an active network of interactions that the believer experiences, which inadvertently shapes the believer's self-consciousness.

¹⁰ This belief integrates Buddhism and Taoism, the practice of which is commonly found in southern China in different varieties.

¹¹ Such as by drawing fortune-telling lots or throwing fortune-telling woodblocks. A later piece called *Sound of Luck* (2020-2021) was inspired by the second method. See Chapter 4.

Figure 3.4: Door gods on the front of a temple



In *Door Gods*, I explored ways of realising this network of interactions, the focus of which naturally falls on the exchange between performers. First, I listed all the sounds that I deemed related to a religious soundscape and prepared them as musical materials. Then, to organise these materials, I considered the two performers as both the creators and observers of this soundscape; in other words, the performers create sounds for each other to respond to. To reflect this in the score, the materials come in blocks aligned vertically by dashed lines, a feature inspired by Lutosławski's proportional notations in his *String Quartet* (1964) — under a non-specific tempo, entry points could be both flexible and strict depending on the instruction given.

The score of *Door Gods* gives clear instructions on interaction, but these are not as detailed as the score of *Pavilion* in fixating the exact actions, thus the performers are encouraged to improvise more intrinsically. To further stimulate the performers, I designed three 'games' for this piece, each of which explores one form of interaction between the two performers. Fig. 3.5 presents the rules of these games.

Figure 3.5: The rules of games in *Door Gods*

- **GAME 1** is led by one of the players (labelled S), who plays one instrument option. The follower (F) has to try to play or shout out one of the options immediately after hearing the leader's playing. This process is repeated freely for 20 seconds. N.B.: The leader has to use every effort to 'trick' the follower by creating unexpected entries.
- **GAME 2** is a free counterpoint between the two players. It is up to the players to render the given passage, using features such as dynamic, attack speed and point, and emotions.
- **GAME 3** is a competition between the two players. Both should play and vocalise materials from the given list. The goal is to try to intimidate and overwhelm the other player.

In essence, 'games' concentrate on the idea of exchange and push it to a new level. The outcomes of games became more and more interesting after each play. Once familiar with the rules, performers can present an authentic 'competition' to the audience. The outcome is often (unintentionally) comical both sonically and visually.

On the score, Game 1 is presented as boxes of information with approximated running time (in seconds). In essence, it encourages the performers to try fooling each other constantly. Specifically, the leader can fake an entry with exaggerated actions, tricking the follower's response. Another trick is to play a rhythm that is difficult for the follower to catch up with. The follower is thus subject to creating mistakes, the fact of which reveals the improvisatory basis of this piece to the audience.¹²

With this inherent theatricality, Game 1 invites the audience into the network of interactions, so they can immerse themselves in an indeterminate sound world. During the work's second performance in October 2018, the percussionist and I enjoyed exchanging banter so much that we even forgot to follow the music as notated. After a while, laughter was heard from the audience, an indication of attentiveness, which contributed to the work's sound world and acknowledged the audience as a part of the interaction network.

¹² Indeed, to make a mistake is an improvisation method. See Aden Evens, *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience* (Theory out of Bounds series, vol. 27; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 154.

On the other hand, Game 2 is a more straightforward dialogue between the performers, both uttering one single word: ‘lai’. This game is notated in detail to provide some certainty to the piece’s structure. The number of vocal exchanges is fixed; below some notes are question or exclamation marks, which suggest the emotions involved. Based on these instructions, the performers are free to respond in all different manners of speaking. In a way, Game 2 resembles the way Inuit vocal games work, as it focuses on information exchange.¹³

Example 3.3: Zhuo, *Door Gods*, 5'50" to 6'20"

The musical score is divided into two main sections: 5'50" and 6'00" - 6'20".

5'50" Section:

- Vocal Part:** Features a melodic line with an *accel.* (accelerando) marking and a *f* (forte) dynamic. It includes a glissando (gliss.) leading to the syllable 'sa'.
- Instrumental Part:** Includes a 'cover mouth' instruction and a 'hm...' vocalization. The percussion part is marked *mf* (mezzo-forte) and includes a 'Rumba shaker' and 'R.S. Bongos M. Gong'.

6'00" - 6'20" Section:

- Vocal Part:** Features a series of vocalizations including 'and', 'ord.', 'lai!', 'chyu!', 'sa!', and 'o!'. A box labeled 'GAME 3 as loud as possible' is placed over the 'lai!' and 'chyu!' syllables.
- Instrumental Part:** Continues with the 'Rumba shaker' and 'R.S. Bongos M. Gong'.

Game 3 comes with a distinctive instruction: ‘as loud as possible’ (see Ex. 3.3). Evidently, this game can easily reveal the participants’ identities, as they have to make loud noises in their own intuitive ways. Since the game requires the non-stop creation of intensive sounds, there is no time for the performers to think about anything else rather than their immediate actions. Interestingly, the existing performances showed that the percussionist usually resolved to some similar beating patterns on the snare drum, while I (as a non-

¹³ See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, ‘Some Aspects of Inuit Vocal Games’, *Ethnomusicology*, 27.3 (1983), pp. 457–75 (p. 457).

percussionist) resolved to shouting. Practically, percussion sounds can easily swamp the shouts, turning the game into a mime accompanied by an extremely noisy background.

The above discussion has addressed the first two questions raised at the beginning of this section. Finally, to recall the third question, how does this piece balance the composer's and the performer's identities? On the one hand, I would argue that the composer's identity has 'liquified' in this composition: the analogy of religious experience was inspired by my own identity sample, which is essential to the organisation of materials and structure. Thus the composer's identity permeates the whole work, showing itself in every single note and symbol.

On the other hand, the two players are still free to express themselves, not only through the games but also through their interpretations of other features, such as non-strict tempo, relative pitches and vocalisation. Nevertheless, the games encourage the performers to think beyond the notated score, which arguably sets *Door Gods* apart from *Pavilion* by bringing the performer's identity into focus.

