An Infusion of Eastern and Western Music Styles into Art Song: Introducing Two Sets of Art Song for Mezzo-Soprano by Chen Yi

Wen Zhang
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, zhangw7@UNLV.Nevada.edu

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AN INFUSION OF EASTERN AND WESTERN MUSIC STYLES INTO ART SONG:
INTRODUCING TWO SETS OF ART SONG FOR MEZZO-SOPRANO BY CHEN YI

By

Wen Zhang

Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance
Nanjing College of Fine Arts, China
1986

Master of Music in Vocal Performance
University of Western Ontario, Canada
1991

Master of Music Education
Teachers College of Columbia University, New York
2009

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The Graduate College

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Wen Zhang

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Doctor of Musical Arts
Department of Music

Linda Lister, D.M.A., Committee Chair
Alfonse Anderson, D.M.A., Committee Member
Kenneth Hanlon, D.M.A., Committee Member
Eugenie Burkett, Ph.D., Committee Member
Joe Bynum, M.F.A., Graduate College Representative
Tom Piechota, Ph.D., Interim Vice President for Research & Dean of the Graduate College

December 2012
ABSTRACT

Chinese-American composer Chen Yi has been praised as “the most internationally renowned female Asian composer of contemporary music today,” and she “has in particular become a prominent figure in music circles in the United States and China.”1 Besides her successes in writing orchestral and chamber music, Chen Yi has also written numerous vocal compositions including some art songs. This document aims to introduce two sets of Chen’s art songs written for mezzo-soprano voice, Meditation and Bright Moonlight, and study the features of these compositions that represent the unique style of her music, which is influenced by Chinese folk music idioms and Western modern music elements.

Chen Yi grew up in both the traditional China before the mid-1960s and the reformed China after the mid-1970s. She took her journey of music study a long way from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing to Columbia University in New York City. She is a Western-trained musician and has launched a successful career of teaching Western music in higher education in America. This document reveals Chen’s bicultural background, strengthens the link between her cultural uniqueness and her musical creativity, and elaborates on how her bicultural background has influenced her compositional style.

Ancient Chinese poetry and Peking Opera singing style have inspired Chen’s art songwriting tremendously. By reviewing the poetic literature of Tang Shi and Song Ci and the performing practice of Peking Opera, this document will give comprehensive

interpretations of Chen’s musical approaches for her *Meditation* and *Bright Moonlight* that use the two sources effectively.

The scope of this document covers a wide collection of Chen’s biographical and educational information, as well as her published vocal compositions and the reviews of her works. Some relevant references are gathered from research articles to support the thesis of this document. The theoretical approaches to analyzing Chen’s art songs emphasize her music expressions that mirror her poetic choices and compositional methods, paying attention to her creative ways of combining Chinese music practices with Western compositional devices.

The purpose of this research is to promote Chen’s solo vocal works and spark contemporary women composers’ musical creativities. It is hoped that professional singers and voice teachers will consider including Chen’s art songs in their contemporary repertoires, making substantial contributions to the tradition of art song within their teaching and performing practices.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The tradition of art song in Western and Eastern musical cultures has been carried on by groups of women composers who strongly believe that art song is the most important genre of vocal music. From nineteenth-century Romantic lieder by Clara Schumann to the Three Browning Songs by Amy Beach, America’s first successful female composer in the twentieth century, the works of those extraordinary individuals demonstrate the accomplishments of women composers in the history of Western Music. Women composers in the East have also created art songs in many remarkable ways, representing themselves with amazing talents and skills. Due to certain prejudice against women composers and neglect by performers and scholars in Eastern culture, their music once was a missing part in the cultural heritage but has recently been more exposed.²

When searching for contemporary vocal repertoire by women composers, one songwriting style is often found: combining modern compositional methods with world-music practices.³ This research document introduces a contemporary women composer whose art songs manifestly represent the style: Chinese-American composer Chen Yi and her two sets of art song written for mezzo-soprano voice. Although Chen Yi has been successful both in China and America with her orchestral, chamber, and choral works, and the unique style of her music has been gradually accepted, further studies of her solo vocal works are especially needed. This document aims to reveal Chen’s bicultural background, strengthen the link between her cultural uniqueness and her musical


creativity, and elaborate on how her bicultural background has influenced her compositional style.

Research conducted by human psychology scholars has found links between cultural diversity and creativity such as the effect of cultural networks on creative performances. The results reveal that exposure to multiple cultures and social networks offers access to diverse ideas, promotes openness to new perspectives, and helps people link apparently disparate ideas to generate new ones. Does the effect apply to all types or only certain types of creative tasks? How can cultural uniqueness be used more broadly? These questions invite further investigations. Although the link between cultural diversity and musical creativity yields limited results in research, the founding of human psychology research can support such a specific link. The focus of this document will highlight the extent to which Chen’s cultural uniqueness has influenced her musical creativity.

Chen Yi was born into the world of the East and grew up in Chinese tradition and culture. However, she is a Western-trained pianist and violist; moreover, she is a composer who has successfully launched a career of teaching Western music in higher education in America. While holding a full-time teaching position at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, Chen Yi has been composing prolifically in almost every genre of music. Meditation is a set of group song that Chen Yi composed for mezzo-soprano voice; it made a remarkable premiere in the Trinity Concerts of New York in 2005. The critics hailed her work for “infusing the Western forms with the folk idioms and melodic

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influences of China... a mixture of East meets West.”

Bright Moonlight is a single art song for mezzo-soprano voice, which was premiered in the Songbook for a New Century concert held by The New York Festival of Song in March 2001. It received an excellent review from The New York Times, praising this work as “impressive for its mix of leisurely yet elaborate vocal lines for voice and skittish fluttering writing for instrument.”

The International Adkins Chiti, an Italy based Women in Music Foundation, recently conducted a survey to investigate the programming of major orchestras and festivals in European and North American countries. The results state: “The status of women musicians and composers is constantly under threat... within the world of contemporary music, only a minority of women composers can achieve their objectives...”

The survey also shows that today’s musical culture, “with a tradition of Western classical music, has [produced] the amount of contemporary works less than it was thirty, fifty and even seventy years ago.”

Chen has been considered among an elite group of women composers in contemporary music, as she has won a plethora of important music awards for her compositions, including a CalArts Alpert Award in Music in 1997 for her Chinese Myths Cantata. However, many of her vocal compositions have been missing from the collections of college and university music libraries, where the same genres created by contemporary male composers are often found. A particular

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8 Ibid.
case is that the music scores of her *Meditation* and *Bright Moonlight* are not found at the library of her own university, where she has been teaching for more than a decade.\(^9\) Thus it is evident that her art songs have received less attention than the works deserve.

