The Impact of Buddhist Thought on the Music of Zhou Long: A Consideration of *Dhyana*

Edward Green

From 1987 to 1994, Zhou Long composed in a manner he declared ‘Buddhist’. A work that exemplifies this period—and its aesthetic preoccupations—is the quintet *Dhyana*. This article investigates that work in close technical detail, exploring how key concepts inherent in the term ‘dhyana’ are reflected in the music. Most centrally, ‘dhyana’ implies the oneness of concentration of thought and expansion of consciousness—and concentration and expansion prove to be primary opposites in Zhou Long’s compositional technique. Buddhism (especially Chan Buddhism) asserts the inseparability of these opposites. So does the great Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu, in whom Zhou Long has had an abiding interest. And so does Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy of the arts founded by Eli Siegel, which serves as the methodological framework for this article. Central to Aesthetic Realism is Siegel’s statement: ‘In reality opposites are one, art shows this’.

Keywords: Zhou Long (b. 1953); Dhyana; Buddhism; Chan; Eli Siegel (1902 – 1978); Aesthetic Realism; Du Fu (712 – 770)

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Among the most remarkable works of Zhou Long’s self-declared ‘Buddhist Period’ (1987 – 1994) is Dhyana, a 9½-minute chamber composition scored for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano. Largely composed in 1989, it was premiered in 1990 at the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan, and swiftly became one of Long’s most frequently performed works. It also won the Fifth International Composition Competition in D’Avray, France, in 1991.

In order to give the formal analysis of Dhyana (the heart of this article) its proper context, it is useful to consider first the meaning of this period in Zhou Long’s life. He came to the United States in 1985 to do graduate study at Columbia University as a result of meeting Chou Wen-chung during that composer’s 1979 residency at Beijing’s Central Conservatory. Impressed with Dr Chou’s music, and energized by his call to younger composers to work towards a new confluence of musical cultures, Zhou Long eagerly looked forward to his studies in New York. However, upon arrival, instead of the flood of inspiration he had imagined would be the result of immersion into Western musical culture, he found himself so disoriented that he was unable to compose for nearly two years. ‘It was cultural shock,’ Zhou Long told me. ‘Everything seemed so different—not just the music. And, of course, I was deeply homesick.’ In the midst of this creative crisis, he also received news that his mother had died. It was at this point, filled with emotional turmoil, both personal and professional, that he found composure and strength through a study of Buddhist ideas.

The word ‘study’ is critical. Being ethnically Chinese no more guarantees substantial knowledge of the rich diversity of Chinese culture than being Austrian automatically implies equal fluency in the philosophy of Wittgenstein, the music of Mozart, the history of the Hapsburgs, and the various ‘weirdnesses’ of Freudian doctrine. Though some exposure to Buddhism is to be expected for nearly any person growing up on the mainland in the last thousand (and more) years, the specific years of Zhou Long’s education (he was born in 1953) corresponded to a period in which Buddhism was officially denigrated. It was hardly to be encountered in the schools, let alone with respect, and few in his generation developed a solid sense of its depth and subtlety as a philosophic and spiritual tradition.

What affected Zhou Long most during these studies was the dramatic attitude in Buddhism towards the relation of existence (‘you’, 有) and non-existence (‘wu’, 無). Buddhism, he told me, asks us to be compassionately and very specifically mindful of individual things, moments and people. At the same time, and in apparent contradiction, it also asks us to have a radically different awareness. It insists on the full reality of nothingness, in light of which the boundaries separating thing from thing, moment from moment, person from person, prove illusory. As the ninth century Chan monk Xiyun (希運) insisted: ‘The mind should be like a void emptiness’ (cited in Bodde, 1967, p. 78, n. 28). Yet (and here the dialectics of Buddhism are apparent) it was this same monk (also known as ‘Huangbo’, 黃檗)
who bitterly rejected any notion that the enlightened state was fundamentally opposed to the ordinary use of our minds.\textsuperscript{4}

Let us be empty; let us be full. Let us not grasp at things; let us be lovingly in touch with them. Let the infinite be our guide, and let us keep our minds firmly focused on the objects right before us. Let us be specific and comprehensive.

The paradoxical conjunction of these ethical demands, Zhou Long said, he found at first problematic, and then, ultimately, beautiful—and it was in the light of that beauty that he was able to make sense of what before had seemed only a world of painful confusion and discontinuity. ‘I was thinking very philosophically at the time,’ he observed. Meanwhile, in an irony which he deeply appreciates, it was life in the West—the worldly, bustling, confusing, wonderfully diverse city of New York—that impelled him to a more profound engagement with what he considered the ‘serene’ depths of Chinese culture. Nor was he the only Chinese musician of his generation (and later, too) for whom this was the case.

