

*The Form of Music: Polyphony and
Contra-dictions in Ouyang Jianghe's Poetry*

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between music and poetry has constituted a continuous subject of speculation, with many composers, poets, and scholars of music and literature firmly acknowledging the close connection between these two arts or highlighting their insurmountable differences.

In this paper I examine how the global use of music in poetry manifests in a Chinese refrain, investigating works by the renowned poet Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 (1956-).

Primary research questions include: What musical subtext is selected for a poem, and why? How does the poet perceive and convey musical elements, such as structure, motifs, rhythm, timbre and voice?

Generally, music is associated with a location, a culture, and the use of such an aesthetic trope can trigger memories and offer information on modes of reception and critique of the cultures involved. What does Ouyang Jianghe's response tell us about the cultural capital of music within the contemporary Chinese intellectual spheres? Does the poet's use of the associative, and imaginative power of music signal a perceptual and cognitive crisis in literature?

This study aims both to investigate the individual engagement of the poet with music, and the ways in which such an inter-art poetic practice reveals the complex dialogues, the numerous connections and incursions that take place in the contemporary globalized world.

Il rapporto tra musica e poesia è oggetto di continue speculazioni: compositori, poeti e studiosi di musica e letteratura riconoscono lo stretto legame tra le due forme artistiche o ne evidenziano le insormontabili differenze. In questo saggio intendo esaminare il contesto cinese dell'uso globale di musica in poesia, mettendo sotto scrutinio le opere del rinomato poeta contemporaneo Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 (1956-).

Primarie domande di ricerca includono: quale intertesto musicale ha selezionato il poeta per una data poesia e perché? In che modo il poeta percepisce e trasmette elementi musicali, quali struttura, ritmo, timbro o voce? Un'opera

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musicale è spesso associata a un luogo e a una cultura, e l'uso di un tale tropo estetico può innescare immagini e offrire informazioni sulle modalità di ricezione e critica delle culture coinvolte. Cosa si evince dalle poesie di Ouyang Jianghe sul capitale culturale della musica nelle sfere intellettuali contemporanee cinesi? Rivolgersi al potere associativo e immaginativo della musica in poesia indica forse una crisi percettiva e cognitiva del linguaggio poetico?

Il saggio getta luce sia sull'incontro individuale del poeta con la musica, sia sui modi in cui tale pratica poetica intermediale rivela i complessi dialoghi, connessioni e incursioni del mondo contemporaneo globalizzato.

1. Introduction

The idea that music and poetry are inherently connected to each other is recurrent worldwide. William E. Grim observes that the connection goes so far back that the two art forms share a «panorama of terminology», such as «rhythm», «meter», «voice», «tone», etc¹. But is such a shared terminology a faux ami that creates the illusion of music and poetry as sister arts, or is it something profoundly and appropriately revealing?

Motivated by the overarching question of what it means writing according to sound, I explore how Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 (1956-) adopts music as principal aesthetic device, setting musical forms or specific pieces of music to poetry, so as to find out parallels between the musical subtext and the poem.

Alongside this line of enquiry, I also wish to deliberate on the reasons behind the choice of music. Since Western classical music seems to be so highly valorised by Ouyang Jianghe, his fellow poets Yang Lian 杨炼 and Zhang Zao 张枣², and, in general, by Chinese intellectual society throughout the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I ask: Why would poetry that aims to be cutting edge have such conservative, and also foreign-facing, taste in music?

Thus, my questions throughout are: in which ways the poet uses musical elements, such as theme and motifs, structure, melody, rhythm, dynamics, timbre and mood, voice, polyphony? Did he for example study and measured musical sections and then worked independently to create a transposition into words of that same type? Or is it a more free and metaphorical notion of time in music that he adopts in poetry? Which sounds, for what duration, at which volume and tempo? Do sequences of notes correspond to sequences of words or lines? Do stanzas, or sections correspond to music sections?

Music is often associated with a location, a culture, and the use of such an aesthetic trope can offer information on modes of reception and critique of the cultures involved. What does such a response tell us

¹ WILLIAM E. GRIM, *Musical Form as a Problem in Literary Criticism*, in WALTER BERNHART, STEVEN PAUL SCHER, WENER WOLF (eds), *Word and Music Studies: Defining the Field*, Amsterdam | Atlanta, Rodopi, 1999, pp. 237-248.

² For an exploration of the music elements in Yang Lian and Zhang Zao, see respectively COSIMA BRUNO, *Between the Lines. Yang Lian's Poetry through Translation*, Amsterdam, Brill, 2012, and BRUNO and YAN LIANJUN, *Intersections, Interactions, Integrations: Chronological Entanglement of Chinese Poem*, in HUANG YUNTE (ed.), *Modern Chinese Poetry in/and the World*, Hong Kong, Duke University Press, 2023, pp. 163-176.

about the educational or cultural capital of European classical music? Does the fact that the poet uses the emotional, associative, and imaginative power of music signal a perceptual and cognitive crisis in literature?

