

'If Music Be the Food of Love': An Acoustic 'Fourth World' in Ong Keng Sen's *Awaking*

Marcus Cheng Chye Tan (Trinity College Dublin)

'Music is the Universal Language of Mankind': Sonic & Performance Universals

In the opening pages of a stimulating explication on the state of world music today, ethnomusicologist Laurent Aubert asks, 'if, as one hears, music is a universal language, of what music do we speak, wherein lies its universality and under which conditions does it emerge?' (xii). The plausibility of music's universality, its transcultural semantics, and humanist affections, has long been debated in the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology. Aubert's inquiry, however, interrogates this episteme of universalism in sound and notes how in an aural encounter with a 'music of the Other,' a dilemma often encountered in ethnomusicology, universality is not about a transcendental signified or an affective communion but a comment about one's own musical tradition and sensibilities, particularly when one fails to specify what music is being referred to (Aubert 7).

Like hybridity, disguised appropriation is the trademark of interculturalism on the stage, for such Orientalist importations first began as a genuine attempt at comprehending the performance philosophies of the alien Other. Expeditions of humanist ideals led to a quest for universal structures, beginning with Victor Turner's anthropological quest of establishing social dramas as universals in myth, ritual and drama, which was built on by Richard Schechner's consequent developments.¹ Performance theory developed from the efforts of Turner and Schechner. Asian performance practices and principles were

¹ See Victor Turner, 'Are there Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?' and Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory* or 'Intercultural Performance: An Introduction.'

consequently adopted and adapted by practitioners such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine and Eugenio Barba in an attempt to explore the deep structures of theatrical practices that could enunciate performance universals.

Universality has been a contested claim in both the fields of ethnomusicology (and musicology) and intercultural performance since Edward Said's theories of Orientalism caused paradigm shifts in Western academia's treatment and depiction of the 'East.' In the light of these performative, intercultural and Orientalist debates about universal principles in performance, this paper seeks to examine the intersections of musical and theatrical universals in a particular performance and the ways in which 'universalisms' are consistently employed and deployed in performance. It thereby addresses the questions Aubert raises as well. Specifically, the paper will examine the soundscape of Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen's most recent intercultural project *Awaking* through a close 'listening' of the final act, in which the music performed is a convergence of Western and Eastern sounds that engenders a new cosmological universal. A soundscape, a term first coined by R. Murray Schafer in his seminal work *The Tuning of the World* (1977), can be understood as an acoustic environment, or an environment of sound. It is an auditory 'terrain' that maps the composition of noises, sounds, music and human melodies in a particular space and context. As Barry Truax notes, it is 'how the individual and society as a whole understand the acoustic environment through listening' (xii). An intercultural soundscape is thus one in which listeners comprehend the cultural interactions and intersections, and the engendered intercultural space, in performance. A study of music and sound, an often neglected area of performance analysis which is frequently considered secondary to the visual spectacle,

serving only to augment the emotional atmosphere of the performance, could consequently facilitate a clearer understanding of the cultural dynamics on stage, particularly in the light of *Awaking's* performance of the intercultural as sonic negotiation. In undertaking such a study, this paper postulates that despite attempts at re-appropriating and underscoring the autonomy of the East in intercultural discourses, *Awaking* (re)performs Western notions of universalism, albeit ones that are merely re-tuned to an 'Oriental' acoustic signature. *Awaking* can thus be said to engage explicitly with early modern notions of universalism reformulated as a postmodern performative through the performance of sound.

Staged as an attempt to 'bring together Shakespeare's plays and Tang Xian Zu's classical tale made popular as Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion*' (Programme Notes), *Awaking* marks Ong's paradigmatic shift in dramatic strategies of (re)figuring the intercultural that is Other to Western modes. In Ong's earlier controversial works such as the Shakespeare-trilogy *Lear* (1997), *Desdemona* (2000) and *Search Hamlet* (2002), the intercultural involved an interplay of juxtaposed cultural spectacles framed by inversions of and re-visions to Shakespeare's text. *Awaking*, however, attempted to explore issues of inter-culture beyond a visual aesthetic and depart from ocular obsession to aural encounter. It thus trod on the borders of theatrical and musical conventions in intercultural performance discourse, for it featured the music and musicians as central performative devices of (re)presenting the intercultural.