\section*{Music and Buddhist Philosophy}

Zhou Long’s philosophic meditations had audible consequences. \textit{Dhyana}, one of his earliest ‘Buddhist’ pieces, displays an engaging relation of the two opposed, yet complementary, precepts just mentioned. The composition honors both the finite and the infinite aspects of reality. It has sharply etched form and exquisitely subtle suggestiveness. Sound is organized in it in such a way as to encourage a consciousness of the world as tangibly, definitely ‘here’ (reality as \textit{wu}, demanding our specific mindfulness)—and a consciousness of the world as suffused with mystery (reality as \textit{you}, infinitely ‘open’ and not subject to the restrictions of ordinary thought; or, as the title of another of Zhou Long’s ‘Buddhist’ compositions has it, reality as ‘\textit{Wu Ji}’（無極)—reality without any borders whatsoever).\textsuperscript{5}

It is clear that of the various branches of Chinese Buddhism, it was Chan (the progenitor of Japanese Zen) that affected the composer most centrally, for it is Chan that highlighted the concept of concentrated meditation (the core meaning of the term ‘\textit{dhyana}’) and gave it a special place of honor.\textsuperscript{6} In the Program Notes Zhou Long authorized to accompany his score, there is this:

\begin{quote}
The inspiration for \textit{Dhyana} comes from the Buddhist concept of ‘cultivation of thought’—the process of gathering scattered thoughts and focusing them on one object to arrive at enlightenment. To express the progression from worldliness to serenity and, finally, to purification, the musical structure moves from complex to simple in pitch, from dense to relaxed in rhythm, from tight to open in range, from colorful to monochrome in timbre, from foreground to background in sonority.
\end{quote}

These notes are valuable. They correspond to the impact of the work on a macroscopic level, where there is, indeed, a sense of ‘progress’—a gradual shift of
accent from one opposite to the next. Yet, from another perspective, there is no ‘progression’ at all. Opposites are present in conjunction. Later in this article, I will look at the gradualist aspect of the work, but first I illustrate, through a sustained consideration of its opening 13 measures, how closely opposites are experienced together in this composition (Figure 1).

In these measures we find a constant reinterpretation of the dyad D/Eb. It is the very first sound we encounter, and for two measures no other pitches arrive. Meanwhile, simple as it is, the scoring of that initial dyad makes one experience opposing notions of reality together—specifically, the unchanging and the ever-changing. In m. 1, only the violin’s Eb is doubled, giving the dyad a subtle auditory imbalance. Imbalance (with its implication of change) is also achieved by the striking contrast of dynamics. The cello and flute are in unison, but express the Eb at entirely different dynamic levels. Moreover, change is also highlighted by this fact: while the pizzicati of violin and cello inevitably create a sound which fades, the quieter flute remains steady. In fact, by contrast with the fading sound of the string pizzicati, the flute sound gives the impression of coming forward. All this subtle auditory dynamism occurs exactly as the dyad—from another point of view—does not change at all. As Seng Zhao (僧肇) (374(?–414) noted in his classic essay Wu Buqian Lun (物不遷論, ‘On Time’): ‘Motion need not cease in order to produce rest; therefore, though (things) are at rest they do not cease moving’ (Liebethal, 1968, p. 46).

Continuing with our technical analysis: in m. 2, flute and cello now express different pitches, each taking responsibility for one member of the dyad. Yet as they disagree as to pitch for the first time, they now agree (they did not before) on a dynamic: mp. This dynamic is now substantially louder than that of the violin, which has taken on—in sharp contrast to the dynamic of its first measure—the recessiveness of pp. Meanwhile, if flute and cello have the more prominent dynamic here, their prominence lasts for only the briefest of instants. The quiet, sustained sound of the violin (now arco) now comes forth just as the flute had in the earlier measure. Yet where the flute emerged gradually, the sudden silence of flute and cello in this measure makes the sound of the violin leap forward, all of a sudden, to our consciousness.

I trust it is apparent how carefully Zhou Long designed his music, how impelled he was to create it in such a manner that the presence of opposites is constant. We are concentrating on a single sound: that dyad D/Eb. Yet it is utterly ‘open’, varying from split-second to split-second. We are in a world of fixity and unceasing variability: a world in which a thing remains itself, and is always becoming different from itself. Let us now look at these 13 measures not so much in terms of the opposites of persistence and change, but of concentration and expansion. In its initial statement, the dyad is heard as a compact minor second. It then undergoes reinterpretation of register and voicing. In m. 7 it is heard again as a minor second, but two octaves higher. In a kind of sonic irony, this ever-so-tight interval has been employed to convey its very opposite: we sense, in those two additional octaves, an expansion of auditory space.
Figure 1 Opening measures of *Dhyana*. Copyright © 2003, Oxford University Press, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Photocopying this copyright material is illegal.
The Term 'Dhyana'

I pause to remind the reader of the analogue to ‘dhyana’ as a Buddhist practice, a spiritual discipline. It, too, uses tightness in behalf of expansion. It focuses the mind in order to release it. Or, more precisely, it enables one to be aware of the simultaneity of these opposites. In *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts (1965, p. 94) traces the conflict between those Chan monks who believed in a notion of dhyana as ‘mere empty mindedness’, and the richer conception of the term used by Huineng (慧能) (638–713)—the conception Zhou Long follows: ‘In counteracting the false dhyana... Huineng compares the Great Void to space, and calls it great, not just because it is empty, but because it contains the sun, moon and stars’. The defined and the undefined; emptiness and definiteness; multiplicity of specific entities and the completely undifferentiated—experienced at once: this would be the true ‘dhyana’.