The answers to these research questions offer insights into the overlapping disciplinary areas of Chinese poetry, creative writing, and inter-arts cultural encounters. This study therefore aspires to highlight both the individual meeting of the poet with the musical elements, and the ways in which this inter-art poetic practice reveals the complex dialogues, numerous connections, and incursions that take place in the contemporary globalized world.

2. *The Poet as Listener*

Ouyang Jianghe is a poet with several complementary interests, including calligraphy, photography, art, cinema, and most prominently, music. He owns a collection of more than thirty thousand CDs³. He published several critical essays on Western classical music, composers, and especially piano performances⁴. He likens poetry reading and writing to musical performance and composition respectively, and he's been referred to as «extremely sensitive to texture, tone, color and dimension of the Chinese lexicon»⁵. He even imagines himself to have been a conductor in a past life⁶.

Pivotal texts for a discussion of Ouyang Jianghe's music poetics are poems written in the five years from 1988 to 1993. In particular I will look at: «The Voices of Spring» 春之声, «An Overnight Chopin» 一夜肖邦, «Autumn: Listening to a Concert by the Late Cellist Du Pré» 秋天: 听已故女大提琴Du Pré演奏, and «Paper Money, Metal Money» 纸币, 硬币. These and other poems from roughly the same period⁷

³ Reported in HUANG QIAN 黄茜, «The Poet Ouyang Jianghe» 诗人欧阳江河, *Nanfangbu shibao*, 2019. <<https://www.zgshige.com/c/2019-05-19/9670614.shtml>> (last accessed 7.06.2023).

⁴ Many of them are collected in the collections: OUYANG JIANGHE, *Standing on This Side of Fabrication* 站在虚构这边, Beijing, Sanlian shudian, 2001, and OUYANG, *On the Edge: Chinese Independent Cinema* 中国独立电影, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 2007. Ouyang Jianghe is also a regular critic for the journal 爱乐 *Philharmonic*.

⁵ CHENG GUANGWEI 程光炜, *The Allegory of Writing* 写作的寓言, in OUYANG, *Glass Crossing Words* 透过词语的玻璃, Beijing, Gaige chubanshe, 1997, p. 8.

⁶ HUANG, *op. cit.*

⁷ Other music-poems include: «Shostakovich: Waiting to be shot» 肖斯塔柯

report on the poet's experience of listening to music, and put into words his thinking poetry through the lens of music, a process that blends the boundaries between the two arts, into a type of music poetics.

Whether Ouyang Jianghe is counting by design or instinct, his prosody is often strict. This is visible in the regular format of many of his poems, with lines counting equal number of syllables, or repetitive stanzaic patterns. But, as in classical music, rhythm and tempo is more a qualitative, rather than quantitative, matter. The poet, and the reader, can stress the syllables in different ways or start measuring them in manners that affect the rhythm: One! One! or One! Two! In the former case, time is reasonably broken down into faster beats. And there is punctuation that can convey tonal colour and affect the intonation and stress of a reading. There are no other instructions to communicate information about how a reader should organize time in the poem, how many beats there are in a measure and how fast those beats should go. There is however a point of reference in the musical subtext. Knowing the musical subtext can give the reader an indication of how the poem is meant to sound. It sure is still up to the performer to choose a reasonable tempo, based on a combination of contemporary meter conventions and common sense, and, although a musical subtext and prosody on the paper try to capture what is in the mind of the poet, they are still subject to the contingency of the actual performance.

The poem «The Voices of Spring» has Johann Strauss' 1882 most famous waltz as subtext. Thematically and structurally the poem loosely refers to the musical piece, and to the lyrics by Richard Genée, counting five sections. In the lyrics, the voices of Spring are attributed to various birds returning with their cheerful and yet melancholic songs of love. The musical piece is annotated as an *andante* at 76-108 beats per minute.

The matching five stanzas of the poem have a regular rhythm of five or seven syllables per line. Spring's voices are those of a gurgling torrent, a muffled hooter, and the crickets, while the birds are substituted by a human persona who returns to the hometown. The scene is rather relaxed, with rolled-up trousers, bees flying, roses and sun warming the body. Johann Strauss' and Ouyang Jianghe's Spring's voices seem in this way to refer to some phenomenological event or reality. They convey the emotional state of Spring, and thus can be considered as cases of

维奇: 等待枪杀, «Schubert» 舒伯特, «Opera» 歌剧, «Listening» 聆听, «Listening and Talking with the Person on the Chair» 椅中人的倾听和交谈, «Summer 1991, Transcript of a Conversation» 1991年夏天, 谈话记录, «Our Sleep, Our Hunger» 我们的睡眠, 我们的饥饿, and more.