Fig. 3.6 is a summary of the different types of improvisation discussed above:

Figure 3.6: Different types of improvisation used in *Door Gods*

Name	Game 1: imitation	Game 2: free counterpoint	Game 3: as loud as possible	Other materials
Description	Immediate response to another performer; results unpredictable	Non-competitive exchange of sounds, focusing on variations	Instinctive and almost 'frantic' performance	Flexible motivic counterpoints, resulting from proportional notations

***Dream Nostalgic* (2019): Solo improvisation with live electronics**

The last composition to discuss in this chapter, *Dream Nostalgic*, is for solo double bass and an automated electronic part controlled by Max/MSP.¹⁴ This composition explores interaction between the double bass and electronics, which are both improvisatory; in particular, I will demonstrate how I designed the Max/MSP patch to create an improviser-in-effect. Later, I will also reflect on the composer-performer experience and what it means for identity expression.

Dream Nostalgic was commissioned by a leading Chinese photography art centre to commemorate Shoji Ueda (1913–2000), a Japanese photographer who spent most of his creative life in his hometown, Tottori. In his works, Ueda shows a penchant for using his family members and friends as models and a number of iconic scenes in Tottori as backdrops, by which he constructed a fantastical and even surreal visual impression of ‘home’.¹⁵ His practice prompted me to envision my ‘home’ through music. The resulting composition, *Dream Nostalgic*, transforms my impression of ‘home’ into a dreamy soundscape, mixing together fragmented pieces of memory and imagination.

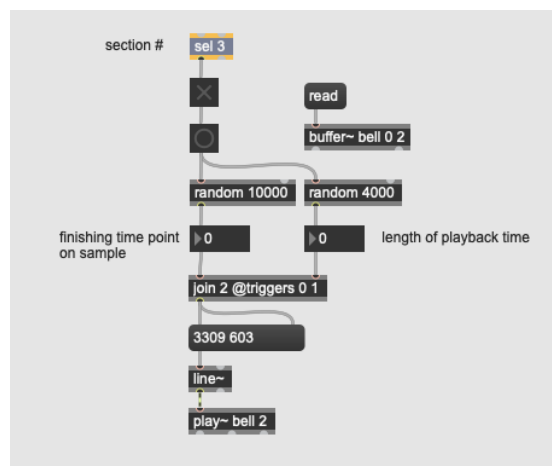
In my experience, an imagined piece of memory can be so concrete that I start to confuse it with the real one, resulting in a questionable relationship between imagination and reality. This dualism provided the basis of a two-layer soundscape design: a slow and subtle layer and a quick-shifting layer which represent the reality and imagination respectively. The double bass and electronics take turns in presenting each layer. Specifically, to reflect the capricious nature of the dreaming process, I created a Max/MSP patch to generate indeterminate electronic sounds, which were then combined with double bass improvisation to form a unique non-linear structure.

¹⁴ Zhuo, vol. 2, pp. 69–79.

¹⁵ ‘Shoji Ueda Retrospective Exhibition’, Three Shadows Photography Art Centre website (2019) <<https://www.threeshadows.cn/exhibitions/70/overview/>> [accessed 27 August 2021].

The electronic part comprises a sequence of sub-patches that are triggered on and off at specific points of time. Most of these sub-patches manipulate the sample(s) they receive and generate random sonic outcomes. There are three samples: the first one is firecracker, a significant identity sample from my cultural identity (as discussed in *Like a Dream, Not a Dream*); the second one is Japanese bell, which signifies a religious atmosphere; finally, the third one is the double bass melody in section 1, which needs to be recorded on the spot for later manipulation.

Figure 3.7: Sample-based random sound generator patch in Max/MSP



As demonstrated in Fig. 3.7, a typical sub-patch will feature a ‘~play’ object (on which a sample is loaded) and two ‘~random’ objects (through which random parameters are generated). The sub-patch controls the following parameters: playback speed, direction (forward or backward), duration and starting point. To achieve a wide range of sonic outcomes, sub-patches are combined in various ways to produce layers of sounds; furthermore, to increase sonic complexity, every ‘~random’ object is assigned a different level of randomness. The role of these sub-patches is as much to construct a dreaming soundscape as to create an improviser-in-effect. Obviously, compared to up-to-date machine learning programs, or even to an earlier program such as *Voyager* (1986–1988) by George

Lewis, these sub-patches are simple.¹⁶ I would argue that they play a vital role in simulating and stimulating ‘interactions’ with the double bass player.

Dream Nostalgic begins with the double bassist entering the stage with a Japanese bell; he or she shakes the bell — an ‘extra’ object — while walking slowly towards the centre of stage. Fifteen seconds later, the patch starts generating bell sounds that quickly develop into complex layers. The blending of acoustic and electronics sounds removes the performer from being the single point of interest. Indeed, the acoustic and electronic parts are agents sharing an equal role in forming a collective musical identity. Simon Emmerson has evaluated the effectiveness of such a method:

An instrumental gesture appears to cause a sounding reaction in the electroacoustic part. In the performance the listener only perceives the *net result* of the two and cannot (by definition) disentangle them. This is the composer’s right — what *sounds* causal *is* effectively causal.¹⁷

Next, in section 1, the double bass presents a melody in *Nan-yin* style, lasting only one minute.¹⁸ After this, at 1’05”, the double bass produces a slap pizzicato that is immediately overtaken by firecracker sounds. By ‘activating’ the electronic sounds, the double bass claims a state of independence so that the following improvisation (section 2) can achieve an interaction rather than a reaction to the electronics.

All improvisatory instructions to the double bassist provide two kinds of information:

1. Text-based instruction which ends with a reflective question.
2. Improvisatory material, including techniques and dynamic options.

