

Addressing the lack of Asian Composers and Administration in Western Classical Music

Joshua Lee¹, Stacy Gil[#], and Joe Foy[#]

¹Woodlands High School

[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

Western classical music is a significant cultural tradition that has been in practice and of scholarly interest in the past millennia. In the past century, there has been an emergence of Asian performers and composers in the classical music industry. Currently, classical Asian musicians make up 9% of the musician population despite comprising 6% of the national population (Hernandez, 2021). In our paper, we will dive into the extent of influence of Asian music on the West, as well as the presence of Asians in a Western Classical music context and the expression of their identities. Analyzing different representations of Western music in Asian context in the past centuries have shown these compositions to be merely cultural reproductions and rather simplistic than genuinely representing Asian identity. Although a handful of composers have shown hope in carving a space for Asian innovators, such as Tan Dun and Toru Takemitsu, the greatest barriers arise from the lack of Asian figures in administration and positions of power in the classical music society. It's vital for Asian students to be offered classes on not just the development of Asian music and its prominent artists, but also on the social and cultural context in which world music developed. Organizations, such as the Music of Asia America Research Center, should be incorporated into music school curriculum in order to strengthen the identity of asian musicians and create a community where they can prosper.

Introduction

Western classical music, or Western music, is an informal term referring to the significant European cultural tradition that has been in practice and of scholarly interest in the past millennia. Throughout this time, classical music has developed from a vocal, religious practice into a complex ensemble of instruments that evokes a range of emotional and philosophical complexities (New World Encyclopedia). In the last few centuries, classical music has expanded its influence into Eastern cultures along with the force of Western imperialism and colonialism. Since the last century, Western classical music has been performed and composed by an increasing number of Asian musicians and composers (Yang, 2007). The first Asian superstar musicians of the past few decades such as Lang Lang, Mitsuko Uchida, Midori, and Yo-Yo Ma have signaled the growing Asian influence within the classical music world (Yang, 2007).

Currently, classical Asian musicians make up 9% of the musician population despite comprising 6% of the national population (Hernandez, 2021). Moreover, Asian musicians dominate in the music competition scene while young Asian and Asian Americans comprise almost half of the country's leading music schools (Wang, 2009). However, the overrepresentation of Asian performers belies the serious dearth of composers and professionals of Asian descent within the classical musical sphere. It has been only in the last few decades since non-Western composers have pioneered new directions within classical music with a distinct non-Western perspective (Hall, 2021). The issue of Asian identity within a Western musical context is still severely underdeveloped and is upheld by the relatively few classical musical composers such as Tan Dun and Toru Takemitsu. Numbers for Asian composers are abysmal while there are rare figures in music leadership and administration (Hernandez, 2021).

Classical music's influence on Asia is multifaceted and involves disparate cultures responding in their own way to the introduction of Western music and ideals. My paper will examine the ethnomusicology of the major Far

East countries (China and Japan) as the most prominent Asian classical musicians, composers, and professionals originate from these countries. An interview with Dr. Eric Hung, an expert on Asian music studies, also delineates the current state of Asian musicians and composers in the modern world. By examining the presence of Asians in a Western classical music context and noting the expression of identity of Asian musicians and composers, this paper focuses on how the cultural features of both the West and the East affected the participation of Asians in classical music.

Musical Constructs and Meaning in the Far East

In order to understand the full cultural impact of Western classical music on the Eastern world, it is crucial to first understand the ethnomusicology of the Eastern World. Ethnomusicology attempts to examine the intersections of culture and music systems and explain the attitudes that certain cultures may have for a particular type of music (Neuman, 1976). Before the entrance of Western cultures into the Far East, China and Japan had a distinct music system from its Western counterparts. Most of the Eastern traditions of music in Asia originated in China, whose music spans more than 3000 years. Chinese traditional music was distinct in that it attempted to incorporate and embody sounds of nature and be “in tune” with the universe and the emperor (who was sent from the gods). (Frary). The ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius claimed that modes of music were important to the “moral well-being of a gentleman.” Though folk music existed with wide popularity at this time, almost no records of it remain, and the remaining evidence of music composition was mainly centered around court music or religious/cultural rituals (Malm). Music composition was not as complicated or polyphonic as that of Western classical music. The entry of Western music in the last few centuries represented a harsh departure from these ideals and would be representative of the new wave of cultural values that were set as a result of globalization and modernization.