«expressive mimesis»⁸. However, in Ouyang Jianghe's poem, we soon realise important deviations. Spring and youth are viewed through Autumn and middle age: the melting of snow stings into the throat, Spring's melody weakens, and the persona has already experienced dawn, love, and flowers. In short, what for youth is novelty, for middle age is repetition. The poem's final line – «if you can't hear the tigers, listen to the crickets» – may refer to Jorge Luis Borges's «tiger», or perhaps to Dylan Thomas's «tiger's eggs»; in both cases the trope advocates originality and creativity in poetry, although here tigers and crickets also create a contrapuntal play in which the bold and vigorous call of the tiger is down-scaled to the crickets, which implies a cocking of the ear to more subtle, collective sounds. On another level of interpretation, and in accordance with pre-modern Chinese literature, the crickets may contribute to marking the beginning of Autumn.

Ouyang Jianghe's conception of listening is employed in this poem as well as in much of his work. I see it as a distinctive theory based on the poet's understanding of classical music, with possible reference to Roland Barthes's elaborations on the same topic. In fact, both authors insist on the spatio-temporal sense of listening, and on its creative power that «metamorphoses man into a dual subject: [...] *listening speaks*»⁹. Paraphrasing T.S. Eliot, Ouyang Jianghe states in one of his essays that in listening to music one simply becomes music. This kind of *becoming* is for Ouyang Jianghe also a kind of disappearing, because in uniting with *that* voice, or *that* sound, the listener breaks through the barriers separating the object from the subject, and listener and performer disappear into each other¹⁰.

In the poem, «Autumn: Listening to a Concert by the Late Cellist Du Pré»¹¹, music constitutes a major element of evocation, the trigger that charts the mind-body relation. The concert in question is most prob-

⁸ Term borrowed from WALTER BERNHART, *What Can Music Do to a Poem? New Intermedial Perspectives of Literary Studies*, in WOLFGANG ZACH and MICHAEL KENNEALLY (eds), *Literatures in English: Priorities of Research*, Tübingen, Stauffenberg, 2008, p. 42.

⁹ ROLAND BARTHES, *The Responsibility of Forms. Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, translated by R. HOWARD, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1991, p. 259. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁰ OUYANG, *Listening to Paul Hoffmann 倾听保尔霍夫曼*, in OUYANG, *Standing on This Side of Fabrication*, cit., pp. 236-37. The original lines by Eliot are: «music heard so deeply/that is not heard at all, but you are/ the music/while the music lasts».

¹¹ An Italian translation of this poem is found in BRUNO, «Autunno: ascoltando un concerto della violoncellista scomparsa Du Pré», *In forma di parole*, n. 1, 1999, pp. 220-223.

ably the 1965 Elgar Concerto¹², the iconic performance that brought worldwide notoriety to the 17-year-old British cellist Jacqueline du Pré. The Elgar Concerto that the musicologist Martin Cooper called «autumnal»¹³, has four movements, duly matched by the four stanzas in the poem. Again, the poem presents images and associations. Beginning by looking, the subject soon releases attention from the eyes, allowing himself to be buoyed by the sound. Now music is simply felt through the body, as a kite in the wind. It is like listening does not simply concern the ears, but rather involves feeling with the object, touching the reverberating space, and seeing its body. The performer Jacqueline du Pré is situated within a space of resonance, becoming a sense organ. The poet-persona feels music through her, and what is felt and heard merge into a larger sense. The feeling of a melody expands and extends through space, on the page, drawing together body and surroundings into one detailed, complex, constantly modulating vibration. This constitutes the poet's body-listening in which he is an active participant. Unpacking his subjective rendering of the performed music, he muses of something over-memory, an elevation, and, after this almost ecstatic experience progresses and intensifies, towards the end, in the last stanza, he slows down and concludes with a consideration on the end of romantic aesthetics that intersects with the parallel theme of life's autumn, and death. Three different planes are made overlap in a disintegration of natural time: the plane of the poet as listener, the plane of the performer Jacqueline du Pré, and the plane of the composer Edward Elgar.

The writing style in this poem tends to diminish the plot, instead placing the poet in the middle of the aesthetic experience. The reader has to deal with a quite intricate syntactic network, where words and sentences are likewise compressed into long determinative convolutions. The grammatical spectacle engendered by conjunctions and prepositions in the original is somewhat simplified and loosened up in translation, as for example, in the first stanza:

¹² This was the war requiem composed for solo cello by the late romantic/early modern composer Edward William Elgar in 1919. According to Matthew Riley, the concerto «carries strong overtones of melancholy and regret», representing «Elgar's farewell to the shattered ideals of the pre-war world». Critics and commentators, including du Pré's sister Hilary, have noticed the allure of having Elgar's autumnal piece performed with the ardour of a young woman in her prime years. MATTHEW RILEY, *Edward Elgar and the Nostalgic Imagination*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp.138-39.