To properly document Chen’s achievements in the field of the art song, it is necessary to learn where her career journey began and what she has contributed to the tradition of art song in both Eastern and Western cultures. Chapter I of this document provides Chen’s biographical and educational information that reveals her bicultural background. In order to link her cultural uniqueness to her musical creativity and support the principal thesis of this document, Chapter II will examine Chen’s poetic choice and songwriting style, and give detailed analyses of her art songs, exploring the features of the works that reflect her bicultural background. While evaluating Chen’s compositional approaches to writing for mezzo-soprano voice, Chapter III will review the characteristics of this voice type in terms of the vocal abilities and singing techniques that could transmit the composer’s creations and reproduce her works with desired effect and sonority. The Performance Strategies section will offer a practical guide to singers and voice teachers who are interested in singing this type of contemporary vocal repertoire.

Unlike the traditional research used to focus on biographical links between the composers and their works, this document will inform Chen’s cultural framework that has influenced her musical creations. For example, Chen’s music is deeply inspired by Chinese folk tradition, to which she was exposed in her early career years before coming to America in the late 1980s. Both Chinese and American cultures have helped her

\(^9\) A search for the music scores of *Meditation* and *Bright Moonlight* through the library catalogs of the University of Missouri-Kansas City provided no result.
professional growth tremendously. A factor such as this helps contextualize Chen’s bicultural background that is different from many contemporary women composers; they often live in one country or are familiar with one culture for a long period of the lifetime.

This document also approaches to studying Chen’s vocal works from the perspectives of literature and performance and gives a provocative summary of her musical insights. The discussion of ancient Chinese poetry helps understand Chen’s poetic choice for her music settings. To substantiate that Chen’s musical expressions are influenced by her bicultural background, this document will identify some musical elements in her songs that are adapted from the Peking Opera singing and chanting practices, from which Chen Yi gained rich knowledge by working with a Peking Opera troupe during her early career in China. The performance strategies are designed to solve some musical challenges encountered in the preparation of performing Chen’s art songs, providing a source of pedagogical approaches for the voice teachers who may use Chen’s vocal works for their teaching practices, and a series of interpretive suggestions for the voice students who may program the type of contemporary repertoire in their recitals.

It is anticipated that research into the compositional values of Chen’s vocal works and promotion of her art songs will spark new exploration of contemporary women composers’ works. By offering musical analyses and performing strategies on Chen’s art songs, a new variety of contemporary vocal repertoire for mezzo voice will become available to professional singers, singing students, and voice teachers for further studies. Therefore, many of these individuals will make renewed contributions to continuing the tradition of art song and developing its artistry through their performing and teaching practices.
CHAPTER I. A WOMAN COMPOSER FROM THE EAST

Chen Yi (b. 1953)

Born into an upper class family in 1953 and raised in Southern part of China, Chen’s parents were doctors and amateur piano and violin players. All of her three siblings had natural gifts of music making and became professional musicians in China. Chen Yi studied both piano and violin at a very young age. She was also attracted to other arts like Chinese ancient poetry, picture-story books, and fairytale novels. During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Chen Yi was forced to discontinue her music training, as the entire educational system in China was severely interrupted. She was sent to the countryside to undertake forced labor for almost two years. However, Chen Yi survived the dark period and become the first woman in China to receive both bachelor and master’s degrees in composition in 1986. She was also the first female Asian composer to give a multimedia concert of her orchestral and choral compositions in the United States in 1996, and her music was highly respected for its unique style and impeccable craft.

After receiving her doctoral degree in composition from Columbia University in New York City in 1993, Chen Yi continued to earn successes by winning the Charles Ives Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters from 2001 to 2004. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2005.10 Her extensive teaching career includes a full-time composition faculty position at Peabody Conservatory and Johns Hopkins University (1996-98), a Distinguished Professorship at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music and Dance (1998-), a

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Visiting Professorship at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China (2006-2011), and a Distinguished Visiting Professorship at Tianjin Conservatory of Music in China (2012-).

Chen Yi is married to another successful Chinese-born composer Zhou Long, who also studied composition at Columbia University and currently teaches composition at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He is the first Asian-American composer to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2011 for his first opera, Madam White Snake. They provide each other with creative concepts and inventive techniques and share their music creations after completing each work. In one of her e-mails, Chen Yi had some words about living with another music creator: “When I compose, I don't use instruments, only [playing the tunes] in my head, so that I don't make much noise, [because] we can’t be bothered during the process of creating music.”¹¹

Chen Yi has been praised as “the most internationally renowned female Asian composer of contemporary music today,” and she “has in particular become a prominent figure in music circles in the United States and China.”¹² As a prolific composer, Chen Yi blends Chinese and Western music traditions by transcending their cultural boundaries. Through doing so, she serves as an art ambassador between China and America, writing music to reach a wide range of audiences and inspire them with bicultural characteristics.

Besides her successes in composing orchestral and chamber music, Chen Yi has also written numerous choral and solo vocal compositions, such as a vocal chamber piece, As in a Dream (two songs for soprano and two strings or two Chinese traditional

¹¹ Chen Yi, e-mail to author, June 27, 2012.

instruments), a multi-movement choral work for two solo voices and mixed choir, *To the New Millennium*, and her milestone an a cappella work, *Tang Poems*. All these works are set to ancient Chinese poems and composed for specific singers. The first work was dedicated to Chinese soprano Rao Lan who inspired the composer to create the work for her unique voice. The second work was specifically tailored for American soprano Audrey Luna and mezzo-soprano Mari Opatz-Muni; their beautifully blended singing with a 100-voice choir made a remarkable performance on April 21, 2002. This composition stands as a notable addition to the contemporary choral literature. An excerpt from the third work was performed and recorded by the male choral ensemble, *Chanticleer*, and they won the Grammy Award in 2000 for the Best Small Ensemble Performance (with or without a conductor) and the Contemporary A Cappella Recording Award for Best Classical Album.

**Bicultural Background**

In an interview with www.newmusicon.org in 2001, Chen Yi talked about her musical life in her youth back in China. Both her parents were Western classical music lovers, and they provided her opportunities to study Western music and play Western instruments when she was three years old. Chen Yi learned the standard classical repertoire from Mozart’s sonatas to Prokofiev’s concert pieces and deeply admired all the masterpieces that she studied during her early music training, even though she did not realize all those great composers were Western music masters, because she did not have a chance to be connected with Chinese music until some years later.