So insistent was Hui-neng that his students avoid one-sidedness, that shortly before he died he gave his disciples these pedagogical instructions:

If, in questioning you, someone asks about being, answer with non-being. If he asks about non-being, answer with being. If he asks about the ordinary man, answer in terms of the sage. If he asks about the sage, answer in terms of the ordinary man. By this method of opposites mutually related there arises an understanding of the Middle Way. (Watts, 1965, p. 94)

With these philosophic considerations in mind, we return to our technical analysis of the opening measures of *Dhyana*. 
When the D/Eb dyad is heard again at the very end of m. 7, it expands space in the opposite direction than that taken before; now it is heard in a lower register. Nor is register the only form of expansion; the dyad itself has taken on a wider configuration. It is now a minor ninth. The next expansion is in m. 9, yet in a somewhat ‘hidden’ manner. The dyad is now heard in inversion: Eb/D. The clarinet has a sustained low Eb, and the piano contributes the D as both the highest, and also the last, note of its figuration. This creates distances of two octaves plus a major seventh and of a simple major seventh. We have thus had, swiftly, five entirely different distributions in space of that simple dyad. Nor is Zhou Long finished being mindful of its potential. In mm. 10 – 12, the flute presents the dyad yet again. It has returned to its initial structure, D/Eb, but is now present in a melodic and microtonally sinuous form. That makes six distinct presentations in 13 measures—seven, if one includes the brief sfz pizzicato of the dyad on violin, in its original register, in m. 6. The question thus arises, unconsciously as we listen and consciously as we analyze: what message about reality does this composition of Zhou Long convey?

Arising from with the composer’s understanding of Buddhist ideas, and through the symbolic potency of musical sound, the message, as I understand it, is this: reality cannot be experienced apart from the dramatic contrast of opposites, and yet, in the deepest sense, opposites are one—are indistinguishable. For how else could tightness be expansiveness? How else could an unchanging sustained sound be experienced as something suddenly flying forward into prominence? How else, in short, can a thing be what it is and the opposite of what it is? This philosophic message, embodied within the ‘sonic landscape’ created by Dhyana, is not to be construed as inherently ‘Eastern’ in some essentialist notion of the word. Certainly, it arises from an Eastern source—Zhou Long is, after all, Chinese, and the Buddhist texts he cared for so deeply were largely Chinese. Still, it is a message of universal significance. This universality becomes apparent when we think about Zhou Long’s music from the perspective of Aesthetic Realism, the education founded in 1941 by Eli Siegel (1902–1978). One of the core principles animating this great philosophy is: ‘In reality opposites are one; art shows this’ (cited in Green, 2005b, p. 233).

Aesthetic Realism and the Meaning of Art

Philosophy, at its finest, East or West, has implied that the ultimate nature of reality must be present in every instance of it, or reflected in every instance of it. As Eli Siegel explained—and was the first philosopher to do so—all successful art, from whatever culture or whatever century, illustrates this. He said: ‘The world, art, and self explain each other; each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites’ (cited in Green, 2005a, pp. 438–440). This way of thinking about art puts the field of aesthetics, at last, on a solidly scientific footing. It is also enormously kind; it shows that we can learn directly, technically, from the art of any culture about the most immediate questions of our personal lives. It also carries with it a tremendous philosophic implication, not
present in the work of any previous philosopher, West or East: since what we experience in art is the oneness of opposites, and this is likewise the nature of reality, and since we experience the oneness of opposites in art not as a ‘value-neutral’ thing, but as beauty, then there is honest reason to like the world. The world itself has, fundamentally, an aesthetic nature.\textsuperscript{8}

As noted before, in the discussion about Hui-neng, in ordinary life, people err constantly by separating opposites. This, Eli Siegel pointed out, is something—on a strictly technical level—art never does.\textsuperscript{9} Reality is misjudged when it is made either too hard or too soft, too sharply ‘definite’ or too vaguely ‘indefinite’. We err when we lack a sense of mystery, and we err equally when we act as if everything is mysterious. If we assert that everything is in flux, we are as one-sided as if we argue that change is an illusion. The function of art, as Aesthetic Realism conceives it, is to keep us from these errors by demonstrating, literally, what it means to have a beautiful state of mind.