This 'dramatic concert' (Ong) was thus a product of a collaboration between The Musicians of The Globe, led by music director Philip Pickett, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) under the direction of Maestro Tsung Yeh, and the Northern Kunqu

Opera Theatre troupe from Beijing. The performative structure of a triadic interplay between Kunqu opera (昆曲), Chinese classical music and Elizabethan folk tunes from Shakespeare's plays became a hybrid composition that sought to explore 'the differing yet connected philosophies of love, death, and the afterlife' (Publicity pamphlet). This tripartite negotiation of these metaphysical universals found expression in the triadic relation between the three performance traditions. The humanist and 'universal' themes were thus embodied in the 'universal' language of music creating, in the space of performance, an imagined intercultural heterotopia of an 'after-life' – a 'Fourth World.' The term 'Fourth World' is minimalist composer and trumpeter Jon Hassell's title for his 'world music' albums that attempt to feature the exotic sounds of the East in fusion with those of contemporary Western music.² It describes, more significantly, his compositional philosophy of minimalist fusion: a sonic topography of utopian interzones composed of electronic sounds and Asian-African rhythms and musics.

The arcadian Fourth World of *Awaking* is the acoustemologies of intercultural interstices.³ The shared belief in a universal cosmology engendered by the quality of music is distinctly revealed when Ong writes of how *Awaking* was an attempt to merge aesthetic and cultural parallels of West and East exemplified by the lives and canonical

² The term 'Fourth World' can be understood from a variety of perspectives. It can be regarded as a creation of a 'fourth' world/space from the three performance traditions represented on the stage. It is also used to underscore, and de-centre, the Orientalist discourses prevalent in Jon Hassell's music. For an experience of Hassell's music, listen to *Fourth World, Vol 1: Possible Musics*, also *Fourth World, Vol 2: Dream Theory in Malaya*.

³ The term 'acoustemology' was coined by anthropologist Steven Feld to denote the specific relations between acoustic experience and epistemology in the establishment of personal and cultural identity. Feld created the term to study the sense of place and the place of senses in the Kaluli people's experience and expression of the tropical rainforest in Papua New Guinea. For Feld, sound could denote specific local conditions, knowledge and imagination embodied in a culturally particular sense of place (91). See 'Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea' in *Senses of Place*. I have adapted this term to performance analysis by considering the ways in which acoustic densities in intercultural performance can be accessed and understood by listening phenomenologically and considering the ways that acoustics can engender an inter-cultural epistemology.

works of Shakespeare and Tang Xian Zu (汤显祖). Both playwrights lived in the 16th century and wrote great dramatic works that have transcended temporalities; both wrote of tragic lovers and states of unrequited love. For example, the star-crossed lives of Hamlet and Ophelia mirror those of Du Liniang (杜丽娘) and Liu Mengmei (柳梦梅) in *Mudan Ting* (牡丹亭) / *The Peony Pavilion*. Ong attempted to use music as a performative instrument to stage the universal, thus highlighting the parallels between the cosmologies of East and West. He notes that 'sad songs and happy songs of love became the pillars of quotes for us' (Ong, 'Programme Notes'). Ong's equation of sonic with metaphysical universals consequently created in the space of performance an aesthetically seductive idea of an intercultural acoustemology.

Awaking to a 'Fourth World': An Intercultural Acoustemology

The dramatic structure of the performance exemplifies Ong's dramatic philosophy of juxtaposition as central tenet of the intercultural. The performance was partitioned into five acts with each act musically contrasting the act preceding, leading to a finale. Each prior act featured the musics of the cultural divide, with Acts I and III assigned to the performance of *The Peony Pavilion* and Qu Xiao Song's, *Awaking's* composer, contemporary classical composition and Acts II and IV showcasing songs from Shakespeare's plays respectively. The universals of love, life and death were interwoven into this structure of 'quotations' (Ong, 'Programme Notes'). This antiphonal structure culminated in a finale where 'the universe unite[d].'⁴ The final act saw the involvement of all the musicians – both Eastern and Western – with the attempt to create an orchestral

⁴ This is the title of the Final Act.

denouement of a journey into the after-life, an alternate consciousness reflected through a *mise en abyme*.