During the Cultural Revolution, Chen’s family was compelled to live far away in

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the countryside under certain political pressure, which was the punishment for their exposure to Western music and culture that were forbidden in China at that time. While living in the countryside and working with the farmers, from seeing the beauty of the nature and smelling the scent of the field, Chen Yi learned to hope, to forgive, and to survive. She transformed her new feelings into the music she was practicing every day, and discovered a new way of presenting her favorite Western music pieces to the farmers. Quite often, she would play a famous piece like Paganini's Cadenza, and then play some popular folk tunes to entertain the farmers, in this way she could continue practicing her Western classical music and developing her performing skills. It was also during that time period that Chen Yi started to be connected to Chinese folk music and appreciate its quality and style. She developed a passion for writing her own music, expressing her thoughts and ideas through the Western classical music she had known since her childhood and the Chinese folk tunes she learned from the local society during those dark years.

China began a Reform movement in the late 1970s. It brought enormous changes to the politics and economics as well as to the musical culture, which created new opportunities for women musicians. The equality of women composers reached an adequate level after a long fight over centuries in Chinese music history. Musical authorities began to accept the works of female composers with the same consideration given to the works of male counterparts, judging the quality of compositions with less social prejudice towards the composer’s gender.

In 1978, the system of higher education in China resumed after ten years of Cultural Revolution. Twenty-five-year-old Chen Yi was accepted by the Central
Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China (CCoM) as one of the first female composition students in the highest level of music education. During her eight years of intensive training at CCoM for both her bachelor and master’s degrees, Chen Yi was very fortunate to have many of her compositions recognized by the media, earning a reputation as a notable Chinese woman composer.

In 1986, Chen Yi was offered an opportunity to pursue her doctoral degree in composition at Columbia University in New York City. The journey was much more difficult than she expected. As an Asian woman composer in her mid-thirties, she was struggling with cultural difference, social adjustment, and financial difficulty. All of these made her wonder if her career goal could ever be reached. Encountering all of the challenges in her life helped her professional growth. By the early 1990s, her hard work gradually paid off. She received major commissions from the Brooklyn Academy of Music for her Piano Concerto (1992), the orchestral residency grant from Meet The Composer’s New Residencies program (1993), and the Sorel Medal for Excellence in Music from the Center for Women in Music of New York University (1996). On an airplane returning to China in 2000, Chen wrote a heartfelt art song (for mezzo-soprano) set to her own lyrics and entitled Bright Moonlight. It sings of “missing homeland, near in front, far away, yearning for the world of consonance.”\(^\text{14}\) What Chen Yi brought out through her song seems so innate; after all those years of tears and laughs, she really delivers the music from her heart.

CHAPTER II. THE COMPOSER’S ART SONGS

Poetic Choice—Ancient Chinese Poetry

Chen’s vocal works are commonly set to ancient Chinese poetry as she was exposed to the poetic literature in her youth. She grew up with the tradition of children chanting ancient poems at very young ages, and this practice helped cultivate her fantasy about ancient poetry in terms of its philosophical and spiritual concepts such as “peaceful thinking” and “longing for the future.” Chen Yi is particularly attracted to the poetry of the Tang Dynasty, not only because of the huge popularity and high standard of the poetry from that era, but also for communicating easily with Chinese audience through her vocal works. She also enjoys the exquisiteness of translating ancient Chinese poems into English, and often provides program notes with her own English translation to the text. Furthermore, by setting her music to ancient Chinese poems, she does not need to cope with any copyright.15

The Tang Dynasty (618-907) was the golden age of poetic literature and fine arts in Chinese history. There were over 48,900 poems penned by some 2,200 Tang poets that have survived in modern time.16 Ancient poems of the Tang Dynasty have been widely studied in China for many generations. It is traditional for children to be taught to chant some poems from the authoritative collection, Three Hundred Tang Poems, before they can even read. Chen Yi grew up with this tradition and learned two poems from the collection in her childhood. They meant to her no more than just learning the words back then. While searching for poems for her compositional projects in 1994, as an adult, Chen

15 Chen Yi, e-mail message to author, June 24, 2012.

Yi rediscovered the two poems. She could hear the two ancient poets speaking for the feelings deep inside her heart—the loneliness while struggling and the hopefulness for fresh springtime. She made her own English translations to the poems, composed “awakening” melodies for each poem, and grouped the two songs as *Meditation*.

The selected poems for Chen’s *Meditation* are written by two important figures in poetic literature of the Tang Dynasty, and their poems are included in the *Three Hundred Tang Poems*. Meng Hao-ran (689-740), the poet for song no.1 in *Meditation*, is considered one of the best poets of his time. Nature was the principal subject of his poetry. The landscape and legends of his hometown were the main topics of his poems, while the meaning of human life was also the center of his writings. The style of his poetry helped set a poetic tradition followed by many generations. Chen Zi-ang (661-702), the poet for song no. 2 in *Meditation*, is an important figure for establishing the symbolic style of Tang poetic literature, which dissatisfied with the affairs of poetry at the time, keeping eye on the remote antiquity. This poet was well known for his writing in simple vocabulary versus the style that was heavily influenced by the Taoism tradition in his time.17

The verse forms of ancient Chinese poetry did not become well established until the Tang Dynasty. Poetry of that era is named as 唐诗－*Tang Shi*, which has a regular format of four or eight lines in each stanza, five or seven characters in each line, and a parallel structure in the middle couplets. The two poems selected for Chen’s *Meditation* have the structure of four lines in one stanza. The first poem is in a regular form of five characters per line, and the second poem is in an irregular form that mixes five-character

and six-character in different lines (Example 1). In general, the poetry of *Tang Shi* is essentially lyrical, with subjects on nature, philosophy, and occasions, emphasizing calmness, peaceful mind, and the contemplation of Buddhism. It also addresses social and ethical issues and speaks of personal matters such as family affection and infinite love for humanity.\(^\text{18}\)

Example 1. Two *Tang Shi* poems for Chen’s *Meditation* in regular and irregular poetic structures

1) 春晓－Meng Hao-ran (689-740)  
   春眠不觉晓，
   处处闻啼鸟。  
   夜来风雨声，
   花落知多少。  

2) 登幽州台歌－Chen Zi-ang (661-702)  
   前不见古人，
   后不见来者。  
   念天地之悠悠，
   独怆然而涕下。

By the Song Dynasty (960-1279), another poetic form with better flexibility was established: 宋词—*Song Ci*. It has the lyrics written based on different patterns of meter and rhyme, as well as the four tunes of Chinese words. Each poem of *Song Ci* belongs to a label that has some patterns of certain meter, rhyme, and tune of the words for each line; the poet can choose different words to fill in the given patterns. The content of a *Song Ci* poem is not necessarily related to its label, as long as the particular *Song Ci* delivers the emotions and thoughts of the poet, who is often a female author. Thus, *Song Ci* usually represents the feminine quality of the poetry and expresses the feelings of desire, every so often in an adopted persona with romantic contents.\(^\text{19}\)