¹³ MARTIN COOPER, music editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, quoted in MICHAEL KENNEDY, *The Hallé, 1858-1983: A History of the Orchestra*, London, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 103.

扰人的旧梦，转而朝向亡魂，在此地
此时。而你没有听到狂风刮过的强烈印象
在光亮中渐弱，终至叹息，在擦弦之音消失
和远处的
双唇紧闭的黑暗豁然绽开之前。

Old dreams haunt, turn toward dead souls, here,
now. But you are deaf to the wild passing of the gale
fading into the light, to a sigh, and then the sounding of the strings dies
and the distant darkness
throws open its tightly closed lips.

The poem rests on a synergetic style, where verse form unfolds in combination with a prosaic attitude. Indeed, those lengthy sentences with elaborated subordinations, prepositional and resultative constructions, may determine a discursiveness that is usually associated with prose. The prosodic pattern of this stanza is repeated in the other remaining three stanzas. The poem's texture, or sound quality, is dense but flowing, in consonance with a story-like, prose, or speaking style. By holding on, suspending and accelerating – while at the same time extending, augmenting and retaining the poem's tempo through adverbs, aspectual particles and resultatives, Ouyang Jianghe is able to show his ability to give design to his experience of listening to music.

The descriptions oscillate between concrete and abstract, powerful and mysterious, seductive. The prose-like rhythm, with adverbs, and other coherence marks, may be seen as matching the «quasi-recitative»¹⁴ style played by the cellist, with fluctuations in tempo tending toward a much more *rubato* approach. Imagery appeals to the senses of sight and hearing. In the fourth stanza, as in the last movement of the concert, the mood is more contemplative and melancholic, emphasizing the grief of the solo, after the second and third romantic stanzas/movements. We can feel a sense of loss in the poem, as we do in Jacqueline du Pré's performance, which amplifies the sense of nostalgia and yearning already present in Edward Elgar.

All in all, the impression is that of imposed relations: while displaying images, the poet uses prepositions to put in communication different orders of experience. Let us look again at the stanza quoted above. Sight

¹⁴ JUSTIN SALOMON, «Deconstructing the Definitive Recording: Elgar's Cello Concerto and the Influence of Jacqueline du Pré», available online: <<https://people.csail.mit.edu/jsolomon/assets/dupre.pdf>> (last accessed 7.06.2023).

and hearing («fading in the light, to a sigh, before the sound of the strings dies»), imagination («Old dreams haunt, turn toward dead souls») and reality («here», «now») are put into relation. At the same time, adverbs and prepositional constructions define opposing spaces and times: «here» and «distant», «now» and «before», reinforced by the lexical choice: «light» and «darkness». Such a structure is re-proposed in most poems by Ouyang Jianghe, characterising his poetics as what I may call a poetics of contra-dictions¹⁵.

Since the opening lines of the poem «An Overnight Chopin», Ouyang Jianghe endows the composer with artistic uniqueness («One Chopin is enough for the world»), a concept he has repetitively discussed also in his essays¹⁶. In what I think is a reference to the Beethoven-Chopin controversy over the sonata «Moonlight. Fantasia Impromptu»¹⁷, Ouyang Jianghe reports on the criticism addressed to Chopin for having

¹⁵ For example, as remarked by Woerner, in the long poem «Our Sleep, Our Hunger», applies the large schema of «a string quartet, with four main characters – bat, rat, man, leopard – in the roles of violins, viola, and cello». OUYANG & AUSTIN WOERNER (tr.), *Double Shadows*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2012, xvii. Within this framework, we can notice a particular syntactical structure that relates two extremes to one another, as in a duet. By using prepositions and resultatives, constantly shifting the relationships among the main four characters, Ouyang Jianghe opposes spaces, concepts, and characters. Now and again, in his production, the poet uses contradictions, such as those pertaining to light/dark: «Sometimes *brilliance* brings a *darkness* deeper than darkness itself». («Comet» 彗星, in OUYANG, *Glass Crossing Words*, cit. p. 88); upper/lower space: «The *sea* suddenly swallowed up the *sky*» («The Storm Stays in the Heart» 风暴在内心尊六部曲, *Ibid.*, p. 77); short time/long time: «*One night* is as long as a *life*» («Suspended Garden» 空中的家园, *Ibid.*, p. 34); fire/water: «The so-called glass is *water* changing attitude in the *fire*» («Glass Factory» 玻璃工厂, *Ibid.*, p.66); food/hunger: «Though they are *hungry*, the *fruit* and the *bread* // Are not prepared for them, their mouths» («Journey of the Spirit: A Sonnet» 誓死行诗: 魂游的年代, in OUYANG, *Who Goes, Who Stays* 谁去谁留, Changsha, Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 1997, p.134, or in the poem «Dinner» 晚餐 (*Ibid.*, pp. 61-62), where writing about food the poet thinks about hunger, employing names of foods that make up a menu without consistency: aromas, beer foam, and 卷心菜 (literally «rolled-up vegetables») and 空心菜 (literally «empty-core vegetables»); concrete and abstract nouns: «the horn of diction» and «the ear of substance» («Refusal» 拒绝, *Ibid.*, pp. 69-71). To be sure, contradictions of this kind are everywhere in Ouyang Jianghe's poetry. Even when words are not so evidently and inherently opposing each other, they are made contrasting by the way the poet treats them syntactically. This writing can perhaps be defined «under erasure», deconstructing words and concepts by his contra-diction technique in which he says different things simultaneously and in multiple linguistic registers. In music, we could be talking of a polyphonic contrapuntal play.

