

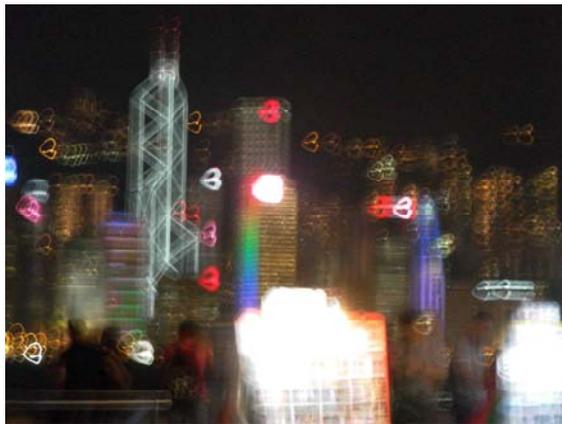
Australian Living Colours: Chinese Opera and an Asian-Pacific Aesthetic

By Bruce Crossman

As an Australian-based composer I consider that complex hybridity is the basis which forms a personal compositional voice in music and that an important part of this imagination comes from the culture of place, which in my case is the Asian-Pacific resonance. In my compositional practice, mind and spirit give birth to *living colours* of sound influenced by ideas from the Asia-Pacific. In my music-theatre work *Gentleness-Suddenness* (2010-12) the music's emergence into wriggling living colours and raw sound production was intensified and liberated after direct engagement with Tokyo and Hong Kong.

My visit to Tokyo and Hong Kong emphasized freshness in artistic creation that prioritised the creative artefact. In Japan not only the vigorousness of the calligraphical action stimulated my creativity, but so too did traditional Japanese musical performance interpretation. Japanese *shakuhachi* player Kawamura Taizan at the Asian Music Festival 2010 in Tokyo performed my earlier *shakuhachi* work, *In Gentleness and Suddenness* (2003). Kawamura's performance engaged me with its vibrant colour chunks; it was as if every sound was a vibrant wriggling colour given its momentary space yet frenetically designed to climax. The rehearsal process was a special exchange between us of few words sonically but many unspoken words resonated. Amidst this ritual of exchange my music emerged in this gorgeous *living colour* fatness that was an aural delight. With minimal interpretation the structure was shaped. There was an unspoken understanding between us about music; the nature of the fabric of sound as driving the music was the point of creativity. This invaluable unspoken, but clearly in the mind, exchange infused my later vocal line in the music-theatre work with more extended colours. After the festival I travelled to Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong, the collision of cultures and vibrancy was stimulating during my tenure as Scholar-in-Residence at the David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies in 2010. This residency involved collaboration with The Chinese University of Hong Kong to explore their rich resources on Chinese opera. My interactions with Cheung Man Shan Milky at this latter institution were crucial in locating *Kunqu* and Cantonese opera materials as well as obtaining a Mandarin romanisation of the *Peony* for the libretto of my music-theatre work. Of vital importance was hearing the refined performance by a *Kunqu* troupe from Shanghai of *The Lute* and the Paichangxi Repertoires of Cantonese Opera riotous interpretation of *The Drunken Emperor Orders to Have His Brother Executed*. As Cheung noted after we had both seen the latter, I had become alive to Chinese opera after experiencing it live. The emphasis on energised living colour sounds leaping out into the air as an expression of raw excitement was apparent when the six Cantonese opera percussionists vibrated the Ko Shan Theatre; my experience of this emotional physicality took away any timidity I had about using sound. Later on, after my return to Australia, this visceral experience embedded itself into my music-theatre work as energised metal rhythmic chunks.

Figure 1: Kowloon Vibrancy**Figure 2:** Chinese University of Hong Kong

In *Gentleness-Suddenness* the search for cultural identity picks up on the Confucian *living colour* principle and the East Asian cross-art form attitude and their vibrancy extends my own Asian-Pacific aesthetic. This project embraces a multi artform aesthetic drawing on collaborations between the musicians, photographer, projectionist, sound-diffusionist and filmmaker. Its production was initially developed with Annette Tesoriero and Matthew Hindson, and then Matthew Steffen of Campbelltown Arts Centre and is planned for performance there on Saturday 29th June 2013. Exciting confluences of collaborators are coming together for this project. These include musicians I have worked with before and established a *living colour* understanding with, such as violinist James Cuddeford from Hong Kong, pianist Michael Kieran Harvey from Tasmania, mezzo-soprano Lotte Latukefu from Wollongong and Sydney-based percussionist Claire Edwardes. The multimedia side

Figure 3: Confluence of Collaborators: Lotte Latukefu, James Cuddeford, Michael Kieran Harvey, Claire Edwardes

of the work will be developed in collaboration with photographer David Cubby and projectionist Simon Killalea, who have both developed work for iconic Australian rock band *Cold Chisel*, as well as with sound-diffusion by my colleague Ian Stevenson. Intercultural documentary filmmaker Iqbal Barkat will film the project live for later broadcast and documentation publication. The principle idea of the production is to swirl the multi-lingual aspects (English and Mandarin) and intercultural sounds around the space via sound diffusion working with the synergy of photos of *Kunqu* intermingled with calligraphical live-projections of the contemporary performers. In essence it is a multicultural re-interpretation of an ancient Asian-Pacific genre.