¹⁶ George Lewis, ‘Too Many Notes: Computers, Complexity and Culture in Voyager’, *Leonardo Music Journal*, 10 (2000), pp. 33–39 (pp. 34–37).

¹⁷ Simon Emmerson, *Living Electronic Music* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), p. 93.

¹⁸ See Chapter 1 for details of *Nan-yin*.

Specifically, questions given to the double bassist address the ‘past–present–future’ framework. For example, after the beginning of section 4, the performer is asked to interact with himself or herself from the past (Ex. 3.4) — a sample of the double bass melody which was live recorded in section 1. After 4’25”, this double bass sample is sent to the random sound generator, so that the electronics would be heard as if reacting spontaneously to the acoustic sounds, making it a more convincing improviser-in-effect.

Example 3.4: Zhuo, *Dream Nostalgic*, 4’00” to 4’20”

The image shows a musical score for two parts: Double Bass (Db.) and Electronics (Elec.).

- Db. Part:**
 - At the 4'00" mark, there is a box containing the following text:

Improvisation #3:
React to the past — your own playing of the melody
Follow, adapt or reject the past.
Ord. arco. *p* to *mf*
 - To the right of this box is a wavy line representing a sound or improvisation.
- Elec. Part:**
 - Below the Db. part, there is a section labeled "Db. Recording Playback" with a musical staff showing a sequence of notes.

The collective improvisation becomes the most active in sections 5 and 6. Here, all three samples are fed to the electronics, enabling the player to engage with them freely — either as a piece of memory or an inspiration for new improvisatory gestures. Such active interactions will not cease until the very end of the composition. At the beginning of section 6, the double bass is instructed to imitate the firecracker sounds, which leads to a short period of sonic intensification between 7’40” and 7’50”. Subsequently, the melody sample is played in reverse, creating a manipulated memory.

Obviously, during an actual performance, the double bassist also interacts constantly with the performing space. A notable example of such interaction came from the work’s premiere (Fig. 3.8): in the middle of the performance, a distinctive sound occurred, which turned out to be from a person wearing high heels walking down the stairs. This sound and its

rhythmic pattern immediately caught my (the performer's) interest and became a piece of memory, which I quoted before the end of the performance.

We can see from the discussion above how electronics brings considerable interest into an otherwise solo improvisatory performance. The double bass interacts with the changing identity represented by the electronics and forms its unique identity as the music progresses. Fig. 3.9 presents a summary of the work's main events and the different types of improvisation used.

Figure 3.8: Performing *Dream Nostalgic*

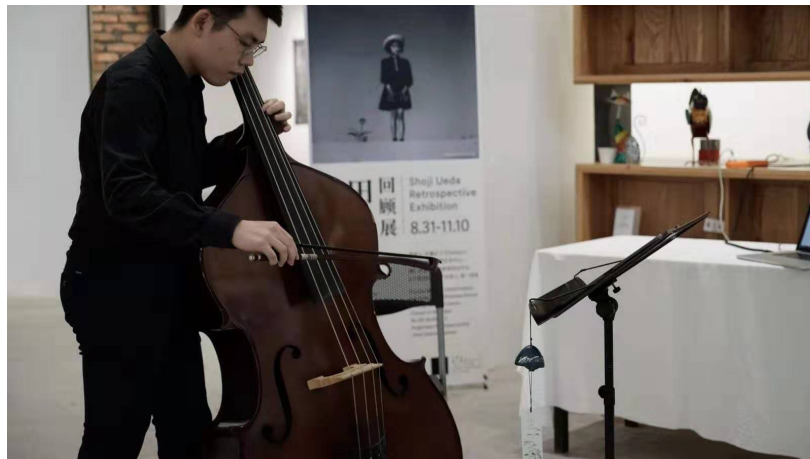


Figure 3.9: *Dream Nostalgic*, summary of events

Time	0'00" – 0'40"	0'50" – 1'50"	1'50" – 2'30"	2'45" – 4'00"
Detail	Stage actions coinciding with bell sample	Main double bass melody	Variations of section 1 melody from memory	Reaction to random electronic sounds
Time	4'00" – 6'10"	6'10" – 7'50"	7'50" – 9'15" (End)	
Detail	Reaction to the manipulated recording of section 1 melody	The general reaction to electronic sounds and variations of memory	Reaction to the manipulated recording of section 1 melody	

Concluding remarks

Compared to the three compositions discussed in earlier sections, *Dream Nostalgic* has left considerable room for the double bass to improvise. This is regardless of the materials and gestures notated in the score, which nonetheless ensure a structured interaction with the electronics. In other words, *Dream Nostalgic* presents near-free improvisation in a designed musical structure, which leads to an interesting conclusion: if the musical structure embodies my identity as the composer, then, when performing the work, I am reacting to my identity from the past. A question therefore arises: should I follow this past identity, or should I focus on the present and express the identity of a performer? In her article about *The New Discipline*, Groth gives her opinion on a similar series of questions:

Where does [Jennifer Walshe's] *The New Discipline* leave authorship? Did the author really die? Has a resurrection occurred? My answer to this is that within contemporary music, the death of the author and the rebirth of the reader also tend to result in a resurrection of the author.¹⁹

This 'resurrection of the author' is inspiring. Firstly, my role as a composer-performer is not simply to repeat the composer 'I' and what I put down on the score (*past*). In many cases, such as in *Dream Nostalgic* and *Door Gods*, I also prefer to dissociate from my composer 'I' when performing these works (*present*). This leaves me with the possibility of associating myself with the *future* — a new dynamic identity combining that of a composer and a performance artist. In this context, my experiments with improvisation can be treated as an endeavour to articulate this new identity.