The dramatic structure of antiphonal citations metatheatrically performs the philosophical and cultural dissimilarities underlying two different musical systems and the purported incompatibilities between Renaissance music and Chinese classical and Kunqu sounds. Since the structure is presented as a ‘dialogue’ between the two dominant traditions, with each being performed in an alternate sequence, the final Act effects a potential reversal of dramatic attitudes through a performance of syncretism within sound types, and between sight and sound. In the attempt to unite universes, physical and metaphysical, visual and aural, Western and Far Eastern, Ong and Qu engineered an aural performative that became a sonic ‘spectacle.’⁵ The ‘awaking’ to a ‘Fourth World’ was an acoustic space of simulated harmony between the three performance styles and two dominant cultural traditions.⁶ The compositional structure of the finale distinctly reflects the movement, both musical and theatrical, toward an intercultural acoustemology. Qu necessitated an involvement of all musicians segregated, proxemically, on the stage. While the solitary video screen located above the stage revealed two geometric circles merging, as a most overt signifier of merging universes, a violin solo, played by the violinist from the Globe ensemble, performed a variation from Qu’s theme for *Awaking* as the *luo* (锣) (Chinese high tin-bronze gong) reverberated with a deep resonant echo. The audience saw Wei emerge from offstage, stripped of the vestimentary and cosmetic codes that had earlier assigned her as a *guimen dan* (闺门旦), a particular female role of

⁵ The term spectacle has generally been used with reference to visual aesthetics. There is, however, an increasing association of the term with the aural sense particularly in the area of Film Studies.

⁶ In the post-show dialogue, Ong calls this a ‘Third World’ – a transcendental new space which engenders a new culture. For Ong, transcultural work necessitated the creation of something new. ‘Through layering, collage, juxtaposition and quotation, a new space emerges in the finale.’

the Kunqu tradition.⁷ Garbed in a layered 'patchwork' floral dress, and gracefully manipulating a fan in her hand, she danced across, still abiding by the stylized kinesic movements of Kunqu. The physical 'deconstruction' of her *dan* role mirrored the visual narrative of Singaporean Choy Ka Fai's cosmetic 'deconstruction' of character (Du Liniang) to become an actor (Wei) seen on the screen above. Yet her stage speech (*nianbai*, 念白) was performed as lyric couplets (*lian*, 联) indicating retention of the vocal modulations of the Kunqu performance form.

The visual and aural juxtaposition provoked a discursive confrontation that engendered questions of identity location, suggesting that the character Wei plays has metamorphosed. This was followed with a clash of the *bo* (钹, cymbals) and the climax resolved on the mellifluous woodwind tunes of the *dizi* (笛子, bamboo flute) that filtered the accompanying Buddhist mantra, 'Om Mani Padme Hum,' chanted by the SCO musicians. Pickett's English piccolo partook in the woodwind sounds and following this the distinctive 'wailing' resonance of Chinese *huqins* (胡琴)⁸ were heard as other instruments, such as the *pipa* (琵琶, a Chinese lute) and *sheng* (笙, a mouth-blown reed instrument of vertical pipes) gradually entered the composite refrain in a showcase of 'musical grafts' and sonorous layering. The interplay of cultural sounds quietened, and the movement of unification was repeated as Wei revealed her 'water sleeves' (*shui xiu*, 水袖)⁹ and moved gracefully to the cosmic soundscape created by the reverberating gong

⁷ The *guimen dan* is a role that usually demarcates maturity and relative youth along with an impeccable ability in singing and dance-acting. They are usually of high social status and are unmarried. See Xiao Li, *Chinese Kunqu Opera*, 41-45; Jo Riley, *Chinese Theatre and the Actor in Performance*, 14.

⁸ *Huqin* refers to a series of instruments including the *erhu* (二胡), *zhonghu* (中胡) and *gaohu* (高胡), all of which are bowed string instruments. The *gaohu* produces the highest-pitch and the *zhonghu* the lowest.

⁹ The 'water sleeves' are sleeve extensions of the costumes that consist of a length of white silk worn by Sheng and Dan roles in Chinese theatre. They are cultural iconic signifiers and are used to signal to the

and the strains of the cellos. In this musical cycle, accompanied by a crescendo of musical concordance that culminated in a climax, Wei welcomed the coming of Autumn and heralded the conjoining of universes.