Interestingly, the East Asian influence is released in a new way in my music in the second movement (entitled ‘Spirit’) of *Gentleness-Suddenness* after my return from Japan and China; in contrast to the more understated *living colour* nature of the first movement (entitled ‘Water and Fire’), ‘Spirit’ cuts loose with raucous juxtapositions, predominantly driven by metal gongs, and wriggling lines amid extensive pushing of the vocal, violin and piano sonorities. It was as if my previously imagined and experienced Asian-Pacific aesthetic had been galvanised by the experience of hearing the raw colour vibrancy of Cantonese opera and a modern Japanese *shakuhachi* master interpret my work.

The principle idea behind composing *Gentleness-Suddenness* was to create a meditation on the nature of love and creativity. The text for the work is an amalgamation of portions of the Chinese playwright Tang Xianzu’s *Kunqu* classic *The Peony Pavilion: Mudan ting* and similar Judaic-Christian biblical sources from *Genesis*, *Song of Songs*, *Psalms* and *Revelation*. I was assisted in the Chinese portions of the text through help with the pronunciation and romanization of the *pinyin* text by Hong Kong linguist Cheung Man Shan Milky and from American scholar Lindy Li Mark’s lucid English language translation. Mark’s version draws on a condensed form of the *Peony* by Chinese-born Taiwanese author Kenneth Pai which concentrates on the love story with the aim of connecting to youth. The translation is highly sensual poetry and spiritual in nature. This intimate creativity of love, which I connect to the Judaic-Christian idea of spiritual life, is central to my music-theatre work.

This intimate confluence of ideas can clearly be seen in one short passage from ‘Spirit’ in *Gentleness-Suddenness*. The text of this passage contains the implied heavenly intimacy of ‘Zhe yi sha tian’ (This brief moment) and spiritual life of ‘The angel showed me the river’. This intimate creativity confluence is caught by multiple cultural confluences where a series of intense juxtapositions of personal interval-colour sonorities, *Kunqu* inspired-melodic fragments, and metal vibrations from Japanese temple bowl and Filipino *kulintang* suddenly break the ‘silence’ of the surrounding nuanced living colours of soft *kulintang* gong-chimes and wriggling Chinese opera-influenced vocal-vibrato lines. In a sense this conceptualisation of the musical process grew out of Asian Music Festival administrator Miyoshi Izumi’s idea of ‘gentleness as something that is broken’ in her Japanese translation of the title my earlier solo *shakuhachi* work—*In Gentleness and Suddenness*. This juxtapositional colour vitality amidst subtle vocal and gong-chime residue in my music resonates with the Chinese literati *qiyun* philosophy: vigorous *qi*-like energy in the juxtapositions and a form of *yun* residual-sound in the softly merging *kulintang* gongs and mezzo-soprano line. It can also be seen as intersecting with another East Asian concept. The music is a sudden surge of sound breaking the near silence, before settling into soft sounds—where the near silent resonance contains the tension of the disturbance. In this sense it draws on the Japanese concept of *ma* as expressed in *Noh* theatre where after the actor’s gesture, to borrow Japanese scholar Shimosako Man’s

articulation, there is heart intensity in the actor that the audience senses, and hence this makes the silence stimulating.

Figure 4: Bruce Crossman *Gentleness-Suddenness*, ‘Spirit’ (bars 128-131)—Intense Confluence