In a work from the late 1950s, whose text is clearly relevant to the philosophic issues Zhou Long wrestled with as he composed \textit{Dhyana}, Eli Siegel noted:

\begin{quote}
In the same way as existence has to be infinite and finite at once, so a work of art must be suggestive and tight at once. This is what criticism of the arts has said for a long time . . . . [T]he problem of economy and spaciousness in art is not apart from finite and infinite as philosophic matters of thought . . . . Too much matter and too much space or ‘roominess’ can both hurt a work of art. Concreteness by itself or the intangible by itself can both interfere with the effect of a work.
\end{quote}

Moreover, these technical issues are not separate from life, and the everyday hopes of men and women. ‘The mind of man,’ he continued, ‘desires the touchable as it desires the spaciously significant’ (Siegel, c.1957, pp. 2 – 3). As I have already hinted, one can gather that Zhou Long was stirred by the idea of creating a parallel between the central technique of ‘dhyana’ as a Buddhist meditative practice and the central technique of \textit{Dhyana}, the musical composition. That ‘shared technique’, in a nutshell, can be described as: ‘Tightness Becoming Expansiveness’. We concentrate in order to have our minds as wide as possible. We give justice to one thing in order to have minds ready to give justice to everything.

\textbf{How Tightness Becomes Expansion}

Some of how this technique is present, musically, has already been investigated. Here is another instance, again from the opening measures. Consider the cello figuration of mm. 3 – 4. It is a six-note sequence (Ab, D, Db, C, A, Eb), which needs a very short duration of time to express itself: the equivalent of five eighth-notes at $\frac{\mathbf{4}}{\mathbf{4}} = 120$. Then, beginning with the ‘jumpbeat’ cello harmonic right before m. 7, and continuing through to the second beat of m. 10, we hear the same six notes, though in altered sequence: C#, C, D, G#, A, Eb. Where five eighth-notes of duration were needed
before, this presentation requires 28 (42, if we follow the final Eb through to its release in m. 12). Zhou Long is once more dealing with the opposites of identity and change. The same ‘sonic material’ is heard first in a tight form and then an expanded one. Only whereas in the earlier case (the D/Eb dyad) the drama of opposites played out in auditory space, it is now playing out in auditory time. In fact, when we take into account the rit the composer marks at the beginning of m. 10, the degree of expansion is even greater than the 5:28, or 5:42 proportion just observed.

It may be said that here we are on the edge of audibility because without a score it is questionable how easily one might hear the fundamental identity of these two cello figurations. Yet that is just the point! The exquisite (in fact, ineffable) relation of identity and non-identity is a philosophic matter. ‘Reality is not a separate entity’, writes the Tibetan master, Chögyam Trungpa (the eleventh incarnation of the Trungpa Tulku):

One is already part of that reality, so all that remains is to take away the doubt... [T]here is such a thing as personality, in a way, but we are not really individuals as separate from the environment, or as separate from external phenomena... If there is individuality, there must also be oneness. (Trungpa, 1969, pp. 60 – 61)

All honest meditation, he explains, is for the purpose of opening the self, of breaking down artificial barriers.

The term ‘dhyana’ technically refers to that concentrated, meditative state of mind that enables one to reach an awareness of the utter inter-relation of all things, and the vast, ineffable, unbounded source of all things that, technically, must be called ‘nothing’ or ‘non-existence’. (The final work of Zhou Long’s Buddhist period, in fact, is a 1994 composition entitled The Ineffable (‘Xuan’, 隨). As we shall continue to see, the technique of letting space invade what at first seemed ever-so tight and solid governs every aspect of Dhyana’s formal structure and its expressive strategy.

Its overall structure is strophic, the most elemental of all musical structures. Yet even as it employs this sharply defined form, it does so in a novel way. As hinted at in the Program Notes, and as the composer made explicit in conversation with me, the work was designed to suggest a progression from what he considered to be a more ‘Western’ notion of crisply articulated form (a ‘worldlier’ state of mind) towards a more ‘Eastern’ dissolution of that form: a sonic analogue of the ‘serene’ realization that behind all specific, finite, definite things is the infinitely unbounded. Perhaps the most obvious way this can be heard is in the increasing use by the composer of silence as the work goes on. Whether this generalization about the West and the East is ultimately legitimate can (and ought to) be questioned. Clearly, there are trends in every human culture towards each state of mind. Beijing and New York, let alone medieval Timbuktu and the aboriginal Australian Outback, have witnessed an interest in the tangibly Finite and the ungraspably Infinite. Still, the composer is
hardly alone in making these cultural associations. As Fung Yu-lan (1948, p. 24) notes, in his *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*:

When a student of Chinese philosophy begins to study Western philosophy, he is glad to see that the Greek philosophers also made a distinction between Being and Non-being, the limited and the unlimited. But he feels rather surprised to find that the Greek philosophers held that Non-being and the unlimited are inferior to Being and the limited. In Chinese philosophy, the case is just the reverse.