Music and War: Western musical influence as an extension of Western and Eastern imperialism

The proliferation of Western classical music in Far East Asia in the 20th century was amid a turbulent period in history in which European and Japanese governments were pursuing their ambitions for colonization which was followed by World War II ravaging across the world. Amid the chaos, centuries-old traditional practices were destabilized and were being viewed as remnants of an old and dying system. In the late 19th century, Japan had adopted a Western-based infrastructure as a defense strategy to catch up to the imperial European forces that were conquering Asia. In these efforts, Western classical music was deemed more scientific and rigorous and was established systematically in the church, military bands, and public schools. This system extended during their imperial reign over Korea, Taiwan, and parts of Eastern China, further spreading Western classical music. When the war ended and Asian countries rebuilt and became industrialized, western culture began to get associated with upper social class, technology, and greater economic opportunity. The emerging middle class were quick to absorb the Western music ideals and viewed them as superior to traditional music. At the same time, the growing influence of Western culture brought into question the preservation of a pure Japanese identity. In an attempt to instill nationalism within the population, traditional music practices were encouraged alongside the established Western classical music curriculum (Yang, 2007).

In China, Western classical music also represented the foreign and modern influence that increasingly had a foothold in Asia. In the early 20th century, artists and intellectuals were striving to lay a new path for China that was based on science and progress. Cosmopolitan cities such as Shanghai enthusiastically incorporated and showcased Western classical music with artists from all over the world interacting with Chinese musicians. Then, classical music’s influence would be abruptly purged along with other artistic and intellectual practices as a result of the Communist Revolution and subsequent Cultural Revolution. Western classical music was the ultimate symbol of the “decadent” foreign ideals and was seen as a threat to Chinese nationalism. Western culture was only accepted after the Cultural Revolution wound down in the 1980s and 90s (Yang, 2007).

With two distinct cultural traditions in conflict within these countries, Asian identity was not viewed as an important aspect of playing Western classical music. Though the initial country-wide adoption of classical music in Asian countries produced the first wave of Asian musicians that were able to gain international acclaim, any discussion to construct Asian identities within classical music were almost nonexistent. The partial rejection of Western classical music as a decadent, dangerous cultural force was also a strong force that hampered meaningful discourse about finding Asian identity within Western classical music. Though there were many musicians that rose to prominence at this time, Asian composers were few and far between. The works that did represent Asian culture and tradition were simple and misrepresentative of Asian culture at best.

Problematic Representations of Western classic music within an Asian cultural context

Classical music based on common Asian melodies or themes, from its inception, have been crafted through a distinct Western lens. A Western audience has then accepted these music pieces as the prescribed view of the Asian world and Asian identity. Researcher Christian Utz points out that examples of notable Asian music compositions within classical music are merely recreations of local tunes that eventually gets simplified and is made representative of the whole culture (Utz, 2003).

Jasmine Flower is one of the earliest examples of an Asian melody being recreated through Western classical music at the end of the 18th century. A common folk song that has many variants across China, Jasmine Flower was published by Western musicians and composers who heard the tune in a local Southern Chinese province. This melody shows up in several works by European composers with little variation and no further depth. In China, there is no cohesive version of this national folk song. In Europe, however, this tune is regarded as the official representation of Asian music to Western audiences. It was only when Chinese composer Tan Dun's *Nine Songs*, in which he composed "counter-models" to the Westernized official representations of Chinese culture, did any discourse on Asian music composition progress (Utz, 2003).

Though Jasmine Flower is a primitive example of the limitations of Western perspectives on a truthful representation of Asian culture, recent compositions by modern Asian composers were also victim to the perspective. International classical pianist Lang Lang has represented his "Chineseness" in multiple aspects of his career. In addition to tirelessly projecting his Chineseness to the audience by wearing traditional Chinese garb, Lang Lang wanted to represent the greatness of Chinese music through his album *Dragon Songs*. His album is filled with various songs by Asian composers, but they are mostly "guoye," or nationalistic songs from the 20th century. The *Yellow River Concerto*, a prominent track, is a propaganda work, and the Chinese composers featured were making "guoye" and had little relevance to traditional music. Despite Lang Lang's success and efforts to showcase Asian culture as potentially beneficial to the perception of Asian communities, his simplistic gestures (frequently donning a traditional garb) and lack of true engagement with the music piece show that he is not interested in looking into the depths of Asian music composition and its meaning to his artistry (Utz, 2003). From then on, Lang Lang's album has rarely strayed from the standard Western classical music repertoire. However, Lang Lang's lack of depth in his projects is not due to individual deficiencies; the lack of a discourse and the meaning of identity within these spaces creates an unsophisticated establishment of Asian identity (Hung, 2009).