One of the *Song Ci* labels, 采桑子 (pick-up mulberry), was frequently used by a


famous woman poet in the Song Dynasty named Li Qing-zhao (1184-1151), who left more than a hundred poems that traced varying fortunes in her life. The gifted poetess is credited for making the first critique of the metrics of Chinese poetry, and is regarded as a master of delicate restraint.²⁰ Chen Yi loves the poems by Li Qing-zhou and translated one of her poems, *Palm Tree*, to English, and then filled her own words into the given patterns. Both female authors express the heart-broken feelings of missing homeland in their poems. Chen Yi used her lyrics for the music setting of *Bright Moonlight*.

Example 2. A poem by Li Qing-zhao using the pattern of Song Ci label—Pick-up Mulberry

采桑子—芭蕉树 (Li Qing-zhao, 1084-1151)

窗前谁种芭蕉树？
荫满中庭，荫满中庭，
愁损离人，舒卷有余情。
伤心枕上三更雨，
点滴凄清，点滴凄清，
叶叶心心，不惯起来听。

**Palm Tree** (English translation by Chen Yi)

Outside my window the palm tree
Shadowed the courtyard,
Every leaf, every blade,
Leaves some impression on the heart.
When midnight rain washing my sadness,
Dripping lone and sore,
Dreams of the absent one,
Wakening me to listen more of raining.

**Bright Moonlight** (Poem by Chen Yi)

Outside my window bright moonlight,
Kissing the grassland,
Near in front, far away,
Given to the earth with consonance.
Look at the window bright moonlight,
Missing my homeland,
Near in front, far away
Yearning for the world of consonance.

Chen’s passion for ancient Chinese poetry has inspired her to continue searching for texts that can make her feel connected and stimulate her musical creativity. Through the wide range of emotion and energy she discovers from her favorite poems, Chen’s art

songs provide music lovers with a rich output from the pen of such a creative woman composer.

**Songwriting Style—Peking Opera Singing and Chanting Practices**

The music genre of art song is defined as a combination of poetry and music, a composite musical form that is based on four elements: poet, composer, singer, and accompanist. In art songs, text and music coexist and rub shoulders with each other. “Music is often praised for its poetic expression, and poetry for its musical sound.” The balance in disposition between text and music in art songs often shifts at different moments according to the composer’s desired musical expressions. Such a balance handled by the composer through the pattern of text-to-music strives to be the perfect combination of music and poetry, and can be presented by a typical singing style of composer’s choice. This blend can be different among cultural and social structures, as well as folk idioms, resulting in a distinctive style of a composer’s songwriting.

When composing for voice, Chen Yi has the ability to merge both Romantic art song tradition and Chinese folk music style to appear so logically in her compositions. Her art songs feature fundamental characteristics of Western and Chinese vocal music, which contain standard forms and structures, free flowing and complex melodic lines, and the distinctive use of tonalities and modes. Her harmonic language is adaptable along

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with unconventional modulations and interesting textures. Her musical expressions are idiosyncratic, yet strong and convincing.  

Chen’s art songs have something in common—they are written for classically trained voices with piano or chamber ensembles, in simple forms but complex patterns, and set to ancient Chinese poems or her own lyrics. The rhythmic patterns are designed on the prosody of Chinese poetry such as the couplets, level-tones, and caesuras within lines. The melodic patterns are often adapted from Peking Opera singing and chanting practices. Her set *Meditation* is a good example of using one of the chanting patterns in Peking Opera called 说唱—half sung and spoken (Example 3), while her single song *Bright Moonlight* has one of the Peking Opera singing patterns in its melodies called 拖腔—holding tone (Example 4). The piano opening in *Meditation* has the characteristic of the Peking Opera’s ensemble practice called Xipi.

Example 3. *Meditation*, song no. 1, m. 9—the note with X means half sung and half spoken

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24 Andrew Druckenbrod, review of *New World Records*, Gramophone (October 2009).
Example 4. *Bright Moonlight*, mm. 5-17—the holding tone features a 16-note ascending motive with a clear cut-off at the end of the note.

Peking Opera, a Chinese cultural treasure with a history of over 200 years, is a synthesis of singing, dancing, acting, and acrobatics, as well as the instrumental music. Considered the most beautiful singing in Chinese music, Peking Opera has been titled the highest level of bel canto singing in Chinese, with its unique vocal tonality and singing style.\(^{25}\) The general characteristics of its singing style are: a) the use of half sung and half spoken voice for chanting between singing and speaking, similar to singing recitative in bel canto style; b) the use of nasal straightened tone for singing high-pitched and melismatic passages, which is considered the most aesthetic value; and c) the vocal melodies often have a curving sharp that can be dramatically pushing up and retractably pulling down, and a holding tone at the end of phrase.\(^{26}\)

Songs in Peking Opera are sung in a vocal range of an octave or a fifth higher than the written notes, as the high pitches always hold aesthetic values in Peking Opera


singing. Different performers may sing the same songs in their desirable keys in the performances, which require the accompanying musicians to retune their instruments constantly to meet singers’ needs. The accompaniment of Peking Opera usually is played by an ensemble of string and percussion instruments such as the Jinghu—a high-pitched two-string fiddle, and the Daluo—a high-pitched clapper. The two main performing formats of Peking Opera practices are called Xipi and Erhuang. In the Xipi form, the Jinghu accompanies voice to make high and disjointed sound for delivering some dramatic scenes. In the Erhuang form, the Jinghu is tuned in lower keys to play soft and despondent instrumental melodies along with the vocal lines for telling some lyrical stories.

The folk idioms and stylistic devices in Peking Opera have been adapted by many contemporary Chinese composers for creating music of modern theater productions such as Madam White Snake, a Chinese modern opera composed by Chen’s husband, Zhou Long. The opera was successfully performed by Boston Lyric Opera and Beijing National Opera in 2008. Oscar awarded Chinese composer Tan Dun also adapted a great deal of Peking Opera style to his new opera The First Emperor, which made a remarkable premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 2006, featuring Western opera legend Placido Domingo as the leading role of the Chinese Emperor.