We need, then, to consider the possibility that *Dhyana* was shaped by its composer on two different levels. It is apparent that Zhou Long consciously associated the re-establishment of his personal serenity with a new commitment to Eastern philosophic ideas. On this level, he shaped the piece to reflect a progression from West to East. By contrast, and perhaps on a less conscious level, the piece was shaped by a desire to transcend such cultural distinctions: to say something of abiding, universal validity about the Finite and the Infinite, the Concentrated and the Open, the Changeable and the Persistent. On this level, the piece is not a victory of ‘Chinese’ thought over ‘Western’, but an aesthetic victory that is disarmingly human. Nor should we forget that the idea of belonging to a specific culture, while simultaneously belonging to humanity as a whole, is yet one further instance of the opposites of tightness and expansion. Here, too, one can err aesthetically: by running away from one’s roots, or by clinging, in an exclusive, xenophobic manner, to them.

That, of course, was something of a ‘sociological’ aside. Or, perhaps, not—for let us return directly to the analysis of *Dhyana* and see how the two ‘stories’ interact structurally. The work begins with two tightly argued ‘expository’ strophes. Internally, each has an *ABC* structure (Figure 2). It is a structure that accents the idea of ‘reality as change’. (Mm. 1 – 13, already investigated, constitute section A.) Yet different as A, B and C are, they all make use of a single core idea: the contrast between the ‘tightness’ of the minor second and the ‘expansiveness’ of the tritone. (In set theory, these correspond to 1 and 6: the greatest fundamental contrast in terms of intervallic space.) Consider some of the more prominent figures to be found in this opening strophe. We hear tritones in close conjunction with minor seconds, which, of course, invert to major sevenths without changing their ‘Fortean’ identity.

Strophe II is very similar to Strophe I, but slightly expanded: 43 measures in length where the earlier strophe was 33. More interestingly, while its A section varies the material of the previous A section at pitch, its B and C sections are transposed up a semitone. This is a technique to which, as far as I know, Zhou Long never returned. In keeping with the first of the two Buddhist precepts Zhou Long spoke of, these strophes are relatively compact and clear. They are ‘concentrated’. They honor a set of very specific musical identities; and the variations, such as they are, in the second strophe, barely register as variations. We are aware of something subtly different, but the emphasis is on the subtlety. They are followed, however, by two strophes in which the complementary precept is honored: the object opens itself up and is penetrated by, and joins, the wide world beyond itself. One could call these strophes ‘developmental’, yet it would be more appropriate, given the prevailing Chinese
aesthetics of the work and the eventual triumph (as Zhou Long, at least on one level, conceived it) of Buddhist feeling, to take a cue from his program notes and call these ‘strophes of openness and relaxation’. So open, so relaxed is the second half of this structure (Strophes III and IV) relative to its first half (Strophes I and II) that it takes more than twice the time for it to unfold; this, as we shall see, despite the fact that the final strophe is left purposefully incomplete.

Another difference between the two halves of the composition is that in part two the composer purposefully interrupts his ABC structure. There is an extended interlude that follows the A section in Strophe III; and in Strophe IV, the A section is constantly infused with ideas that seem purposefully to interrupt, veil and eventually dissolve its identity as a distinct section. The musical material used in both these instances, while based on ideas heard before, nonetheless sharply distinguishes itself from the music elsewhere in the composition. These passages appear to ‘suspend time’. They are given slower tempi, and the density of their rhythmic activity is far thinner than what surrounds them. Moreover, the overall timbre is different:

![Figure 2](figure2.png)
in these interludes the composer takes great pains to give his entirely Western instrumental ensemble a more distinctly ‘Chinese’ accent. For example, the piano plays in a *qin* (zither)-like manner, with much use of inside-the-piano harmonics and *pizzicati*. The violin (and even more clearly the cello) is employed in a manner reminiscent of the *erhu* (two-stringed fiddle), and the flute and clarinet microtonal *glissandi* of the *xiao* (vertical bamboo flute).

From a programmatic point of view these interludes appear to represent Chinese (and Buddhist) feeling gradually taking over center-stage sonically. Certainly this third strophe sounds very different from the first. So deeply, in fact, does the Buddhist point of view eventually triumph that Strophe IV never completes itself. In it, we hear section A, and that is it! *Dhyana* literally ends—from a formal perspective—by ‘opening itself’ out into space.\(^\text{13}\) Table 1 provides, through its measure numbers, a ‘bird’s-eye’ view of the composition. The asterisk is used to indicate that in Strophe II the B and C sections, but not the A section, are transposed up a semitone. As mentioned earlier, in this subtle way (for this a largely atonal composition), the composer keeps the composition tonally off-balance, and thus alive.

As I have implied, the conscious strategy of the work is to provide a ‘Buddhist’ conclusion to a ‘Western’ beginning as a means of joining the opposites of the bounded and the unbounded, the defined and the mysterious. Technically this means going from a ‘tighter’ to a more ‘relaxed’ sense of form. Being a good composer, Zhou Long hints at the strategy right from the start. Let us return to the first strophe’s opening section. It is, in fact, divided in two: an initial exposition (m. 1 through the first half of m. 6) and then a restatement (the second half of m. 6 through m. 13) that is nearly twice as long as its tighter ‘model’ due to longer metric units per measure and the mark of *rit* at m. 10. Thus the very opening section of the work presages the proportions of the entire composition: the second half of *Dhyana* (the final strophes) takes roughly twice as long as the initial pair.