Autumn was marked by Wei's continued dance in celebration of the passing of spring and the bountiful harvest of autumn, achieved through classic *yunshou* (云手, cloud-hands) gestures that expressed her joyous emotions. Her patterns of rounded movements, an essential aesthetic philosophy in Chinese Theatre,¹⁰ culminated in an embrace of the moon seen as the classic pose of *baoyueshi* (抱月式). The mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum,' chanted by the SCO musicians, accompanied the visual signifiers of autumn. With each chant cycle completed, there was an upward modulation by a major second indicating aurally a journey toward nirvana and enlightenment – recognizably a musical articulation of the uniting universes. The following rest was punctuated by the enchanting sounds of the piccolo playing to the tune of 'Walsingham.' Joanne Lunn followed with a solo performance of the mantra sung to the established melody. While Lunn's solitary soprano voice filled the auditorium with the chant, Wei removed her costume to reveal yet another beneath – a casual dress that is removed from cultural signification, a vestimentary sign perhaps of the mundane schizophrenic condition that is consequent of re-birth and regeneration into a new postmodern 'Fourth World.' The

orchestra that the actor is ready to speak or sing. Movements and 'flicks' of the water sleeves also characterize the role, attitude and emotional state of the character. See Riley, 59, 175-6. See also A.C. Scott, 'The Performance of Classical Theatre' in *Chinese Theatre: From Its Origins to the Present Day* (31). In *Awaking*, the twirling motions indicate, perhaps, the merging of universes and the passing of time. It seemed as though it was also done for aesthetic effect, as a dance, rather than in order to maintain the symbolic roles the sleeves assume in a Kunqu or Jingju performance.

¹⁰ 'Pattern of roundness' is an essential aesthetic principle in Chinese Theatre. It is regarded as emblematic of perfection, holism, and beauty. But more importantly, it holds cosmological and philosophical significance related to yin-yang and the Luo (落) matrix where, in combination with all other aspects of performance, it metaphorically unifies all times and spaces in the theatre space. See Riley, 295-331.

cosmetic act of cultural erasure on the actor's body is undoubtedly a dramatic signifier of the re-birth of Du Liniang and the union of universes in the time and space of the here and now. Yet the 'un-dressing' ironically performs, metadramatically, a renunciation of tradition for modernity in the search for a universal language both musical and theatrical. In *Listening to Theatre*, Elizabeth Wichmann observes how, in *Jingju*, 'everything in the world of the play must above all be beautiful (*mei*, 美)' (2) and all aspects of *Jingju* performance adhere strictly to this basic aesthetic value. This is true of Chinese performance styles and in Chinese theatre the aesthetic principle of *xieyi* (写艺), which literally means to write/paint/draw the meaning, pervades the process of preparation to performance in any artform and in particular for theatre. *Xieyi*, as opposed to *xieshi* (写实), which is to write realistically, conveys the essence of things in representation and beauty is consequently a necessity in Chinese performance (Wichmann 2-3). Beauty, in performance, is not an attempt at verisimilitude but an aesthetic philosophy. The performative event of 'undressing,' adumbrated by Choy's earlier virtualized act of deconstructing the *dan* character, gestured to an abandonment and erasure of the fundamental principle of beauty (*mei*, 美). The finale was thus a confounding moment of an anti-aestheticism that juxtaposed with the flourish of musical syncretism.

When one considers the significance of this musical movement, one *hears* the overtones of synthesis and *sees* its occurrence with the inclusion of the various instruments from the cultural divides on stage. In the post-show dialogue, Qu explains that this is the dramatic moment of universes uniting, structured as the lyrical transformation of 'Walsingham' to the Buddhist mantra. Musically, the shifting variations on the tune of the former eventually become tonally assimilated by the theme

from *Awaking*, thereby performing melodically the harmony – cosmic and musical – that is desired. The intercultural intersection can thus be heard as different vectors of signifiers culminating in a compositional flourish that is aurally pleasing to the listeners and perhaps even a moment's experience of the romantic sublime. The currents of exchange in this sonic interzone then are not only located in melody or the formal structure of the composition but also in song – in the metamorphosis of lyrical translatabilities to Buddhist untranslatables.