There is no doubt that Chen’s vocal music sounds very much like the singing and chanting in Peking Opera, representing different ways of using the folk idioms. Three main approaches can be identified in Chen’s songwriting: a) folk-song arrangements, particularly in her choral works; b) folk-like compositions that are inspired by original folk idioms; and c) use of the structural principles, rhythmic patterns, and performing
techniques of the folk music, such as in *Meditation*, the vocal lines are clearly in the chanting style of Peking Opera. In *Bright Moonlight*, the runs and turns in the vocal lines are very similar to the singing melodies in Peking Opera, but they are not direct quotations; they are created with Chen’s own insights of understanding those musical elements in the practices of Peking Opera.27

Deeply grounded in the spectrum of her Chinese heritage, particularly its philosophical and spiritual concepts, Chen Yi is an innovator in combining the idiomatic sounds of Chinese traditional music with Western contemporary forms and devices. No matter how her musical language is enriched by Western compositional techniques, the roots of Chinese culture always show in her compositions. She has created a unique way to compose her music that brings together the aesthetic concepts and musical elements of East and West, delivering her music through a fusion of the Eastern and Western musical styles. The result is a natural hybrid, not an artificial or superficial combination of the two. This bicultural composer’s music is so distinctive because of the way that she seamlessly weaves the Eastern and Western musical elements while devising the sonorities that are welcomed by both American and Chinese audiences.28

**Analysis of Meditation**

Chen’s solo vocal work *Meditation* was commissioned by Artistic Circles in 1999 and published by Theodore Presser in 2006. It consists of two songs written for mezzo soprano voice and piano and set to two ancient Chinese poems from the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

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27 Chen Yi, e-mail message to author, April 3, 2012.

Unlike the ancient Chinese poems set in Gustav Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* that are sung in German, nor the Chinese lyrics set in Albert Roussel’s *mélodies* that are sung in French,²⁹ Chen Yi insists her two songs of *Meditation* to be sung in the original language of the text in all the performances, as she feels her music can only be reproduced thoroughly through the tonality of the Mandarin language. American mezzo-soprano Karen Frankenstein premiered Chen’s *Meditation* in the Trinity Concerts at Saint Paul’s Chapel, New York in 2005, and she sang these two songs in Chinese.

*Spring Dreams* by Meng Hao-ran (689-740, Tang Dynasty)
(English translation by Chen Yi)

Spring dreams unconscious of dawning,  春眠不觉晓，
Not woke up till I hear birds singing;  处处闻啼鸟。
Oh night long wind and showers  夜来风雨声，
Know you how many petals falling?  花落知多少。

*Spring Dreams*, song no. 1 in the *Meditation*, is short and simple in a modified binary form—A B+ conclusion. It portrays the poet/singer struggling with the dark past and longing for fresh springtime. In the piano introduction, the ostinato is formed by A D G C F B♭, much like the quartal harmony of Paul Hindemith. Coincidentally, the interval of perfect fourth is also one of the signature intervals in Chinese folk music. The pattern of this ostinato is borrowed from the instrumental ensemble practice in Peking Opera called 行弦 (running strings), in which a small instrumental ensemble repeats a fixed pattern as the background accompaniment, making a scene of dialogue with the solo

instrument. Chen Yi adapted this instrumental performing practice for piano and voice here (Example 5a). The two parts are moving independently from the very beginning, within individual rhythmic patterns and tonal modes: the piano plays in a Chinese 5-note pentatonic scale but in Western rhythmic patterns; the voice sings in a Western major-minor scale but in Peking Opera melodic structures. The words of Leng ge leng ge long are the nonsense syllables typically adapted from Peking Opera chanting practice (Example 5b), originally used for showing the singer’s vocal flexibility. Such a music setting for piano and voice is the evidence of how Chen Yi merges Chinese folk idioms and Western musical elements and makes them seamlessly functional for her musical expressions.

Example 5a. Meditation, song no.1, m. 1—the ostinato in the piano introduction

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30 Chen Yi, e-mail to author, May 15, 2012.
Example 5b. *Meditation*, song no. 1, mm. 2-7—the vocal entrance and the nonsense syllables

Chen Yi is conscious of the prosody in the ancient Chinese poems. She knows which word in the poem needs to be emphasized and must be placed on the downbeat, extended note, or higher pitch. Words that do not receive poetic stress need to be placed on the weaker beats. A good example is in measure 20, the vocal line with the words *Hua luo zhi duo shao* (flowers falling, knowing how many) has a poetic meter of two, one, two. The first emphasized word “Hua” (flower) in measure 20 is placed on the high A♭ with a quarter-noted downbeat (Example 6a); the third word “zhi” (knowing) in the following measure is a non-stressed syllable to be placed with a sixteen-note on a weak beat (Example 6b). The descending melodic line gives listeners an aural picture of flowers falling, finally reaching the “ground” with three beats off in measure 26 (Example 7). The musical expression conveys the devastating emotion in the poem—lost hope.
Example 6a. *Meditation*, song no. 1, m. 20—the word of “Hua” (flower)

Example 6b. *Meditation*, song no. 1, m. 21—the word of “Zhi” (knowing)

Example 7. Three beats resting in m. 26—leading into an interlude

The voice and piano become more in partnership in section B, starting with the piano interlude in measure 27. The two parts alternate their turns till the end of the song, when the voice stops at measure 30 with a note of F♯, the leading tone of G major/minor, to match the question presented in the text: “how many?” The piano dominates and completes the song with a long G chord formed by mixed intervals—not a perfect answer to the question (Example 8). Although this G chord never resolves to a G triad as in a traditional way, it has implied the note of G as a centric pitch for the conclusion. The music setting of this song ideally represents the poetic moods—endless sorrow, treasuring beauty, and getting lost.
Example 8. *Meditation*, the end of song no. 1 ends with a G centered conclusion

Prior to *Meditation* set to the Tang poem, *Spring Dreams*, Chen Yi also set to the same poem for one of her choral works in 1997, an *a cappella* piece for mixed choir commissioned by the Choral Series in the Ithaca College School of Music. The choral piece was performed and recorded by the Grammy Award-winning choir *Chanticleer*.³¹

In this choral music setting, Chen Yi focuses on expressing the excitement and happiness of springtime. She used a group of ostinatos in the beginning of the piece, gradually appearing in different tempos to imitate the birds singing in springtime, much like the opening of *Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky. The fresh melody sung by the soprano section sounds very much like Peking Opera singing—half sung and half spoken, which is also adapted for her melodic designs in *Meditation*, but in a different vocal arrangement. There is a turning point in the middle of this choral piece, when the music is reaching a climax by repeating the text "knowing how many?" suddenly the birds singing stops, indicating the sweet dream is over. The choir resumes a unison singing toward to the end, submerging into wordless sorrow as if the bird singing became crying fading away. This music design is similar to what appears in *Monologue*.