¹⁹ Sanne Krogh Groth, 'Composers on Stage: Ambiguous Authorship in Contemporary Music Performance', *Contemporary Music Review*, 35.6 (2016), pp. 686–705 (p. 703).

Chapter 4

Concluding Projects

As discussed at the end of Chapter 3, I identified a new research interest from my compositional and performing practices in the final few months of 2019 — to express the identity of a composer-performer, thus challenging the conventional identity of a composer which is only reflected ‘second-hand’ through interpretation of the notated score. This interest came from an urge to express an independent self, which is, ideally, free from stereotypical cultural, national or political influences. Regarding this, Jennifer Walshe’s statement in *The New Discipline* is illuminative:

The [New Discipline] functions as a way for me to connect compositions which have a wide range of disparate interests but all share the common concern of being rooted in the physical, theatrical and visual, as well as musical; [...] the New Discipline is located in the fact of composers being interested and willing to perform, to get their hands dirty, to do it themselves, do it immediately.¹

Published in 2016, Walshe’s statement seems not at all unconventional in 2021 when this commentary was written: the outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in a surge in composer-performer practice, which rapidly removed the boundaries between previously parallel forms of arts, such as the sonic and the visual, offline and online, authentic and manipulated, and live and pre-recorded performances. What I found especially noteworthy was the rise of self-awareness during the pandemic: under physical limitations, everyone was ‘forced’ to face themselves and get along with themselves. Interestingly, many people engaged in recording and sharing their experiences online, which, from my observation, has helped people to be more self-conscious and, more importantly, socially connected with others. Moreover, to me, this phenomenon serves as a silver lining of the pandemic, as musicians and artists now show

¹ Jennifer Walshe, ‘The New Discipline’, Borealis Festival website (2016)
<<https://www.borealisfestival.no/2016/the-new-discipline-4/#content>> [accessed 27 April 2021].

a significant interest in expressing identity in musical composition and art, the fact of which makes my doctoral research increasingly relevant to real-life practice.

However, an obvious pitfall of online performance is its lack of a real sense of space. In my opinion, the idea of interaction (discussed in Chapter 3) works more naturally when the performers and the audience are in one physical space, where they can experience the dynamics together. This was obviously not possible for me under the COVID-19 lockdown in Wales (starting in March 2020), during which I composed several works, utilising the limited resources I had. A number of these works have been discussed in previous chapters: examples include *Sui* and *I-D-T*, the recordings of which I had to produce myself, and *Name It*, which was performed during an online music festival concert. Needless to say, these works are highly expressive and reflective; however, the lack of face-to-face communication between the composer, performers and audience challenged the delivery of these pieces' musical identity.

Concluding Project 1: Self-performed concert 'Who Do You Think You Are?'

In September 2020, when the first lockdown in Wales was partially relaxed, I finally took the chance to travel back to China. This trip had a critical purpose: to create one of the two concluding projects of my PhD research in Xiamen, the city that most influenced the development of my original identity. I decided to realise this project with a themed concert lasting about ninety minutes, which was distinctive in two ways: firstly, I was the only composer-performer present on stage; secondly, it invited the audience members to become their own source of identity sampling and encouraged them to reflect on themselves. Thus, this concert serves both as an exploration of identity and as an experiment in new forms of composition, performance and public engagement.

Figure 4.1: Poster for the ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’ concert

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE

原创作品主题音乐会

2021年1月3日 下午 3:00
三影堂厦门摄影艺术中心

3:00 p.m., 3 January 2021
Three Shadows Xiamen
Photography Art Centre

主办 Organiser
三影堂厦门摄影艺术中心
Three Shadows Xiamen
Photography Art Centre

主创 Presented by
卓越 Jerry Yue Zhuo
呼牛社 Hooting Cow Collective

特邀音乐家 Guest Performer
林宸 Cindy Chen Lin

三影堂
厦门摄影艺术中心
THREE SHADOWS
XIAMEN PHOTOGRAPHY
ART CENTRE

HCC
呼牛社

樂
晓乐集
艺术·教育



节目单 PROGRAMME

卓越：声来运转
Jerry Yue Zhuo: Sound of Luck
2020

卓越：晨曲
Jerry Yue Zhuo: Morning Song
2020

理查德·麦克雷诺兹：理查德·麦克雷诺兹
Richard McReynolds: Richard McReynolds
2020

罗伯特·波基：Choice 18
Robert Bozzi: Choice 18
1966

卓越：即兴－北海道
Jerry Yue Zhuo: Improvisation-Hokkaido
2020

劳拉·施普西：从一楼的公寓
Laura Shipsey: From a Ground Floor Flat
2020

卓越：你是谁
Jerry Yue Zhuo: Who Are You
2020

丹尼尔·维恩·琼斯：欣赏文学
Daniel-Wyn Jones: Appreciating Literature
2018

卓越：《新夏天》第七号
Jerry Yue Zhuo: ‘New Summer’ No.7
2020

久石让：《记忆》
Joe Hisaishi: Memory
2008

While I was planning the concert in November 2020, the pandemic-related restrictions were slowly being lifted in China, but it was still difficult to travel internationally and even interprovincially. Consequently, the likelihood of having an ensemble available for the concert was negligible. This practical limitation coincided with my interest in exploring the composer-performer's identity. As a response, I set two questions for my final project:

1. What can I do as the only composer-performer on stage for a concert of substantial time?
2. How can I make this concert and its constituent compositions into a giant dynamic identity-forming act?

The resulting concert reflects on the issue of identity and self-expression in its every detail. To begin with, the title, 'Who Do You Think You Are?', is already provocative. Following on from this, the music I composed or selected either address the identity issues directly or engage self as part of the performance, thus clearly stating the concert's theme and intentions.