Listening In/To Each Other: Acoustic Orientals and Occidentals

While the fusion of cultural sounds and styles engendered a Fourth World of intercultural possibilities, one could listen alternatively to this soundscape as one that is not a utopian universal but an appropriative reversal or a reclamation of acoustic identity in the political theatre of interculturalism. Critiquing the intercultural music of Jon Hassell, John Corbett sees this Fourth World of world music possibilities not as a topography of alternatives or a utopian interzone where all cultures mingle freely and without anxiety of authenticity or propriety but an imperialistic equation of Third World musics being added to First World sounds.¹¹ In *Awaking*, however, it was 'First World' sounds becoming assimilated by 'Third World'¹² experimental discourses. 'Walsingham' became appropriated and consumed by an overtly Chinese composition. The metamorphosis of linguistic signifiers performed a political process of an Eastern philosophy and religion

¹¹ See Corbett, 175-8.

¹² I use the terms 'First' and 'Third' Worlds here loosely, recognizing that the rapidly changing economic landscape has led to China being thrust onto the First World playing field. Also, I recognize that these Elizabethan tunes are hardly characteristic of a First World England, but are nonetheless reflective of the global position Britain once held. It reifies my argument about the dichotomies of West/East prevalent in the production despite the attempts at concord and harmony.

grafted onto an Elizabethan tune; the sonorities of an English soprano were subverted by the religious semantics of an Eastern mantra. What was composed as a journey towards re-birth realized through an acoustic universalism could be heard as an acoustic Occidentalism.

This Occidentalism is not merely a simplistic model of Saidian Orientalism inverted, nor is it a strategic subversion or writing 'against' and in opposition to the Western Other, but a complex process of selection, re-appropriation, assimilation, and transformation of 'foreign' properties. In *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, Chen Xiaomei defines Occidentalism in China as 'a discursive practice, that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others' (4-5). While Chen's views addressed specifically the state of Chinese theatre in the Post-Mao era, they resound in the context of Qu's cosmopolitical composition which exemplified a Chinese musical discourse that has consumed and appropriated qualities of its Western Other – here an Elizabethan tune that, Philip Pickett notes with a high degree of certainty, was a historical rendition of the popular ayre sung in 16th century England.¹³ Thus Patrice Pavis's source-target assimilative model that would yield a utopian intercultural *mise en scène* is effectively disproved. Yet while the intercultural hourglass has been shattered, the power relations contained within these cross-cultural dialogues prevail.¹⁴

¹³ Philip Pickett notes, in the post-show dialogue, that although there were three varying versions of the tune 'Walsingham,' they all had strong similarities with variations only in certain musical phrases and notations.

¹⁴ Pavis was among the pioneering theorists to postulate the dynamics of intercultural negotiation. In *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, he proposes an 'hourglass' model where the upper bowl contains the foreign or source culture, and the lower bowl contains the target culture. Intercultural exchange can

Aural Exoticism: The Sounds of Universal Spiritualism

The performance complicates the political dynamics of cultural practice not only by its attempted dismantling of sonic boundaries in a performative act of acoustic utopia, but also by introducing the discourse of religion. One can consider how the recurring Buddhist mantra, that is the refrain of Qu's composition, becomes a third 'culture' introduced to the performance syntax. As performative element, its recurrence, as refrain and repetition as chant, becomes a dominant sonic presence that erases all other aural signifiers and appropriates all other cultural languages. Chants possess appropriative abilities, for they engrave acoustic signatures subliminally not only through repetition but, in *Awaking*, via the annexation of the characteristics of Elizabethan songs: ease of singing due to flowing pitch patterns, firm pentatonic melodies and a high degree of emotionality due to word painting.