Cultural Barriers for Asian musicians and composers

Even as Western classical music was accepted and practiced in Asian countries and Asian musicians became more prolific, the authenticity of Asian musicianship was continuously in question. In the documentary *From Mao to Mozart*, in which world renowned violinist Isaac Stern visited Chinese music students after restrictions on classical music were loosened, there is a distinct placement of Stern as the Westerner who comes to China to free the students from

the effects of their government's suppression (Yoshihara, 2009). Due to the cultural conflict ongoing in both China and Japan, many view classical music in Asia to be underdeveloped and primitive. This perspective unfairly views Asian musicians as having to overcome their Asian culture and master a foreign practice. During Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu's early career, he recalls being ignored by Asian critics for his strange and inauthentic music. It was only when world-renowned Russian composer Igor Stravinsky praised his composition that Takemitsu began to be noticed by his own countrymen (Takemitsu, 1989).

Furthermore, musicians who do become prominent received their education abroad and were established in the West. Asian musicians like Cho Seong Jin, Lang Lang, and Tiffany Poon are all accomplished musicians who were born in Shenyang, Beijing, and Seoul. However, they and most other prominent Asian musicians moved to western countries in pursuit of their education and established connections in the US and Europe. Musicians who grew up in this time would be known for their playing would be both incredibly free and also very technical and precise. Currently, it is an implicit requirement for Asian musicians to displace themselves from their home countries and travel to other Western centers of music to hone their expertise.

Toru Takemitsu and Tan Dun: The Beginnings of a new Asian music identity

In contrast to the limited attempts to create Asian identity within Western classical music, there have been a few composers that have taken a first counter stance to the conventional Asian music pieces that created a unique form of music, differing from their Asian predecessors.

Toru Takemitsu was a Japanese composer who learned classical music during his enlistment as a soldier in World War II. Then, developing his career in Japan, he noticed the conflict in between the neo-nationalism asserting Japan's traditions against the internationalism of Western classical music. However, Takemitsu steps away from both these concepts and sought to create his own meaning. Takemitsu takes an interesting take on composing music that is unique from Western musicianship, where technical mastery and effortless composing is valued greatly. Takemitsu claims this "idea of humans conquering nature" misses the essence of music, and he is interested in sticking to the roots of sound and silence. While first time listeners may mistake his sparse and irregular composing as inspired by Western avant-garde music, his music is uniquely inspired by general Japanese concepts such as *ma* (or silence): "the music's textures are sparse, the motifs are short, and the role of silence extends to the point of being as important as sound" (Takemitsu, 1989).

Tan Dun, like Takemitsu, stands out as one of the more noticeable Asian composers in modern day. He followed in Takemitsu's footsteps after receiving mentorship from him and was able to combine the East and the West in his music. Takemitsu and Tan Dun both share a sizable amount of similarities such as tendency toward consonance and respect for silence, nature, and musical traditions of their native heritages. However, Tan Dun generally integrates the influences through its concepts of philosophy as well as using traditional scales and modes. He also tends to combine Western Instruments with Chinese traditional instruments and techniques, creating unique and distinctive sounds (van Raat, 2017). By mixing Western classical music and Chinese musical traditions, Tan Dun has created a uniquely Asian identity within the Western musical context.

In contrast to the traditional view of Asian music by Western composers and the limited view offered by Lang Lang, Tan Dun and Takemitsu demonstrate the success of a music composition style that mixes Eastern and Western elements to create a distinctly new form of music. The definition of the depth and breadth of Asian music composition is entirely dependent on the few composers who survive the barriers in the classical music world.

Limitations of Asian Musicians and composers in the Western World

Though a few composers have shown a promising future in carving a space for Asian creatives to create truly unique art, the greatest barriers for the advocacy of Asian music and composers come from the lack of Asian figures in

administration and positions of power within the classical music world. Many claim that Asian musicians are overrepresented in music and the concern for Asian representation is not important. While there are 86.8% of White musicians compared to 9.6% of Asian musicians, 91.6% of the administration are White. The number of Asian figures in administration is so negligible as to not be included in the statistics (Hernandez, 2021).