One of the most noteworthy features of the project is audience engagement. On the one hand, I did not intend to 'persuade' the audience of some specific authenticity (as discussed in the Introduction); on the other hand, as informed by the Fluxus movement, I also aimed to avoid engagement that would result in an educational activity or, even worse, an oversimplified 'game' for the audience.² Continuing from this, I came up with an idea: to construct a space for the audience, in which they can reflect on themselves by sampling and even questioning their own identities. Essentially, my role as the composer in this space was that of an 'initiator', similar to Stockhausen's role in *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968).³ Besides this, as the performer, I share the same fundamental role with all audience members — that of

² Dick Higgins, 'Boredom and Danger', in *Source: Music of the Avant-Garde, 1966-1973*, eds. Larry Austin, Douglas Kahn, and Nilendra Gurusinghe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 178–82 (p. 179).

³ Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 3rd edn (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 227.

an agent to the work's interaction network, whose actions affect and are affected by all other agents (see Chapter 3).

To realise this idea, I first conducted a survey of the potential audience, distributed online three weeks before the concert. In this survey, there is only one question: 'Who do you think you are?' The survey takers were instructed to note their intuitive answers, essentially asking them to sample their own identity. Within a few days I received more than 100 responses of all different kinds — optimistic, pessimistic, philosophical, to name a few. I sorted these responses into groups and used them as creative materials at different points during the concert through notated, text-based and interactive compositions. In this way, the concert would keep reflecting the survey takers' identities (many of whom did attend the concert) in all their different forms.

One particularly interactive work is *The Way to Fly* (2021) for recorder and paper aeroplanes. This work used five of the answers I collected from my 'Who do you think you are?' survey, in which audience members identify themselves as an 'ordinary person' (see Fig. 4.2). Before the concert, each of these five answers was written on a paper aeroplane. The piece starts with me reading these answers and placing the paper aeroplanes on a table one by one. Then I picked up the recorder and started to play with one hand while throwing paper aeroplanes into the audience with the other hand. While the paper aeroplane was in the air, I played a shifting pitch on the recorder to accompany the aeroplane's movement. After a few repetitions, I started to invite audience members to throw the paper aeroplanes so I could make other sounds on the recorder to 'comment' on the audience's actions when appropriate. Initially, only about four members of the audience were actively participating in the performance but after a few minutes, when the aeroplanes had been thrown to all different corners, the collective mood suddenly lightened up. More and more of the audience of all ages joined-in, passing the aeroplanes to each other and then they started to get up from their

chairs and run about all over the performing space — the resulting interaction was impressively dynamic (see Fig. 4.3).

Figure 4.2: Answers from the pre-concert survey used in *The Way to Fly*

Who Do You Think You Are?
Answers:
#15 (I am) very ordinary.
#27 (I am) an ordinary person, who has a kind heart, but not much talent, nor an attractive appearance.
#29 (I am) Like the wind, who wants to take wing but cannot leave the earth.
#59 (I am) ordinary.
#75 (I am) an ordinary person, living independently in this world.

Figure 4.3: Performance of *The Way to Fly*



Besides interaction, another main purpose of the concert is to stimulate self-reflection. This goal is most directly addressed by a selection of Fluxus pieces, such as Robert Bozzi's

Choice 18 (1966): ‘Performers use mirrors to show the audience to itself.’⁴ Furthermore, inspired by John Cage’s performance works, such as *Water Walk* (1959), I composed a piece called *Morning Song* (2020), the sounds of which were sampled from a morning situation: alarm clock, musical box, noises from the neighbour and the toilet. During the performance, the above samples were triggered one after the other. Then I switched on an electronic toothbrush to brush a denture set while singing loudly, thus combining buzzes from the toothbrush with vocal sounds. As I explained to the audience before the performance, I believe that ‘we are the closest to our true self when we wake up in the morning’. Thus, by presenting a morning situation in a blatant and even whimsical way, the piece provides an opportunity to reflect on the authentic self.

Figure 4.4: Performing *Morning Song*



Besides the more interactive work discussed above, I have also composed notated compositions integrating electronic sounds and videos. Different compositions have different virtual identities presented in their accompanying videos; as the only on-site performer, I

⁴ Robert Bozzi, *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, eds. Ken Friedman, Owen Smith, and Lauren Sawchyn (Performance Research, 2002), p. 19.

engaged with the videos as if having a ‘video call’ with the people or events on the screen. For example, *Sound of Luck* (2020), a work included in my Portfolio, features communication between me on-stage and on-screen.⁵ The piece has three lines of percussive sounds produced by a pair of *jiao-bei*, or fortune-telling blocks, a Taoist ritual tool which is thrown to the ground to summon an ‘answer from god’.⁶ Consequently, this piece is first and foremost a sample on the local religious culture as discussed in *Door Gods*.

The performance starts with me lighting up an incense stick, a common Chinese religious practice. I intended to use the incense’s appearance and smell to invoke a sense of spatialisation, for the video features me playing the blocks in many different places. The video starts in a tiny countryside temple, where I perform the initial ritual of throwing the blocks. The clipping sounds resulting from striking the blocks produce a rhythmic pattern that the video uses to match the scene changes. After showing the door gods, the video suddenly changes to a city scene.⁷ It then starts to trace the blocks’ trip through different locations before finally arriving at the art gallery where the concert took place. During the performance, I, as the on-site performer, essentially engage in a conversation with myself from the past, in terms of both sound and the perception of space (see Fig. 4.5).

To reflect on the COVID-19 situation at that time, the video deliberately avoids showing any other person in the frame, thus creating a ‘one-man show’. In fact, the video was filmed entirely by myself, so the video reflects as many as possible of the situations that a one-man show may encounter. The difficulty of filming this video (which may or may not be perceptible) was itself an expression of COVID-related anxiety.