'Om Mani Padme Hum' is a Tibetan mantra derived from earlier Hindu mantras. There is no exact translation or equivalent in any language nor is there a corresponding lexis that can be used to explain what it means. Chants work on the principle of the recurrence of sound and Tibetan Buddhists believe that the repetition of this phrase as a monotonal vocal expression invokes the powerful benevolent blessings of *Chenrezig*, the embodiment of the compassion of all Buddhas. The mantra exemplifies the failure of language and speech – where words and grammar cease to depict reality – and advocates a primacy and pre-linguistic power of sound. The sonorities and timbre generate meaning and significance – it is the sonic quality that possesses the power to invoke a

be likened to the grains in the hourglass flowing from the source culture, through the narrow neck, to the target culture in a linear fashion. See Pavis, 4-6.

transcendental truth. It is sound that conjures and materializes meaning that is beyond referential and absolutist determinations of musical signification.

Awaking is distinctly an attempt at transculturation effected through the oral and oracular powers of religion. It is an attempt at awaking not only to an after-life located in the narrative of *The Peony Pavilion*, but to a Fourth World of a cultural-religious hybrid that is located in associations with the spiritual powers of a metaphysical compassion. With a composition that has movements distinctly engendered from the musical refrain of the chant, Qu and Ong dramatised acoustically a plane that crossed ethnic and cultural topographies. Yet the desired effect of transcendental enlightenment is unverifiable and indeterminate at best; the outcomes of the proselytizing intentions of global compassion embodied in the mantra's performance, as advocated by Qu in the post-show dialogue, are also doubtful. Viewed through the lens of cultural politics, however, this performance motif challenges assumed notions of intercultural discourse as interstitial modalities of mediations between cultures, for it engages an alternate 'culture' located in the ethereal and spiritual. In *Awaking*, Buddhism is the new intercultural and the mantra the new universal language of cross-cultural understanding, for it has become imbued with the musical traditions of both East and West.

Considered within a framework of reception aesthetics, the dominant reading proposed may not be effectively decoded by an audience devoid of any understanding of Buddhism, much less the 'meaning' of 'Om Mani Padme Hum.'¹⁵ Recognizably, cultural

¹⁵ The terms 'dominant reading' and encoding/decoding are Stuart Hall's concepts of reception. Essentially, Hall believes that visual texts such as film and television (and theatre can be included as well) employ a process of encoding, by the producers/director, the intended message and in the viewing there is an active process of decoding. This process of decoding results in a 'reading' of the text which may not always result in a preferred (or dominant) reading. There can be an oppositional reading. Such consequences result from the social and cultural backgrounds of the viewer. See *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*.

formation is an imperative aspect of audience competence and efficacy in reception; as Susan Bennett rightly notes with regard to performance reception: ‘we should not talk of theatre as an art form in isolation from cultural practice’ (93).¹⁶ Beyond the discourse of the cultural production of a theatrical event, cultural reception is a necessary consideration of performance analysis. Intercultural negotiation should happen between the sign-texts of a performance and also in engagement with the audience, for in that dialogue, between the audience and sign-texts, the problematics of intercultural communication become salient. Although *Awaking* premiered in multi-cultural Singapore where almost 42.5% are proclaimed Buddhists,¹⁷ ‘[w]ithin cultural boundaries, there are [...] obviously different viewing publics’ (Bennett 94). For a public whose knowledge of Buddhism is limited or who are unfamiliar with the mantra employed, the vocal chants would have served as nothing more than aural exotica – performative devices in an elaborate acoustic apparatus. Qu’s intended performance of compassion would have communicated little more than surface effects to achieve the narrative union or merely convey that which is ‘beautiful in music’.¹⁸ These audiences might have received this moment as a performance of musicalities converging and possibly appreciated the beauty of the confluence of cultural sounds but not recognised the Occident and Orient signifiers or the proselytising intentions of the mantra. Yet, there are other possible receptions. For

¹⁶ I recognize that this may be a reductive explanation of aspects of Reception Theory. However, the discourse is wide and beyond the scope of this paper. It is mentioned here only to provide a framework for considering differing audience receptions to an enigmatic moment in the performance and therefore the consequent theoretical implications.

¹⁷ This figure is taken from the National Census in 2000. See *Statistics Singapore – Census of Population 2000*.