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³¹ Chen Yi’s *Spring Dreams* performed by *Chanticleer*,
Monologue by Chen Zi-ang (661-702, Tang Dynasty)

(English translation by Chen Yi)

Where are the sages of the past, 前不见古人，
and those of future years? 后不见来者。
Sky and earth forever last, 念天地之悠悠，
Lonely, I felt sad with running tears. 独怆然而涕下。

Monologue, the song no. 2 in Meditation, is in the same form as song no. 1, but has a longer duration and more complicated musical setting. It describes the scenery of the poet going on a journey to a dreamy place. Chen Yi connected the two songs by using the similar mixed-interval G chord at the end of song no. 1 and during the beginning harmonic progressions of song no. 2.

The piano introduction opens with the forte octave-paralleled figures in harmonic progressions that are centered in G minor. A long pause is held at measure 4 with a G chord in the left hand, which is in the similar mixed-interval G chord that appeared at the end of song no.1, but adding a diminished D♯ chord in the right hand this time. This new harmonic texture creates an extremely dramatic sonority of a huge collapse. The voice enters, reciting in a tone of half sung and half spoken, making a glissé from E♭4 to F5, followed by a trilling singing in the high tessitura to call out “the sages of the past” (Example 9). The repeated syllable, “lai, lai, lai,” means “coming, coming, coming” in Chinese; they are different from the nonsense syllables that appeared in previous song.

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32 Chen Yi, compositional notes on the score (PA: Theodore Presser Co. 2006).
Example 9. Meditation, song no. 2, mm. 8-10—a glissé followed by a trilling; lai, lai, lai means coming, coming, coming in Chinese.

The text gets its first repetition from measure 11 to 17, supported by accompaniment texture that plays alternately between dotted rhythms and broken-chord patterns. Section A ends quietly in measure 18, followed by a short interlude that has a single line played by the left hand, and then doubled by the right hand, gently bringing out the next section. A calm mood within this linear texture illustrates the loneliness presented in the poem. The voice enters again in Section B with a single-noted, unaccompanied line, intensively repeating the text in Chinese, and then switching to English on an interval of a fourth-up pitch. Chen Yi explained the purpose of this songwriting device—by switching the text repetition from Chinese to English, it helps create the intensity of reaching the climax, as it is always technically difficult for singers to repeat the same text several times during a climbing progression. This typical musical design is to make listeners appreciate the emotional development in the song while crossing over the boundary between the two languages.\(^\text{33}\) (Example 10).

\(^{33}\) Chen Yi, e-mail to author, April 23, 2012.
Example 10. *Meditation*, song no. 2—repetitions in Chinese, and then in English

The climbing triplet patterns on both hands of the piano part urge the excitement of reaching the climax in measure 29: the voice sings at the highest pitch and longest note in the song—$A_5$, and the piano plays the tremolo on both hands. It illustrates a dreamy place has been reached—everything is expected to be beautiful and harmonic. Suddenly, the piano stops playing and leaves voice hanging there alone. The voice starts to chant in dissonances of a seventh and a semi-tone in measure 34-37 (Example 11), indicating a disappointment in this dreamy place—“tears are running” for even deeper hopelessness. The unaccompanied voice finishes the song as if the poet/singer would continue the lonely journey of searching for a “dreamy future.” Chen’s musical expression matches the mood of the poem written 1500 years ago by poet Chen Zi-ang, his frustration, hopelessness, and deep concern for the fate of his country and its people.
Example 11. *Meditation*, song no. 2—piano stops playing at m. 33, voice starts chanting in dissonances.

Textures in this song are extremely inventive, displaying Chen’s versatility in working with each word and musical element. The harmonic language is based on the intermingling of G major and G minor, sometimes in a very dissonant way by using the one mode in the right hand and the other in the left hand, with occasional switching of the two modes between the hands. Notice the last notes of the accompaniment have only the root and fifth of either G major or G minor, but the voice continues using both B♭ and B♮, which is sustained from some of the same quartile harmony of the first song. The voice ends on a note of A₄, making another quartile relationship in the piece, with the Ds and Gs in the accompaniment.³⁴

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³⁴ Kenneth Hanlon, e-mail to author, April 24, 2012.
This song is a challenging piece for the pianist because he/she needs to play some quick-running figures in an extreme range from A₁ to B♭7, the third to the last highest note on a standard keyboard (Example 12). It also consists of many tremolo chords and octave-paralleled ascending moves. An accompanimental texture such as this creates compatible sounds to illustrate the dreamlike atmosphere described in the poem. The voice lines include several large and dissonant leaps formed by intervals of a seventh, ninth, and diminished fifth, which create dramatic tensions through the vocal tessitura. The singer would need to have a good sense of singing dissonance to perform the song in a comfortable manner.

Example 12: *Meditation*, song no.2 mm. 27-28, the piano plays in an extremely wild range.

Analysis of *Bright Moonlight*

*Bright Moonlight* is a single art song written for mezzo-soprano voice and piano. It shows very different characteristics of Chen’s songwriting style both with her poetic choice of her own lyrics and with her compositional methods drawn from Romantic art song. Commissioned by the New York Festival of Song in 2000 for a project of Songbook for New Century, Chen Yi also composed this song to commemorate the
sponsorship of Meet The Composer Foundation. The song was premiered by American mezzo-soprano Theodora Hanslowe at the Kaye Playhouse in Hunter College, New York in March 2001, and received excellent reviews from *The New York Times*.35

Chen Yi created the text with a pattern of *Song Ci* in mind and wrote her lyrics in English, making her vocal works not limited to Chinese language. This song is about a natural object and a personal statement—missing home under tranquil moonlight. It is expressed in a simple and straightforward way but with very abstract approaches—from the landscape of the grassland to the emotion of the homesickness, from nearby to far away, and from the past to the future. The music is more in a Romantic art song style because of the lyrical, expansive vocal lines and the supportive, sparse accompaniment; together they create the sensory component similar to what is famous about Debussy’s second version of *Clair de lune* (1891). This helps listeners recognize Chen’s *Bright Moonlight* to be more fluid and adventurous with inspired harmonic textures and melodic structures. Her aesthetic use of atonal mixed with pentatonic harmonies to produce the moonlike sonority and homesick emotion, indeed captures a sense of Romanticism in contemporary time.