⁵ Yue Zhuo, ‘Experiencing Identity, Forming Poetic Space: Expression and Interaction in a Portfolio of Original Compositions’ (PhD portfolio, Cardiff University, 2022), vol. 1, pp. 67–72.

⁶ *Jiao-bei* (筊杯) has two sides: curved and flat. A pair of *Jiao-bei* would be thrown to get one of the following outcomes: auspicious (1 curved 1 flat); unclear (both flat); or ominous (both curved).

⁷ This is a subtle self-reference if any member of the audience happens to know my existing composition *Door Gods*.

Figure 4.5: *Sound of Luck* performance with video vignettes



Concluding Project 2: *Sheng-sheng-man* (2021-22)

The concert discussed above, especially the work *Sound of Luck*, was a breakthrough in my research and creative practice. Reflecting on the process of composing and curating the concert, I found myself becoming confident in using very simple materials to articulate ideas and expressions; more importantly, as demonstrated in *Sound of Luck*, I was able to bring different parts (or samples) of my identity together to form a cohesive work. However, considering the small scale of each work included in the concert programme (and the Portfolio), I quickly realised that I needed to test my new skills with a large-scale composition that has a more substantial musical form. *Sheng-sheng-man* for mezzo-soprano and ensemble (twelve players in total, which lasts nineteen minutes) was thus composed as another concluding work to my research.⁸

Sheng-sheng-man is originally a poem by Li Qingzhao, which was written at a later stage of the poet's life and describes her personal tragedy of having lost her husband and living through the fall of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) under foreign invasion. The poem contrasts strikingly with the poet's nostalgic *Ru-meng-ling*, which I used in composing *Dream: Pavilion by the Water* (see Chapter 3). Such contrast makes *Sheng-sheng-man* a worthy exploring subject, which, as it turned out, helps establish links between the new and existing works in my portfolio.

My goals in creating this composition are: (1) structure-wise, to realise a coherent, non-linear 'poetic space' at a larger scale, thus addressing my most important research goal; (2) to reflect on what I had achieved in my research until the completion of Concluding Project 1, thus performing a research-concluding sampling on my musical identity. To achieve the first goal, I broke the poem down to single Chinese characters and phrases, some which I then selected and reordered to form the preliminary structural sketch of the work.

⁸ Zhuo, vol. 1, pp. 73–176.

This process resembles the one I went through when composing *Sui* (see Chapter 1) in removing the poem's existing narrative and thus releasing the interpretative potentials of the various subjects of the poem. This time, however, I used my own discretion rather than an order-randomising device in deciding the order of the fragmented texts. The ordering process thus involved creative decisions that reflect on ideas from my existing compositions and research interests, fulfilling the second goal of this Concluding Project. It is for this reason that the remaining discussion of *Sheng-sheng-man* highlights some of the distinctive features coming out of the structuring process.

Fig. 4.6 presents the original poem. The bolded words and phrases are the most frequently used in my composition. As my initial draft shows (see Fig. 4.7 for a sample), I wrote these words or phrases on a piece of paper and assigned specific musical gestures to each according to my impression of them. These 'gem cells' of ideas were then used in creating the work's structure and various features.