¹⁸ This is the title of Eduard Hanslick’s seminal work on musical aesthetics. Hanslick is often considered the father of modern musical criticism and in *On the Musically Beautiful*, he emphasizes the absolute quality of music as beauty in its own right. Based on a formalism in Kant’s aesthetic of the beautiful, Hanslick believes that while music can be expressive of emotion, it is not that which defines its being. Musical meaning is extraneous to the ‘intrinsic beauty’ (68) of music. See Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*.

me, approaching the performance as a local with knowledge of Renaissance music, Shakespeare's songs and the Kunqu tradition, as well as some familiarity with Buddhist philosophy, the composition in this finale of the popular mantra was defamiliarizing, for it was distinctly de-contextualized and re-framed as avant-garde artwork. The exotic quality was thus further accentuated due to its heightened performativity.

The visual prominence of the singing body on the stage adds to readings of the exotic. As Lunn stood to continue her solo chant of the mantra in the closing moments of the performance, the distinct high tessitura produced by a white body 'floated' above the prevailing refrain produced by unaccompanied Asian voices intoning the mantra. This performative action created a schism between the visual and aural signifiers and resulted in a reversed exoticism where the Other is not the Asian body but the English one that attempts to enact an Asian philosophy. This fissure of sound and cultural location is also apparent in the materiality of the voice where Western classical training compels one's production of vocal sounds to be 'full' and 'rounded.' Lunn's singing voice abides by the demands of Western classical vocal music, and the sharp differences in timbre with the vocal sounds produced by 'Asian' bodies can be heard. The currents of appropriation and re-appropriation thus occur at several levels; the white body enchants the audience with the hypnotic melodies of an Asian (arguably Hindu and Buddhist) mantra, but this performance is contained within the distinctly 'Chinese' composition, of which the chant is merely a refrain.

The dynamics of cultural negotiation reveal, then, the inverse positions of alterity. More importantly, this performative event reveals the perplexities of acoustic interculturalism that extend beyond binary arguments of I/You and West/East. *Awaking*

exemplifies Corbett's views about a neo-Orientalist and self-exoticizing trend in new age compositions today such as those by Chinese contemporary classical composer Tan Dun (谭盾). Corbett believes that Tan Dun's compositions reveal

[t]he deep complexity of neo-Orientalist strategies [...]: an Asian composer in the West uses techniques devised by a Western composer inspired by Asian philosophy – the work is played for an Asian audience which hears it as an artifact of the bizarre West. Orientalism is reflected back-and-forth like a musical *mise en abyme*. (Corbett 180)

This musical *mise en abyme* is the intercultural position reflected in *Awaking* where the West is regarded as bizarre and the East exotic. The inclusion of 'white' bodies chanting 'Eastern' mantras extracted from their religious framework inflects the nodal positions of Orientalism and Occidentalism and refracts the static images of appropriation and counter-appropriation. In addition, Ong's instrument of creating a Fourth World is not, ironically, the sonic fusion of dichotomies achieving consonance but is instead a modernity located in the compositional structure of the original soundtrack. While the triadic interaction of cultural forms enacted, visually, a synthesis of sound and an intercultural soundscape of a contemporary *Chinoiserie*, it is in the listening to Qu's composition that we already hear a self-Orientalism. Embedded in the structure of Qu's theme to *Awaking* is the site of an intercultural acoustemology, for the composition is a modernism effected through traditionalism, where Western music elements of thematic variations and recurrence, musical motifs, tonal transpositions, chromatic shifts, and free atonality¹⁹ characterize the composition effected through Chinese traditional instruments.

¹⁹ This refers to compositions without a tonal centre. While it is largely believed that this musical principle was consequent of Arnold Schoenberg's 'Twelve-Tone' movement to address the crisis in tonality in the late nineteenth century, classical Chinese music philosophy has rarely regarded 'atonality' as a sonic quality to be avoided.

Acoustic Syncretism, Sonic Hybridity or World Music Kitsch?

Differentiating varieties of cultural appropriation, which is the *sine qua non* of the world music genre, Corbett observes that some American experimentalists such as John Cage employ sophisticated annexations of Other-sounds through a creation of conditions for musical events to evoke Eastern philosophies, and these annexations are not merely superficial pilferings. The resulting music may have little or nothing to do aesthetically with the original system but is no less aggressive in its appropriation. There are others, like Henry Cowell, who engage in a more common intercultural appropriation through the extraction of cultural acoustic characteristics for the performance of a 'musical contagion'²⁰ – an infectious transference of sounds and emotions.