**Two Ways with Temporal Proportion**

This proportion, in fact, seems to obtain between the strophes, too. Strophe I takes (roughly) 1’ 25''. Strophe II is (again roughly) 2’ 15''—just short of double the length. Strophe III again is a near-doubling: 4’ 15''. Strophe IV appears at first to contradict the design since it takes a mere 2’ 20'' or so; yet when one considers that it is left unfinished, the true impression it makes is of yet another step in a possibly infinite

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chain of expansions. It is to be noted that this is not the usual way in Western music. It is well-known that most pieces in the Western tradition (at least for the last several hundred years or so) climax roughly two-thirds of the way through. There have been Fibonacci studies of Debussy, Bartók and many other masters of the European musical tradition supporting this analysis of the ‘typically Western’ way of feeling musical time. It has even been observed that the most successful Broadway shows tend to have a first act that is roughly twice the length of the second: all of Rodgers and Hammerstein, for example, follow this model.

What Zhou Long is doing, therefore, as he constructs Dhyana in this progressively ‘looser’ assemblage of essentially parallel strophes, flies in the face of Western expectations of form. Rather than proportion the work 2:1, he proportions it 1:2. And, as I indicated, what with that incomplete final strophe, there is a hint of the proportion 1:∞. The question facing the analyst is: why then does this work succeed, not only with Eastern audiences, but with Western as well?—and its popularity shows that it has. The answer, I believe, lies in the fact that even as the work ‘loosens up’ (supposedly an Eastern thing to do), it maintains throughout a ‘tightness’ of motivic structure (an emblematically Western musical procedure). In fact, from the motivic point of view, Dhyana gets tighter and tighter as it goes on, even as simultaneously, from the rhythmic and temporal point of view, it grows more diffuse.

What we are encountering illustrates the Aesthetic Realism principle: ‘All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves’.14 Evidence for its truth can be seen not only in the composition which I am considering in this essay, but in all the music written of in this issue of Contemporary Music Review. And this principle, universal in outlook and free of cultural bias, is particularly relevant when we are analyzing music that attempts to meld disparate musical traditions—and Zhou Long’s Dhyana is just such a work. This composition succeeds because even as, on one level, it seeks to dramatize the differences between West and East, on a deeper level it refuses to set Western and Eastern views at odds with each other, as if they were dueling binarisms (see Green & Perey, 2004). Everywhere in the world, Eli Siegel explained, people are trying to put opposites together; and when opposites are experienced as one, they sense beauty. That people go after this with different cultural accents, and with different cultural expectations, is patent—but that in no way prejudices the main point.

The Coda—and the Oneness of Concentration and Expansion

In a famous passage, praising the poetic art of Zhang Jiuling (張九齡), Du Fu (杜甫) wrote the following words, which I see as deeply applicable, too, to an appreciation of the art with which Zhou Long concludes his composition:

A poem is done, yet leaving further space,
The text ends where words are lucid and terse.15　
詩罷地有余，篇終語清省。
It happens that Du Fu (712–770) is a poet for whom the composer has always
maintained a deep affection, and he has told me in conversation that, as a composer,
he learned a great deal from him—from a close study of the technique of his poetry.
The coda of Dhyana is a good place to observe this (see Figure 3).

The composition concludes with nearly a minute of music focused, ‘lucidly and
tersely’, on only two intervals: the semitone Eb/D (with various microtonal colorations)
and the tritone G/C#. Eb and D are, of course, the very pitches with which the work
begins, and at every statement of section A we meet them prominently. They provide,
in a sense, the ‘tonal center’ of the work—the sonority from which we depart, and to
which we return. Yet until this Coda, this most diffuse of sections, we have never
encountered that sonority in such a concentrated, pure and continuous manner.
Similarly, this is a ‘tritone-haunted’ work. Some of the reason I say this has already been
indicated. Yet many other passages could be cited. For example, mm. 3–8 (Figure 1)
are entirely structured around the tritone. Even earlier, in mm. 1–3, Zhou Long defines
tonal space by spreading out in tritones (plus octaves) from his initial Eb/D. The
highest note is A (on the flute), the lowest Ab (on the cello). When we look again at the
clarinet motif that begins section B (see Figure 2b), we notice that it begins with a
pattern that is the inversion, at the tritone, of the cello motive from measures 3 and 4
(Figure 3). Further, the cello motif itself is a six-note set, which is nothing other than a
tritone transposition of the six-note set (the ‘primary cell’) that comprises the notes
used at the start of the composition by the ensemble as a whole (see Figure 4).