Chen Yi designed the format of music based on the poetic structure—a modified binary form within a duple meter is ideal for portraying the two characters in the song: a moving moon in the piano part and a lonely heart in the voice part. The prelude and postlude share the same materials—an atonal ostinato that appears frequently to unify the song (Example 13). The voice sings mainly in melismatic style with many text-repetitions, delivering the emotions of perpetual nostalgia. The harmonies in both piano

35 See footnote no. 12.
and voice parts contain descending and ascending pentatonic scales that illustrate the scenes described in the text—the moonlight brightens and dims; the lonely heart hums and yearns.

Example 13. *Bright moonlight*, m. 1—the atonal ostinato portrays the moonlight.

The piano tremolo includes some equal-interval chords built on an indeterminate root and some mixed-interval chords characterized by the interval content; both lend themselves to atonal contexts. The piano plays this atonal ostinato as a prelude, creating the scenery of tranquil moonlight impeccably, which brings the opening of Debussy’s *Clair de lune* readily to mind. The voice enters at measure 4, presenting a flowing pentatonic melody that overlaps with the piano tremolo in the left hand. The same tremolo figure is taken over by the right hand of the piano, while the same vocal melody is echoed in the bass line (Example 14). Such an interwoven texture indicates one of the Chinese philosophical concepts: nature-human integration— the soul lifts up to the moon; the moon prays for the soul. The opening vocal melody continues with a humming tone from measure 9 to 12, making a duet with the piano playing a similar melody in both hands. The melismatic vocal lines are instilled with a flavor of Peking Opera singing style, especially the sixteen-note ascending motive with a clear cut-off at the end of the phrase—a reminder of Chen’s favorite Peking Opera singing element: holding tone.
Example 14. *Bright Moonlight*, mm. 4-8—voice and piano interweaving

The text is repeated here: “kissing the grassland, kissing the grassland…” delivering the emotion of perpetual nostalgia. After running a few fragmented patterns as the first interlude, Section B starts at measure 25 with brand new material in both piano and voice parts for portraying a character of “lonely heart” and delivering her message: “Near in front, far away, given to the earth with consonance.” Here, a short motive is repeated three times, and each repetition seems to center on one pentatonic mode—D, G, and A♭.

The melody is shaped with graceful and expansive lines (Example 15). Up until this moment, the voice and piano have been moving in and out of synchrony with each other as the voice plays the leading role. Now the piano provides a fuller texture with playing tremolos in both hands, calling the tranquil moonlight back to be reunited with the lonely heart—Section A returns at measure 39 with slight melodic changes in the last phrase, with the repetition of “missing my homeland,” the same text-repetition of “kissing the grassland” recurs. The moonlight dims again as the piano fades out in a low range; the lonely heart hums softly while hanging at C₃ for seven beats long.
Example 15. *Bright Moonlight*, mm.26-29—the *lonely heart* motive is centered with D, G, and A♭.

The second interlude between Section A’ and Section B’ is formed with new material playing in a very high register. It creates a sparse texture for depicting the images of moving moon and twinkling moonlight. Section B’ starts with the similar musical elements previously in B, gradually entering a climatic region from measure 72 to 76. The voice yearns to return to the homeland at the highest pitch in the song—holding a five-beat long note at B₆, which is quite challenging for most mezzo-soprano singers. The song closes with exact the same melody that appeared in the end of the previous B, bringing back the flavor of Peking Opera singing style: a clear cut-off holding tone. The atonal ostinato is played again with more repetitions but less dynamics to conclude the song (Example 16).
Example 16a. *Bright Moonlight*, mm. 82-83—the holding tone at the end of the phrase.

Example 16b. *Bright Moonlight*, mm. 84-86—the atonal ostinato concludes the song.

**Summary of the Analyses**

Although the two poems in *Meditation* are not poetically intended to be in a group, Chen Yi carefully crafted them under one theme—a lonely heart longing for a bright future. The poet/singer in song no. 1, *Spring Dreams*, hears birds singing at dawn, trying to get out of the dark past and hoping for springtime. Too much lost hope in *Monologue*, song no. 2, makes the sky and earth tearful for the poet/singer—her hopeless journey has to go on without knowing where it will lead.

To gain a proper evaluation of Chen’s achievements in these two songs, it is necessary to point-out the development of her harmonic techniques, which can be estimated by the tendency of tonalities in both songs. Chen’s harmonic language is
surprisingly flexible, as her music is generally tonal but not always triadic. For example, the second song is dominated by dissonant intervals of a diminished fifth and major seventh in the vocal part, where the single-noted chanting practice from the singing style of Peking Opera is also adapted. Neither way of using Western and Eastern musical elements could refer to a centered tonality nor extreme extensive and atonality.

In these two songs, Chen’s writing is highly idiomatic and effective, and her scoring is colorful and vibrant. She utilizes a traditional art song form of binary for both songs, which is also suggested by the two-part poetic structure in the selected ancient poems. The two poems have almost the same number of words, but Chen’s musical settings are different in duration—song no. 2 is two times longer than song no. 1. The IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols under the vocal lines are based on the diction of Chinese Mandarin reading of the texts. Some words are repeated several times in order to emphasize their special meanings. The first song sings in a melismatic style, and the second song is entirely syllabic.

Although it is always helpful to have some linguistic comprehension of the song lyrics, it should not be expected that majority of listeners will be able to understand the Chinese words while listening to the two songs briefly. Despite this, Chen’s musical expressions clearly deliver the meanings of the words and the moods of the poems. She carefully crafted each musical note and phrase to serve the texts. For example, the words “er ti xiao (running tears)” are repeated three times near the end of song no. 2, with similar melodic patterns in different vocal ranges; this musical approach describes different degrees of the sad and hopeless emotions indicated in the poem (Example 17).
Example 17. *Meditation*, song no. 2—*er ti xiao* (running tears) is repeated three times.

a) mm. 34-36

b) mm. 37-38

c) mm. 41-42

Both songs in *Meditation* utilize the traditional meter of 4/4 throughout the pieces. The lack of key signatures allows the harmonies to move and switch around without a commitment to a tonal center. Therefore, there is often seen a hierarchy of pitches in both voice and piano parts that does not adhere to the system of tonal hierarchies; instead, they are collectively designated for musical and artistic expressions. Ambiguous or mixed-interval chords appear occasionally, lending themselves to atonal contexts. Unusual melodic and rhythmic variations are the special features in the two songs, helping the musical approaches reach the informality. Additionally, both songs contain intricate rhythms in the vocal lines; the singer should have a solid ability of counting complicated rhythms in order to coordinate well with the pianist.