¹⁶ See for example, OUYANG, *Standing on This Side of Fabrication*, cit., pp. 236-237.

¹⁷ On Beethoven-Chopin controversy, see JAMES PAVEL SHAWCROSS, «Chopin's Great Controversy», available online <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6W0RL6b9YA>> (last accessed 7.06.2023).

played Beethoven's sonata too slow: «playing it wrong», «playing only soft notes», only playing «adagio», «like an open field, like a heavy snow that dares not fall». The rhythm of the poem also slows down considerably, when the auxiliary «may» stands alone as a line, suspending the flow, before turning to the next line. After «may», is the afterlife of Beethoven's sonata: «playing the wrong tone» goes against the ear and the regular path, which no one is allowed to follow, because «your foot wipes off its traces». «Playing it wrong» is for Ouyang Jianghe experiencing the limits of the tradition, finding another creative possibility. Imitation or outright admiration of past masters will not produce art; «playing it wrong» will.

In this poem too there are paradoxical constructions and strong contradictions: «sunshine» and «moon», «suspended snow», «death» and «resurrection», «overnight» and «life». Oscillating from one contradiction to the other, as in the contrapuntal play of the piano-forte, the reader is presented with a polyphonic spatio-temporal neutral zone, where voices belong to each other. For the poet, the contemporary is constituted by the coexistence of multiple times, just as polyphonic music, where two or more sound lines correspond to different time-chains, creating a multi-dimensional time effect¹⁸. Extremes form a contrapuntal play transcending natural time into the eternity of music. Each stanza, except the first, opens with a paradoxical line resembling philosophical loops, such as «a white horse is not a horse»¹⁹:

You can play the piece you have played again
 [...]
 play Chopin as if there were no Chopin
 [...]
 play it over and over again all night,
 Then never again

It is precisely in the paradoxical relationship of these contradictions that Chopin becomes representative of Ouyang Jianghe's personal speculations on artistic innovation and creativity. «An Overnight Chopin»

¹⁸ OUYANG, *Standing on This Side of Fabrication*, cit., p. 175.

¹⁹ Famous paradox in Chinese philosophy attributed to Gongsun Long 公孙龙 (320-250 BC). A similar point on philosophical paradoxes in Ouyang Jianghe is made in WEI HUANGDAN 韦黄丹, «Eternal Poetry and Music. A close reading of Ouyang Jianghe's poem "Chopin One Night"» 永恒的诗歌和音乐。细读欧阳江河诗歌《一夜肖邦》, *Masterpiece Review* 名作欣赏, 12, 2015, pp. 16-18.

thus interlaces words and notes, a music-poetry virtuoso, in which art is endorsed with the ability of being eternal: «This is no longer Chopin's era», but his music lives on. In the poem, listening is playing, confirming the poet's idea that music and poetry, as playing and listening, are all modes of performing.

Although some of the above poems may create a sense of musicality through prosody, in which the subtext helps a perceptible rhythm re-sound through the mind, this correspondence remains primarily theoretical, inasmuch as the musical subtext constitutes a conceptual structure, rather than an actual sound model.

3. *Writing Music in «Paper Money, Metal Money»*

Much of the classical music Ouyang Jianghe deals with in his poems and essays features polyphony and complex textures of variations. Rather than being attracted by the melodic development of classical music, Ouyang Jianghe is interested in its reading, its structure²⁰. Music for this poet is a technical guide: Ouyang Jianghe creates his poetic framework according to each musical structure, within which he displaces and combines words. Having studied phonology, Ouyang Jianghe has also experimented with the combination of musicological principles and poetic musicality that recur in regional accents and pronunciations, and classical Chinese tones, such as the *rusheng* 入声 tone²¹.