There is another feature to the opening measures of the composition that is
remarkable in light of the drama throughout Dhyana between the tritone and the
minor second. It appears that the tritones come at us, almost exclusively, in patterns
that are groupings of minor seconds. That is, if one returns again to Figure 1, we note
in mm. 3–4, the cello line having first the tritone Ab/D and then (in inversion) the
tritone A/Eb. The violin then presents the tritone B/E. In m. 5, the flute reverses the
motion, giving us two semitonally descending tritones: A/Eb first, and then Ab/D. At
this point, there is a new semitonal grouping. The violin (m. 5) plays E/Bb, and then
reaches a high F, soon doubled three octaves lower on clarinet. What follows? A low B
on cello (m. 6). Thus the pattern of tritones is E/Bb – F/B.

A similar pair is found later in m. 6 as the flute and clarinet present two parallel
tritones a minor seventh apart: Db/G – C/F#. Another pair then is heard: the cello
plays D/G# (mm. 7–8) and then in m. 9 plays an A above which we hear an Eb on the
clarinet. Taken together, mm. 3–9 present all six possible tritonal pairs. Clearly
the tritone is, by implication, critical to the opening measures of Dhyana—as it is, in
fact, throughout the work. Yet in the coda, it is no longer an ‘implied’ matter; it is
utterly direct. There we meet a constantly reiterated G/C#. Thus the most important
motivic feature of the piece has been concentrated, made more dense and definite,
even as the overall sense of time flows out into infinity. I quote again from the
Program Notes: ‘The inspiration for Dhyana comes from the Buddhist concept of
“cultivation of thought”—the process of gathering scattered thoughts and focusing
them on one object to arrive at enlightenment’. That is what this coda does: it
‘focuses’. It tightens our attention even as we spread out to an ‘enlightened’ view of things: an awareness of the illusion of ‘tight boundaries’. Paradox, yes, but such is the nature of beauty. And as Du Fu noted in another poem:

At peace, the mind flies, soaring high;  
The text, at its end, joins the vast.  
(At peace, the mind flies, soaring high; The text, at its end, joins the vast. (Cited in Ye, 1996, p. 19; translation by Ye))

These words express the emotional impact as Dhyana ends, as we meet the final sounds of its ‘text’.

Some Temporal Subtleties

Another fascinating feature of the Coda is how it provides (mm. 159 – 162) a subtle quotation of mm. 1 – 5. Why subtle? Because time flows in it both forward and

Figure 3 The coda of Dhyana. Copyright © 2003, Oxford University Press, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Photocopying this copyright material is illegal.
Figure 3 (Continued).

Analytic Chart No. 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>mm.1-3</th>
<th>mm. 3-4 (vel)</th>
<th>mm. 14-15 (cl)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 0 4 5 7 6 0 6</td>
<td>5 4 1 7 0 6 5</td>
<td>4 1 7 0 6 5 4 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(original set)   (set transposed up tritone) (inversion of original set)

Figure 4 Set transformations in *Dhyana*. 
backward. These measures are largely a retrograde of the opening of the work—and yet within those measures certain patterns nevertheless occur in their ‘normal’ temporal sequence (Table 2). If time can flow forward and backward at once, and we can sense it doing so, perhaps we are having a fuller experience of time than is customary—perhaps more truthful.

And in keeping with time flowing forward and backward, let us take one final look at the opening strophe of the composition. A critical technique in Dhyana is one I shall call ‘interpenetration’. Consider the flute figure of m. 5: a new musical idea, yet built entirely of pitch structures heard in the four previous measures (mostly on other instruments)—structures which now interpenetrate. This can be seen in the analytic reduction in Figure 5.

Perhaps the most startling aspect of ‘interpenetration’—of freedom and order, definition and openness made one—can be seen in Zhou Long’s unusual serial technique. As we look at the opening of the B section Strophe I (Figure 6), we observe that the composer has organized the interplay of the clarinet and flute through a row (itself derived from the primary cell) in the following manner: not by a traditional division into two hexachords, but by a tripartite arrangement of five pitches, followed by four, followed by three. Every time the row cycles through, it is strictly organized this way, yet there is always freedom as well. In each new presentation of the row, two of its three units are a direct result of a previous unit (either by transposition, or inversion, or both), while one of the three units reconfigures its internal order in a way that cannot be predicted ahead of time. Figure 7 is an analytic reduction of the first three presentations of the row. Once again, we are dealing with a primary aesthetic issue in this work, the opposites of the defined and the undefined, the strict and the free—only now in a serial context.