Figure 4.6: *Sheng-sheng-man*, the original poem by Li Qingzhao

《如梦令》

词：李清照

寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚。

乍暖还寒时候，最难将息。

三杯两盏淡酒，怎敌他晚来风急？

雁过也，正伤心，却是旧时相识。

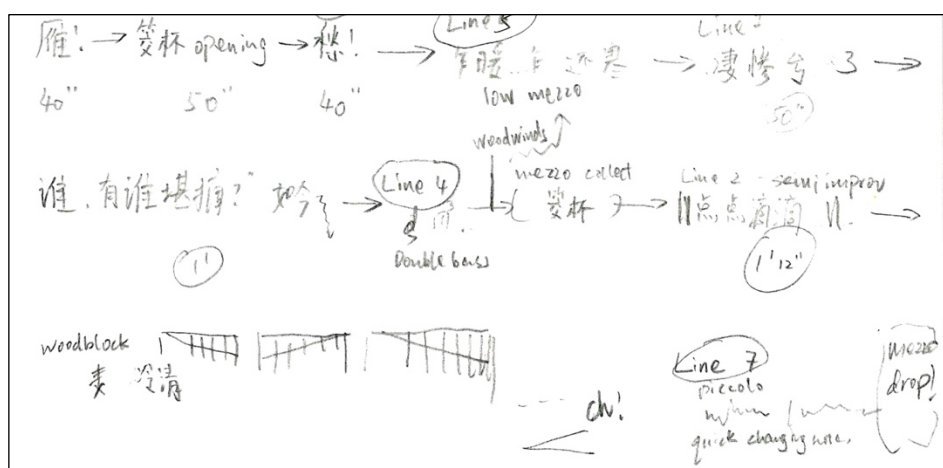
满地黄花堆积。憔悴损，如今有谁堪摘？

守着窗儿，独自怎生得黑？

梧桐更兼细雨，到黄昏点点滴滴。

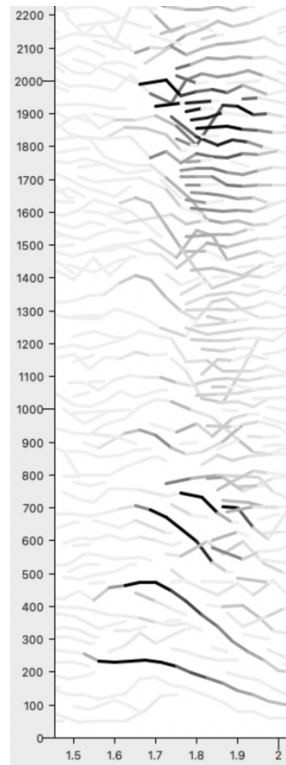
这次第，怎一个愁字了得！

Figure 4.7: Zhuo, *Sheng-sheng-man*, part of the drafted structural plan



The composition opens with my impression of the word ‘yan’ (雁, wild goose) — a high-pitch cluster (set 4-1 [0,1,2,3]) played by the flute, oboe, clarinet and harp (Ex. 4.1). This idea of associating *yan* with a pitch cluster comes from a spectral analysis I conducted on a recording of myself uttering this word. Fig. 4.8 presents the resulting partials between 0 to 2200 Hz, from which I selected the most significant pitches B6, B^b6 and C6 (between 1800 to 2100 Hz). In a way, my first intention of transcribing the *yan* sound was to ‘teach’ the ensemble instruments how to ‘read’ the poem, an idea borrowed from Peter Ablinger, which I used first in composing *Tongue-Twister* (see Chapter 2). The ensemble repeats this pitch cluster on different octaves, creating a distorted sonic impression of poem recitation (until rehearsal mark E). Similar to *Tongue-Twister*, this recitation is deliberately inaccurate; for example, it does not feature glissandi or pitch bends to signify intonations — the prime feature of Chinese languages — which the woodwinds are otherwise capable of making. The resulted sounds are therefore mechanical and can be heard as intrusive and capricious, establishing an overall anxiety that I strive to express in this work.

Figure 4.8: Spectral analysis of a recording of the word ‘*yan*’



Example 4.1: Zhuo, *Sheng-sheng-man*, bars 1–5, winds, percussion and harp

Flute

Oboe

B♭ Clarinet

Bassoon

French Horn

Percussion

Harp

stopped

5 tom-toms
wooden sticks

D♭ C♯ B♭ E♭ F♯ G♯ A♯

p *l.v.*

To make the *yan* motive even more essential to *Sheng-sheng-man*, the rhythm of its first occurrence hints at the work's rhythmic and metric instability that can be perceived in several sections. For example, the section between rehearsal marks A and C explores the use of additive and deductive sequences of metres (by adding or removing one quaver beat each time), the effect of which is combined with carefully placed accent marks and dynamic changes. The section between LL and RR extends this usage further to the level of semiquaver beats; these metre changes facilitate the desired playfulness (as required by the score at LL). Syncopation (as featured in the *yan* motif) is more widely used throughout the composition, which is often correlated with my decision in creating timbral and textural contrasts between groups of instruments (and the voice). One such example can be found between rehearsal marks F and L (see Ex. 4.2), where the ensemble is roughly divided into two groups; notice, however, how the *jiao-bei* played by the mezzo-soprano and later the percussionist forms a partially independent textural layer, thus highlighting the 'instrument' both sonically and visually in a live performance.

The Taoist ritual tool, *jiao-bei*, was first used in *Sound of Luck* (see previous discussion on Concluding Project I), which I employ again in *Sheng-sheng-man* not only for its interesting sonic and visual characteristics (that I discovered from the previous composing experience) but also as one of the few intentional symbolisation of my own identity. By introducing *jiao-bei*, I create an opportunity for my identity to interact with the poet's, thus opening further ground for interpretation in my music of the already well-known poem. Explicitly, since the poem does not directly suggest anything religious, the inclusion of *jiao-bei* may be perceived by the audience as peculiar. Then, it is my hope that the audience may start asking all different questions, such as: In which imagined location does this composition takes place — a temple? As a stage prop, what does the *jiao-bei* signify when it is either

being held, created sounds with, or thrown by the mezzo-soprano? Questions like these make it possible to engage the audience in actively shaping their own interpretations of the music.

Example 4.2: Zhuo, *Sheng-sheng-man*, bars 51–53

14

51

Fl.

mf

pp

p

Ob.

mf

p

pp

p

Cl.

mf

pp

mf

Bsn.

pp

p

Hn.

Perc.

[luo-bei]

p

Hp.

E₂ A₃

f

mf

p

M.S.

f

p

mf

jon swet k'an tsai zu tam k'an tsai tsai san cin cin
有 誰 堪 猶 如 今 堪 正 傷 心 傷 心

mf

Vln.

mf

(mf)

pizz.

arco

p

Vla.

ord.

mf

sfz

pizz.

p

mf

Vc.

mf

p

pizz.

arco

Cb.

p

pizz.

arco

mf

In contrast, there is one feature of the composition that the audience may confidently associate with the poem, which is the repetitions of words at either a constant or changing frequency, the latter of which is notated using feather-beamed notes. While a similar feature appears in my earlier works such as *Name It* as a reference to the *ji-ji-feng* rhythmic topoi

(see Chapter 2), my use of word repetition in this work is inspired directly by the first phrase of the poem: *Hsün hsün mi mi, leng leng ching ching, chi chi tsan tsan chi chi*.⁹ Lin Yutang, the Chinese scholar who included his translation of the poem in his novel *Moment in Peking*, described this first phrase as ‘the famous seven doublets [...], with the rhyme set in the “entering tone” ending in “stop” consonants’.¹⁰ To realise the idea of ‘poetic space’, however, I chose not to reveal this most striking feature of the poem at the beginning of my composition; as the music progresses, note repetitions start to appear, which finally take over as the main musical gesture at rehearsal mark LL. I expect the mezzo-soprano’s reiteration of words to emphasise the consonant sounds (as Lin mentioned). At a fast tempo, as it becomes inevitably hard to articulate the repeated word, quick rounds of consonant noises are naturally resulted. Yet, at a slower tempo, such as from rehearsal mark AAA to the end of the work, articulations become relatively easier, and the music thus provides the listener with an opportunity to explore the nuance of and between each vocal sound produced:

Example 4.3: Zhuo, *Sheng-sheng-man*, bars 359–363, mezzo-soprano

M.S. *p mysteriously*

te'hi ts'an te'hi te'hi te'hi te'hi te'hi te'hi

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In order to build a coherent ‘poetic space’ of such a significant length of time, I kept conscious of the number of ideas included in the composition, so that there is enough room for each of them to be sufficiently developed. By doing so, I also aim to avoid bombarding the listeners with unprepared ideas, which otherwise can make the composition sound unwantedly dramatic. For example, I chose from the poem two phrases that signify the past

⁹ *Hsün mi* (寻觅: to look for); *leng ching* (冷清: cold and lonely); *chi tsan chi* (凄惨: miserable and sorrowful).