The poem «Paper Money, Metal Money»²² can give us a glimpse into this poet-composer's art of setting music to poetry. As he says in a 2017 essay, this poem was conceived as a sort of tribute to Stefan Zweig's *Chess Story*²³, a novella narrating the vicissitudes of Dr B, imprisoned by the Gestapo in a hotel, where he manages to keep his mental sanity by reading a book on past masters of the chess games. After memorising the book and its chess moves by heart, however, he began to play against himself, separating into two personas, and

²⁰ Again, Barthes' voice hovers on these ideas. BARTHES, *op. cit.*

²¹ *Rusheng*, «entering tone», is the fourth of four tones in classical Chinese pronunciation, still retained in certain dialects, such as Fujianese and Cantonese.

²² In OUYANG, *Glass Crossing Words*, cit., pp. 164-169.

²³ *Chess Story* (Schachnovelle), also known as *The Royal Game*, is a 1941 novella by the Austrian author Stefan Zweig. A new translation into English by Joel Rotenberg is published in STEFAN ZWEIG, *Chess Story*, New York, New York Review of Books, 2005.

thus eventually suffering of a psychiatric breakdown²⁴.

The poem was written in a translingual context, in 1994, when Ouyang Jianghe was sojourning in the United States, with little English to get by in a conversation and no one around to listen to his Chinese. He felt to be prisoner of his own language²⁵: the meaning of its words was silenced, but their cadence amplified.

The way I see it, *Chess Story* and the split personality of its protagonist may have worked as a basic idea, but the more essential reference for this poem is without a doubt Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, and perhaps its re-imagination by the Canadian composer Glenn Gould, in *Goldberg Variations*²⁶. As Bach's experimental piece, Ouyang Jianghe's poem is a compendium of the possibilities of contrapuntal writing.

Designing a complex method of sound variation, Ouyang Jianghe spreads musicality throughout the structure and rhythmic patterns of this poem, exhibiting a whole range of prosodic devices, from internal rhyme to alliteration, end rhyme, slant rhyme, rich rhyme with dialect or ancient phonology. All this has the aim of conveying an intricate polyphony, with several layers of voices that can be likened to the musical structure of a fugue²⁷. Indeed, the poem's prosodic scheme can be described as including a first tune sung by a solo voice, a second tune sung by another voice, then a round of conflating voices. Each of these rounds/stanzas has its own prosody. To this kind of horizontal patterning of sound, the poet also adds a descending bass line, as stipulated by the internal logic of music. Those sounds can conform to chromatic or

²⁴ Ouyang has expressed recurrent interest in the theme of imprisonment and in certain paradoxical social conditions that conflate opposing meanings. The essay *Paper Handcuffs. A film that was not shot and its 43 variations* gives a thorough illustration of his theory on this. In OUYANG, *Standing on This Side of Fabrication*, cit., pp. 391-416.

²⁵ OUYANG and HE PING何平, «The Extension of the Individual and Literary History» 个人与文学史的延长线, *Tianya 天涯*, 2021, n. 4, pp. 26-44, available online: <<http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2021/0713/c405057-32156263.html>> (last accessed 7.06.2023).

²⁶ In support of this argument, I draw from multiple conversations with the poet during his stay in Milano, in 1997. Useful in this respect is also Ouyang Jianghe's essay *Glenn Gould: Bach at a Minimum 格伦古尔德: 最低限度的巴赫*, a sort of palimpsest of reflections and observations on Glenn Gould, and on his stature as an innovative artist, «a landmark in the history of contemporary classical music». In OUYANG, *Standing on This Side of Fabrication*, cit., p. 335.

²⁷ Other notorious cases of poetic transposition of this music form include Thomas De Quincey's «Dream Fugue» (1897) and Paul Celan's «Todesfugue» (1948), a recording of the latter is available online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVwLqEHDCQE>> (last accessed 7.06.2023).

diatonic chords, major or minor chords, making up a music of polyphonic texture, with soft and hard sounds, labial, dental, plosive sounds, which in performance can also bear small accelerations or hesitations, and individual phrasing, according to the personal breathing rhythm. The interlacing of sounds, words, semantics, emotions, and thoughts, constitutes what the poet calls «the inner voice», the only remedy to «the wear and tear of language»²⁸. Where the constant effort of the poet aims to discard words' default definitions, or their mechanical reproduction of meaning, music can create that integral quality of poetry, its continuity, through repetition and leitmotif. Music, in other words, can manifest the poetic word's unique «aura», its existence at the place and time where it happens to be, a mystery that can only be present within the mother tongue and cannot be revealed in other language sequences²⁹.