Awaking lies in the hinterland of both appropriative territories where the utopian 'Fourth World' employs distinctly, and attempts to retain while adapting, philosophies in Asian performance styles. In its compositional reworking, it is also a superficial extraction of musical characteristics from dominant traditions to create a contagion of cultural sounds. The performance, as hybrid, is as much 'world music'²¹ as it is 'world theatre'. It presents a philosophy and belief, originated in Asia, as exotic, framed by the exploitation of Western musical and dramatic structures and principles. The production attests, consequently, to the argument that globalization of culture is not synonymous

²⁰ Quoted by Dana Paul Perna in liner text to Henry Cowell, *Persian Set*. See Corbett, 166 – 173 for a discussion on Cage and Cowell's 'experimental oriental' music.

²¹ 'World Music' is a term coined in the 1960s by ethnomusicologist Robert Brown and subsequently marketed as a musical genre by German and English producers in the 1980s as a promotion of traditional and ethnic sounds of various indigenous cultures, its use here is a deliberate pun both to indicate *Awaking* as a production that presented itself as a 'World Music' performance but also attempted a performance of the world through new musical universals.

with the Westernisation of the world. Rather, there is, as Aubert recognizes, a reciprocal sonic invasion (53). ‘Cultural globalization appears, on the contrary, like a vast and indefinite game of distorting mirrors, in which the other sends back to us the altered image of our transient identity’ (Aubert 53). The attitude towards the inevitability of the prevalence and perversion of the culture industry and the schizophrenic conditions of cultural globalization, then, is that which gives rise to the polemic positions both in world music and intercultural theatre – that of hope and fear.

References

- Aubert, Laurent. *The Music of the Other: New Challenges for Ethnomusicology in a Global Age*. Trans Carla Ribeiro. England: Ashgate, 2007.
- Awaking*. By Ong Keng Sen. Dir. Ong Keng Sen. Perf. Wei Chun Rong, The Musicians of the Globe, Northern Kunqu Opera, Singapore Chinese Orchestra. Victoria Theatre. Singapore, 13-14 June 2008.
- . Programme Notes. Singapore Programme, Singapore, 13-14 June 2008.
- . Publicity Pamphlet. Singapore, 13-14 June 2008.
- Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Chen, Xiaomei. *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Corbett, John. 'Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others.' *Western Music and Its Others*. Ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000. 163-186.
- Cowell, Henry. *Persian Set*. Koch International Classics 3-7220-2 H1, 1993.
- Feld, Steven. 'Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea.' *Senses of Place*. Ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Bass. New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1996. 91-135.
- Hall, Stuart. *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973.
- Hanslick, Eduard. *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*. Indianapolis: Hackett P, 1891, 1986 (8th Edition).

Platform, Vol. 4, No. 2, Mapping Performance, Autumn 2009

Hassell, Jon and Brian Eno. Prod. *Fourth World, Vol 1: Possible Musics*. Celestial Sounds, 1980.

Hassell, Jon. Prod. *Fourth World, Vol 2: Dream Theory in Malaya*. Avenue Studio, 1981.

Ong, Keng Sen. Postshow Dialogue. *Awaking*. Victoria Theatre, Singapore. 13 June 2008.

Pavis, Patrice. *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Republic of Singapore. Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry. 'Census of Population 2000.' Advance Data Release No. 2. *Statistics Singapore*. Aug. 2009. 17 March 2009 <<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2000adr/chap5.pdf>>.

Riley, Jo. *Chinese Theatre and the Actor in Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Schafer, R. Murray. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994.

Schechner, Richard. 'Intercultural Performance: An Introduction.' *The Drama Review* 26.2 (1982): 3-4.

---. *Performance Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1977, 1988.

Truax, Barry. *Acoustic Communication*. Second Edition. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 2001.

Turner, Victor. 'Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual and Drama.' *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*. Ed Richard

- Schechner, Richard and Willa Appel. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990, 1997. 19-49.
- Scott, A.C. 'The Performance of Classical Theater.' *Chinese Theater: From Its Origins to the Present Day*. Ed. Colin Mackerras. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1983. 118-144.
- Wichmann, Elizabeth. *Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera*. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1991.
- Xiao, Li. *Chinese Kunqu Opera*. Shanghai: Shanghai P, 2005.