¹⁰ Yutang Lin, *Moment in Peking* (New York, NY: John Day Company, 1939), pp. 290–291.

and present time respectively (see Fig. 4.8) and distributed them throughout the mezzo-soprano's line of text. Each phrase can thus interact with different musical materials in producing various connotations. One of the more significant examples can be found in bars 253–255 (Ex. 4.4), where the mezzo-soprano sings *ru-jin* and throws the *jiao-bei*. This phrase *ru-jin* has appeared previously in the music such as in bars 50 and 175, thus preparing the audience for its most powerful reiteration.

My structuring strategy has also impacted the way I approached ensemble writing. Since it is more important to ensure the coherence of my musical language, I consciously limited the number of instrumental timbres used in the composition. This was especially the case for percussions, as it was indeed tempting to include more kinds of instruments than necessary. Having said that, some special sounds happen only once in the entire work, such as the ‘behind tuning pin’ sounds produced on the harp in bar 252. Special sound effects like this are used frugally to preserve a sense of ‘spikiness’, which hints on the non-linear nature of the work’s structure.

Figure 4.9: Details of the two time-related phrases used in *Sheng-sheng-man*

Phrase from the Poem	Chine Pronunciation	Meaning in English
如今	<i>Ru-jin</i>	Nowadays
点滴	<i>Dian-di</i>	Bits (of rain or memory)

Example 4.4: Zhuo, *Sheng-sheng-man*, bars 253–255, mezzo-soprano

M.S.

sfz viciously

sfz

zu 如

ten 今

[Drop Jiao-bei]

ff

Concluding remark

Sheng-sheng-man is the most recent and the most extensive work presented in my Portfolio of Compositions and can be considered as a conclusion to my Portfolio. My compositional research from 2017 to 2021 has yielded in this work the ability to systematically collect musical materials, produce a clear structural plan, and carry out composing in awareness of the potential issues such as coherence and consistency. Most importantly, when writing this work, I could feel the internalisation of all my various identity samples. Previously emphasised in my compositions as an issue to be resolved, my identity samples have now become the resource for a more intuitive approach to composing. With this discovery, I have finally reconciled myself with my existing ‘stereotypical identity’ and can begin to explore the new creative possibilities it offers.

Conclusion

This Commentary complements my Portfolio of Compositions, mapping out a compositional journey through which I have searched for a dynamic representation of my personal and musical identities. Indeed, since identity is ever-changing, this journey is also everlasting. My research was the starting point of this journey, which has resulted in a practical compositional framework addressing different aspects and issues of my identity.

My compositional research method was inspired by my economics and social sciences background, which manifests itself particularly in ‘identity sampling’. Explicitly, through analysing and evaluating the significant samples of my existing identity, my understanding of identity has evolved and given birth to new compositions, which were then fed into the pool of my identity samples before being re-evaluated. Chapter 1 has demonstrated this identity formation cycle, tracing the chronology of a series of compositions that show a common interest in structural design. One particular structural metaphor, the ‘poetic space’, has played an important role in conceiving a time-space in which performing materials are organised in a unique way. This applies not only to sounds but also to texts, actions, interactions and visual elements, as shown in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

The primary purpose of constructing a poetic space is to see through the superficial presumption of cause and effect and reveal the multifaceted nature of everything related to the creation of music — subjects, musical materials, structures and ideological frameworks. Only with this revelation can one go beyond ‘linearity’ — not the ‘linearity of time’, which now seems superficial after the discussion in Chapter 1 — but the linearity inherent to our thinking process, that one cause must lead to one effect. In Chapter 2, I have established a framework of voice that recognises both semantic and non-semantic meanings that exist simultaneously within any vocal sound. In Chapter 3, I have demonstrated a network of interactions that acknowledges all agents' contributions to the realisation of a composition —

the composer, performer(s), audience, and non-human objects. Lastly, in Chapter 4, I have presented two concluding projects: one explores new forms of expression, and another consolidates the outcomes of my compositional research into a substantial musical construct.

The arguments presented in this Commentary and my thoughts reflected through compositions may be associated with tremendous political implications, especially nowadays when discrimination and conflicts of all kinds are growing at an alarming rate. Admittedly, my early motivation for this research was political (as discussed in the Introduction); but politics is only one of the many aspects of identity. Consequently, instead of directly addressing specific political issues (except in *Name It*), I have striven to express a more comprehensive self in music, which the audience, including myself, could interpret freely. As presented in this Commentary, I have focused much more on the sonic side of each musical object, such as stereotypical pentatonicism, vocal *geno-song*, and rhythmic topoi.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly limited the scope of my final research outcomes. Yet it led to compositions that related more directly than I expected to personal experience and the issue of identity. The two concluding projects served as highly concentrated presentations of all identity samples I have experimented with during my doctoral research. In future, I plan to further integrate these identity samples into more works of different kinds. Specifically, the improvisatory ideas could be used to compose large-scale works that feature stage actions and multimedia installations. It will also be valuable to explore further the potential of language, especially the power of the tongue-twister.

Finally, what is the conclusion of this research? In science, samples are collected to estimate the ‘truth’ and conclude the ‘authentic’. My research, however, has not even engaged in estimating and concluding; on the contrary, it has presented a case for experiencing identity. Thus, if there is any conclusion, it is *openness*.

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