The poem consists of 16 stanzas of 8 lines each. First the rhymes and their rhythmic variations overlap and intersect with each other, then the rhythm seems to slow down becoming more regular. Throughout, we have surprising juxtapositions and sudden turns. In the first stanza, we have the rhyming scheme ABCCDDA: 特征 (feature) and 行程 (itinerary) rhyme in -eng; 画框内 (inside the frame) and 狂野的肺 (wild lungs) end in -ei; 描述 (description) and 住处 (residence) end in -u. In the middle of the stanza, although at first 寸 (inch) and 课程 (course) may not appear to form a rhyming pair, they do when we take their ancient phonological forms into account. In the second stanza, we have the same structure ABCCDDA: 一种 (a kind of) head-and-tail rhymes in -ong with the final 牙痛 (toothache); 乐趣 (fun) rhymes in -u with 鳟鱼 (trout); 赞美 (praise) rhymes in -ei with 撤回 (withdrawal); and 餐桌 (dining table) rhymes in -uo with 星座 (constellations). In the third stanza, we have a different structure, ABCDDCBA: 中 (middle) rhymes in -ong with the final 空 (empty); 授 (grant), rhymes in -ou with 手 (hand); 西 (west) rhymes in -i with 异 (different); 刻度 (scale) rhymes in -u with 蛛 (spider). In the fourth stanza, the end-rhyme scheme is again different, and can be thus represented as ABCBADCD, presenting not only end-rhymes, but also internal rhymes and alliterations in which 作 (do) rhymes in -uo with 错 (error), but also echoes with 我 (I) at the beginning of the fourth line; 币 (coin) rhymes in -i with 迹 (trace); 式样

²⁸ OUYANG, «Writing with Body's Warmth» 带着体温写作, 2017, available online: <<http://ccl.newdu.com/a/201710/14/17681.html>> (last accessed 7.06.2023).

²⁹ *Ibid.* Oyang Jianghe makes clear reference to Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay. WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, translated by J.A. UNDERWOOD, London, Penguin, 1935/2005.

(style) rhymes in -ang with 将 (prep.); 句 (sentence) rhymes in -u with 鱼 (fish), but also echoes with 去 (go) at the beginning of the seventh line. In the fifth stanza, rhyme changes again its structure ABABABAB: 到 (arrive) rhymes in -ao with 脑 (brain), 手套 (gloves), and 材料 (material); 镜 (mirror) rhymes in -ing with 坚定 (firm), 相信 (similar) and 温情 (warmth). Stanzas 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 have all equal rhyme scheme: ABABCDCD. While the rhyming scheme of the eighth stanza appears to be AABBCDD.

Awareness of the fugue as the musical reference of this poem may help readers perceive the resonance and echo among the many lines as a polyphonic structure³⁰. The complex prosodic patterns, with four rhymes/voices in each stanza can be seen as a metaphor of the fugue form; a mathematical, geometrical sound mapping of the rules and compositional techniques of the genre, so as to show what is technically possible in virtuosic prosodic finesse, and compositional sophistication. In addition to the end-rhymes, we may also take into consideration the various enjambments, alliterations, internal rhymes, and correspondences.

The notion of polyphony thus developed appears to be very different from the one presented in «Our Sleep, Our Hunger», where we find the animal-characters in place of the four different string-sounds. In consonance with Ouyang Jianghe's understanding of Johann Sebastian Bach's and Glenn Gould's work as meta-music³¹, the phonological elements of the words create two double voices and interlacing relationships that amplify meaning between the lines. The performative utterance of classical music is recognized by the poet-hearer as a chess game³², in which words, like chess pieces, entertain a simultaneous polyphony.

³⁰ Try to read it for example, in the light of Glenn Gould's 1963 satirical composition «So You Want to Write a Fugue?». GLENN GOULD, «So You Want to Write a Fugue?», 1963, a recording is available online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sogUjjqg2c>> (last accessed 7.06.2023).

³¹ OUYANG, *Standing on This Side of Fabrication*, cit., p. 338. The multilingual reader may also want to listen to Ouyang Jianghe talking about polyphony in Chinese, with Spanish subtitles: OUYANG, «Poesía en la Ruta de la Seda. Entrevista a Ouyang Jianghe», <<https://youtu.be/XFNdDMgSrmY>> (last accessed 7.06.2023).

³² Reference to Wittgenstein's analogy of the language game as a chess game springs to mind. LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958, pp. 47-49, 108.

4. *Concluding Remarks*

Music writing in Ouyang Jianghe's work may have often taken theoretical, abstract, metaphorical directions, but in his life-long engagement with music, the poet has also integrated musical formal features in writing.

Part of the pleasure of reading these poems resides in discovering their relationship to their musical counterpart. In addition, since language's semantic register constitutes a major obstacle to the poet who wants to write poetry *as* music, the endeavour of bringing music and verbal language together entails continuous artistic experimentation.