I have hinted at the fact that there is a drama in Dhyana of Western and Eastern thought: a drama that had deep personal meaning for the composer. Without wishing in the slightest to bifurcate cultures along essentialist grounds (calling one dynamic and the other meditative), it was, without doubt, exactly that contrast Zhou Long indicated he found so disorienting during his first months in New York. The city’s energy, and all the modern ideas about music he was encountering at Columbia, seemed a world apart from the peace and introspection that characterized the ancient music of India.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2 Dhyana: temporal sequence.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strophe I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – 3</td>
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</tbody>
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from the more deliberate tempo of traditional Chinese life (as he had experienced it) and the quieter pacing of traditional Chinese music. He wanted to join the two musical worlds and, by so doing, join the cultural worlds, the worlds of thought, behind them.
In an even deeper sense, one can surmise that the composer wanted to bring together two aspects of himself. ‘The resolution of conflict in self, is like the making one of opposites in art’, wrote Eli Siegel (1981, p. 83). In Dhyana, Zhou Long went after this resolution and gave it a conscious Buddhist upshot, but it is a Buddhism that does not turn its back on the West. The motivic logic of Dhyana, its instrumentation and its use of serial procedures are all plainly Western.

As I indicated in my Editor’s Introduction, I have felt for many years that a new form of music is developing: one in which Chinese experience and Western experience meet on equal terms and give birth to something neither exclusively Chinese nor Western, but palpably both—and palpably new, much as jazz is clearly both African and European in origin, and yet sounds like neither. I would not say that Dhyana is a masterpiece of this new genre, simply because the genre is still in gestation, but when the genre does fully arrive, I believe this composition of Zhou Long will be seen as one of its clearest and most compelling harbingers.

Notes

[1] Biographical detail is based on conversations with the composer (see also Green, 2004 – 2005).

[2] For a compact overview of Buddhist influence in China over the last two millennia, see Wright, 1959, p. 959.

[3] One of the earliest masters of Chinese Buddhism to insist on the simultaneity of wu and you was Jizang (吉藏) (549 – 623).


[5] Wu Ji (無極) joins an ideogram implying ‘nothing’ or ‘the lack of’ with another meaning both ‘polarity’ and ‘infinity’. Together they indicate that which is always present, beyond the particularities of space and time. The composition was first scored for piano and tape (1987), and later was rearranged for piano, zheng and percussion (1991), and then for piano and percussion (2002 and 2004).

[6] In most schools of Mahayana Buddhism, dhyana is just one among a larger group of equally important Paramitas. For the typical placement of ‘Dhyana-paramita’ in the over-all ‘training of a Bodhisattva towards Enlightenment’, see Gard (1962, esp. pp. 145 – 150).

[7] That duality and non-duality are equally real has been asserted by certain schools of Buddhism. A great scholar of the Sanlun school of the Sui-Tang era, Jizang, noted: ‘At the first stage [of training], existence is identified as conventional truth, while emptiness is the absolute truth. Next, emptiness and existence are both taken to represent the conventional truth, while neither emptiness nor existence is the absolute truth. At the third stage, both duality and nonduality are understood as conventional truth, whereas neither duality nor nonduality is the absolute truth’ (cited in Poceski, 2007, p. 213).


[10] Cf. Siegel (1981, pp. 117 – 118): ‘There is a tremendous correspondence between the very unlimited depths of personality and the astonishing universe in its suddenness, its ordinariness, its surprisingness, its concreteness, its boundlessness. The depths, the real depths, of self, are the world’.

Zhou Long himself has noted that while silence is not a general characteristic of his overall musical style, it was characteristic of his 'Buddhist' period (see Green, 2004, p. 70).

As Yang Ye (1996, p. 14; emphasis in original) points out, Chinese poets typically use their final words 'to point to what is beyond the text itself'.

Cited in Siegel (1997, p. 13). Originally from his lecture of 5 August 1949 entitled 'Aesthetic Realism and Beauty'.

Cited in Ye (1996, p. 19; translation is Ye's). It may be useful to note, as William Hung (1972, p. 265) did, there is 'ample evidence of Tu Fu's fondness for Buddhism'. (Hung's article was a review of A. R. Davis, Tu Fu (New York: Twayne, 1971).)

Such, too, Eli Siegel explained, is the nature of wonder when that emotion is sincere—and wonder is inseparable from enlightenment. (See the concept of 'miao' (妙), which is central to Mahayana Buddhism, and can be found prominently in the Lotus Sutra.) In his Definitions and Comment: Being a Description of the World (Siegel, 1945, p. 2), he noted: ‘Wonder is knowledge making the unknown more immediate…. The self has a hugging propensity and an extending propensity. When, concentrating on something, the self sees extension, new territory, the hitherto unseen… wonder has come to be…. The fact that knowledge has to be before there can be wonder holds good all the time. The sense of otherness, the unknown, the unpatterned, the uncaptured, must be solid, and wide, and deep. If there is not knowledge, the unknown is taken casually—even though there may seem to be excitement. For what makes wonder about the unknown a bigger thing, nearer complete as wonder, is the feeling that the unknown can be known—even while it isn’t. And this feeling that the unknown can be known is big in proportion to how much we know already’.

To a certain extent, this technique was foreshadowed in various earlier compositions by Chou Wen-chung, Zhou Long's teacher—a fact Zhou Long happily and gratefully acknowledges. Dhyana is dedicated to Dr Chou.

References