Just as Japanese *honkyoku* and *Noh* creates a space which allow for something to present itself, so to nature is a sonic space, which allows for the presentation of inspiration. On my daily bush sojourn at the foot of the Blue Mountains in Sydney, I was caught by surprise with the gradually explosive crescendo and snap of the Australian whip bird sounds. I rushed home to notate down the elongated snap-sound. It occurred to me that this evolving stillness was the perfect way to make a moment of repose within the dense textures of the ‘Water and Fire’ in *Gentleness-Suddenness*. The sounds in existence in nature were re-imagined as structural breath amid lushly spaced chordal colours. To understand this placement it is important to know about the structure of the work. *Gentleness-Suddenness* is structured along binary principles: it has two large twenty-minute movements. The sounds form two macrocosmic arches; one of these is around the textual elements of water and fire, whilst the other is about spirit. The first Australian-influenced portion, which contains the East coast birdsong, is about subtle transformations of colour to a wildly static climax that then recedes back into subtle resonances. The birdsong is placed, after the first development, as part of the stasis section before the first of two major climaxes. Its purpose is to provide the listener with ‘breath’ before being tossed headlong into ecstatic Filipino *kulintang* gong-chime patterns. Thus the slender and static nature of the birdsong-inspired sound is important to create ‘breath’. The long crescendo and snap of the Australian birdsong is interpreted as a highly placed pure-harmonic gradually increasing in dynamic to end in a rough snap rhythm of the combined colours of the low growling dissonant minor second dyad of prepared piano with squeaky behind the bridge articulation and forced bowing pressure from the violin. This personalised timbre roughness has an underpinning individual ‘silent’ chordal colour—silently depressed notes as a resonator for the prepared-piano attack—which is a personal lush interval-colour sonority (M3, P5, M2) (bar 23). This idea of residual colour, which Chinese scholar Edward Ho calls a type of *yun*, helps personalise the nature inspiration with a pitch matrix that also links it to the rich surrounding colour sonority DNA (M3, P4 [inversion of P5], M2) (bar 25) which characterise my music.

In other words, specific East coast Australian nature is embodied into my music but in a way that has the irreducibility of my individual harmonic language.

Figure 5 Mulgoa Nature Reserve, foot of the Blue Mountains, Sydney—Bush Run



The materiality of music is important to signify place; this can be related to the geographic sense of place in the sense of nature or the cultural surroundings. In my own music the cultural materiality of the Asia-Pacific resonates in it as a way of articulating the ‘mind of the artist’—a Pacific resident composer. The materials of the Asia-Pacific such as ancient Filipino *kulintang* gong-chimes, including their extension as ‘altered sounds’, and the small Japanese temple bowl metal provides identifiable trace elements of the Pacific within the music that are, as musicological scholar Frederick Lau points out, not erasable as part of hybridity, but present as symbols of place. This can be taken further through the underlying modal structures of Southeast and East Asian instruments being used as fragments reconfigured to create personal interval-colour sonorities that are hybrid in nature. The poetic shaping of these materials through my personal participation in Japanese culture as a composer through the use of the conceptual *ma* tense moments and its implicit *living colour* provides an even deeper level of cross-cultural engagement. The spacing of sounds and wriggling gestures inspired from Japanese calligraphical motion and the Chinese landscape painting implied-space idea provide another conceptual dimension from the Pacific—the cross art-form attitude of the Chinese literati. I consider that behind this creativity there is the word: the Greek idea of the ‘unspoken word’ or ancient Chinese painting’s ‘mind of the artist’ which resonate with the idea of spirit in the Judaic-Christian ‘living word’ (or spirit) or the *Daoist* philosophical idea of ‘*dao*’ moving amongst things. This duality—the unspoken mind and moving spirit—I see as refracted through and resident in the artist to give what Lau calls ‘irreducible individuality’ and the presence and symbols of cultural identity within the creative artefact. This is not a simple fixed binarism but rather it allows for a fluid conception of ‘spirit-led’ sound of complex hybridity rooted in the ‘mind of the artist’ and

participating in what musicologist Steven Nuss calls knowable knowledge complexes, which are born of both identity and personal participation.

In conclusion, my compositional practice in *Gentleness-Suddenness* could be argued to be sharing an underlying colouration of sound stemming from a broad philosophical perspective rooted in East Asian and Judaic-Christian thought with a materiality of sounds from the Asian-Pacific region. The multiple *living colour* changes across the surface of the sounds brood as if sympathetic to the spiritual hovering described in *Genesis* or movement of *dao*. The sounds ultimately arise from an intuitive approach—an ‘unspoken’ and ‘living’ word—which situates itself as Judaic-Christian knowing or something akin to what Zen Buddhist scholar Suzuki Daisetz describes as ‘*isness*’.

© Bruce Crossman, Glenmore Park, Sydney, Australia, 8th June 2013.

Bruce Crossman is a Senior Lecturer in music composition at the University of Western Sydney. His Chinese opera influenced *Gentleness-Suddenness* will be performed by Lotte Latukefu (mezzo-soprano), James Cuddeford (violin), Claire Edwardes (percussion) and Michael Kieran Harvey (piano) with sound diffusionist Ian Stevenson, photographer David Cubby, and projectionist David Killalea at the Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, 8pm, 29 June 2013. ABC Classic FM will record the concert.