The centralization of musical experience in all the poems selected here is retrievable both in the phase of fruition and in that of creation, presenting paradigmatic cases of the poet's encounter with music. At the centre of such a privileged observatory of creative practices, there is the poet's interest in developing both a use of language as phonological material, and a linguistic rendition of his subjective selection of musical elements.

Unpacking these poems as readings, performances, or remakes of the music they refer to has a potential historical significance, with wider comparative use. European classical music is a technical guide for Ouyang Jianghe, but, along with the initial descriptive question of *what* is used as subtext and *how* it is used, I'd like also to speculate on the *why* of this poet's foreign-facing selection.

One hypothesis pertains to the lack of synchronicity between musical and literary texts, suggesting that contextual circumstances contribute to the formation of certain aesthetic preferences, throughout history. Along with a sociological reading of the reception of Western music in China, Richard Kraus discusses the introduction of the piano in China, noting that it was received as more than a musical instrument: it was seen as a manifestation of Western scientific capital, and subsequently as symbolic capital of high social status for most middle-class families³³. Following such an hypothesis, Ouyang Jianghe's music selection would

³³ RICHARD KRAUS, *Piano and Politics in China: Middle-class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989. There is not enough space here for an exploration of a historical sociology of music in China. I'd like to simply note that, particularly in the Chinese aesthetic milieu, preference for European classical music needs to be considered vis à vis the early 20th century preference for jazz. As Andrew Jones shows, transpacific encounters, combined with the circulation of new media technologies, won Shanghai the reputation of the «jazz mecca» of Asia. ANDREW JONES, *Yellow Music. Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2001, p. 1.

confirm the status and appeal of European classical music for a bourgeois class of intellectuals. The highbrow aesthetic appreciation of classical music as elite music with a «transcendent experience» is argued by Simon Frith³⁴, while others, such as Ian Woodward and Michael Emmison³⁵, or Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern³⁶, for example, concur in considering it an «intellectualized appreciation»³⁷. Such an argument is convincing, especially in consideration of the influential categorization of certain contemporary Chinese poetic production as «intellectual writing» 知识分子写作, a concept that was first discussed at a poetry conference in China, in 1987, by the same Ouyang Jianghe, together with the poets Xi Chuan 西川 and Chen Dongdong 陈东东³⁸.

A second hypothesis pertains to the conviction that classical music is an art of praxis that is heavily referential, and that its meaning (perhaps more than in pop music) is not received or transposed, but it is enacted through the compositional labour of the listener, therefore through interaction³⁹. In the same vein, Ouyang Jianghe sees the composer-listener interaction as something that is not idealised after intentionality but that emphasises the poet-listener's participation. It is in that compositional labour, and in that participation that Ouyang Jianghe recognises the shared meaning between music and poetry, cutting across cultural boundaries. From an aesthetic point of view, by treating poetic language as music, Ouyang Jianghe's non-interpretative, but performative act emphasises the physical existence of music in poetry.

Unlike Marcel Proust, Ouyang Jianghe's music-poems are not especially seeking emotional arousal, nor do they mean to trigger memory. Rather, this poet's sonorous and visual synaesthesia has the fundamental purpose of changing codes, innovating the sign, or, as Sofiia Zaichenko puts it, to resist utilitarianism in language and the use of the word as a

³⁴ SIMON FRITH, «What is Good Music?», *Canadian University Music Review*, n. 12, 1990, p. 98.

³⁵ IAN WOODWARD & MICHAEL EMMISON, «From Aesthetic Principles to Collective Sentiments», *Poetics*, n. 29, 2001, pp. 295-316.

³⁶ RICHARD A. PETERSON & ROGER M. KERN. «Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore», *American Sociological Review*, n. 61, 1996, pp. 900-907.

³⁷ FRITH, «What is Good Music?», cit., p. 98.

³⁸ Ouyang Jianghe later elaborated further on this concept, in a famous essay titled «Chinese Poetry after '89» 89后国内诗歌写作, in which he proposed the definition of «mature writing» 中年写作. OUYANG, *Who Goes, Who Stays*, cit., pp. 231-261.

³⁹ This reading of classical music draws from Roland Barthes' elaboration on the topic. BARTHES, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

conventional instrument of communication or ideological perpetration⁴⁰.

Merging technical observation and artistic talent, Ouyang Jianghe's music-poems constitute a unique inter-art genre, where verbal and music structure intertwine. For the poet-composer, the text, the words, still carry meaning, while the musical subtext fills the unspoken space of the words, augmenting words' *variations*. In this sense, we can state that setting music to poetry responds to a crisis in literature, trying to counteract the limitations of language as a semantic tool of expression.

⁴⁰ SOFIA ZAICHENKO, «Ouyang Jianghe's Aesthetic Principles in their Relation to the Modern Poetic Tradition in Russia», *International Journal of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies*, vol. 3, n. 2, 2015, p. 33.