Although analysis of Asian musician's perspectives is limited by the lack of systematic studies into their experiences, there are many accounts of Asian musicians having a similar experience feeling like an outsider in the classical music scene. In the 2019 article "Asians Are Represented in Classical Music. But Are They Seen?," author Javier Hernandez interviews many world wide famous Asian musicians and found that there was a thick wall between success in the industry and receiving respect and recognition from the public. Although Asians make up for the majority of large ensembles, as seen with Asians making up a third of the New York Philharmonic, they continue to remain underrepresented in many parts of the music industry. Due to the large success of Asians in the music industry, many individuals have begun to see them as "cheap," "invasive," and many other derogatory terms. Many Asian's have been even denied opportunities: conductor Mei-Ann Chen was denied meeting and performance opportunities due to her ethnicity (Hernández, 2021). Asian musicians are far too often the victims of these racist incidents and without much institutional support. Unlike other minority groups who have large organizations that are dedicated to social justice within classical music, there is often little to no recourse for these unacceptable actions.

A significant barrier for Asian musicians is the perception that Asians are not underrepresented due to the high level of participation. The high proportion of young Asian musicians enrolling in musical pre-colleges and schools seem to conceal the real problems of misrepresentation and lack of attention to defining Asian identity. Though Asian musicians and composers are showing signs of improvement, one area still severely underdeveloped is music administration. People in these organizations ultimately determine the repertoire and performers who are featured in theaters and concert venues across the world. In an interview with Dr. Eric Hung, he points out the advancement of other African American and Hispanic figures in administration has greatly improved in the last decades. However, without Asian administration taking part in the commissioning and advocating for Asian composers and musicians, the development of Asian music composition and Asian influence will stay limited in the Western World.

Future for Classical Music in an Asian context

While Asian performers and composers have been getting more recognition, there has always been a lack of serious discourse around the meaning of Asian identity or lack thereof. In an interview with researcher Dr. Eric Hung, he claimed that the state of Asian music composition or the representation of Asians has been stagnant. Traditionally, in the discussion of improving minority representation in the United States, the issue has always been linked to exposure of education and classical music. The solutions have been a variety of measures to improve the participation of minority students at every level of expertise. The Sphinx organization, a nationally renowned group which focuses on increasing representation of Black and Latinx artists in classical music and recognizing excellence, continually advocates for diversity of underrepresented groups. Many believe that the prevalence of Asian students in pre-college and youth music programs dismiss the need for additional programs. However, Asian youth rarely see Asian leaders within music and do not seem to find the necessity to explore their identity within a musical context. It is important for Asian students to be offered classes not only on the development of Asian music and prominent Asian musicians and composers but also on the social and cultural context in which world music developed.

Music education has undergone significant changes in recent years as the music industry continues to evolve at a rapid pace. The 21st century has brought new challenges and opportunities for educating professional musicians. As time progresses, musicians must learn to incorporate new tools and techniques into their practice and also learn to navigate an increasingly diverse and multicultural world. One approach to educating professional musicians in the 21st century is through interdisciplinary and collaborative efforts. The strength of Asian identity and representation

will be only as strong as the various social institutions and communities supporting musicians and composers to participate in more in depth discourse on the importance of not merely showcasing an exotic culture as is often the case with Western classical music within an Asian context.

Organizations such as the Music of Asia America Research Center and Kularts strive to preserve the music and perspectives of Asians and Asian Americans within the US. Since Asians are still a small minority in the U.S., special effort needs to be made to make connections with their identity. This approach also helps musicians to better understand the needs and preferences of their audiences, informing their artistic choices and help them connect with broader and more diverse audiences.

Conclusion

To encourage more discourse and participation in classical music, it is important to de-emphasize the superiority of Western convention and encourage the current and new generations of Asian musicians and music professionals to understand ethnomusicology. While Asian musicians and composers have been dismissed by Westerners to some extent, the Asian music community has also failed to address these important issues which has led to a lack of depth within Asian music composition. Musicians, composers, and administration all need to come together to establish a united front in fostering young musicians and composers and creating an environment in which active dialogues can be had about the issue of identity within the Western musical context.

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