Compared to Chen’s *Meditation*, her *Bright Moonlight* is fairly singable and relatively conservative for performers and audiences. The song tries to capture the
luminous atmosphere and emotional mood of the text—the tranquil moonlight and the heart-broken homesickness. While intensifying the text, Chen’s music brings listeners into a new atmosphere—the integration of nature and human. She highlights specific words that link to the scenery and the emotion in the poem such as the three repetitions of “far away” in Section B; they are designed for capturing both the beautiful moonlight and the homesick heart in the song, as the pitch and length are increased during each repetition.

Overall, Chen’s Bright Moonlight is a challenging solo piece as it requires a vocal quality of evenness, strong breath-control, and solid low and high registers. The musical setting seems to be much more in a Romantic art song style, not fully presenting Chinese music idioms like in Meditation. This shows Chen’s talent and skill for writing music in both Western and Eastern strengths, and whatever she does with her musical creations always produces something unsurprisingly stunning.

Both Meditation and Bright Moonlight are well-crafted solo works. Although Chen Yi uses melodic elements from Peking Opera singing practices for both musical settings, the compositional styles of the two sets are quite different: one set to English lyrics and with more Romantic art song elements in the piano part, and the other set to Chinese text and with more Peking Opera chanting elements in the voice part. Chen Yi chooses a speech-like melodic setting for Meditation. By contrast, the melodic setting for Bright Moonlight is more focused on general mood with graceful vocal phrases. Furthermore, in Bright Moonlight, the piano accompaniment and voice are making duets throughout the song, while in Meditation, the voice takes the leading role supported by the piano all the way throughout.
CHAPTER III. WRITING FOR MEZZO-SOPRANO VOICE

Approaches to Writing for Mezzo-soprano Voice

While examining composers’ approaches to writing art songs for mezzo-soprano voice, attention may be caught by the sociocultural influences that determine their personal artistic tastes and pursuits, or the criteria for making their aesthetic choices with the sound and facility of the mezzo voice.

Carol Kimball describes in her book *Song* that “certain composers often have the tessituras that favor one voice type or seem suited to one particular vocal timbre. Some composers wrote with specific voices or vocal types in mind…”36 Chen Yi surely is one of the “certain composers” who considers mezzo-soprano voice as her favorite vocal timbre for her musical settings. She also is one of the “some composers” who always has the vocal quality of mezzo-soprano voice in mind, imagining her art songs would sound in typical mezzo vocal tessitura.

Derived from the Italian word “mezzo” meaning medium, mezzo-soprano stands in the middle of the other two types of female voices—soprano and contralto, with a vocal quality that is darker than soprano and lighter than contralto. Many mezzos can sing as high as a soprano can and as low as a contralto can, but they cannot stay in the high range as long as a soprano and remain in the low range as extensively as a contralto. Mezzo-sopranos prefer to live in their middle vocal ranges.37 In general, a mezzo voice

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has a rich, smooth and balanced vocal tessitura, which can be well produced and clearly projected with rock-solid singing technique.

Mezzo-soprano was not designated a voice category till the 1750s when Rossini and other opera composers decided to replace the castrato singers in their newly composed operas; mezzo singers then had the chance to sing all the secondary female roles next to prima donna sopranos. The major development of mezzo-soprano as an important voice type takes place in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when composers were searching for a more dramatic vocal quality with a darker color for the leading roles in Romantic operas such as Carmen and Samson et Dalila. It was also during that era that mezzo-sopranos sang all the alto solo parts in the oratorio such as Handel’s Messiah and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and became a popular voice type for the Romantic Lied of nineteenth-century.

The sound of the mezzo voice is entirely unique when it is created by different singers, not only because of the shapes and conditions of individuals’ vocal tracts, but also the manner in which the sound is habitually formed and articulated. For instance, there is Cecilia Bartoli’s velvety legato and spectacular coloratura, Janet Baker’s dark and chocolaty sound, and Frederica von Stade’s miraculous ability to evoke both tears and smiles with the same heartfelt musical phrases.

It is also because of the miracle of vocal music performed by the individual mezzo-soprano, where every human voice is uniquely different with individual musical and expressive instincts brought to bear. Frauenliebe und Leben, Schumann’s beautiful and affecting song cycle, can be perpetually renewed by different mezzo singers. Anne Sofie von Otter’s interpretation makes her recording of the cycle full of emotion with a
sense of spaciousness in her voice, sounding exceptionally successful. While listening to the legendary recordings of Christa Ludwig, Frauenliebe und Leben is superbly sung with wonderful care for the words in her darker mezzo voice, so rich and sensitive, almost like a contralto tone. Furthermore, the peculiar chemistry of musical collaboration, such as a composition specifically written for a typical singer, provides even greater possibility for gaining richer experience with performance of the given work. A representative case will be Rossini’s music written for Colbran’s talent. The composer created the title role of Semiramide for his wife Isabella Colbran, a mezzo-soprano with a high extension, and the opera proved to be tremendously successful. To Colbran's credit, Rossini always considered her to be the greatest interpreter of his works.

When Chen Yi approaches writing for a mezzo voice, she hears a typical sound of the voice in her mind, the specific way of communication in a velvety vocal timbre and the characteristic manner of expression through a thicker vocal quality. She often looks for the unforced lower register and the warm-ringing mezzo top range to serve her music, so that her art songs can be sung with radiant sound and complete assurance while emulating the singing styles of Western and Eastern vocal music.

The vocal range and tonal quality as well as the pitch accuracy in Chen’s art songs are always challenging for mezzo singers. A good example is song no. 2 in


Meditation, which requires a mezzo singer to sing the large vocal leaps from A₄ to B₄ for the text “sky and earth” (m. 31), and from high B₅ to low B₃ (mm. 38-39) for the text “running tears.” The singer must have a solid sense of pitch to accurately sing those large leaps and dissonant intervals. In Bright Moonlight, the mezzo voice sustains a high B₅ for five beats long at the climax of the song, singing the text, “far away” (mm. 79-81); Chen’s desired vocal color for this particular moment is a high tessitura that is produced with as little volume as possible and well-controlled vibrato. It is understandable that many mezzo singers may not be comfortable with Chen’s vocal demands. In this case, she would make some pitch adjustments in the song to better suit a particular mezzo’s vocal ability, rather than giving up her choice of mezzo sound and letting a higher voice represent her work. Therefore, the suitability of a mezzo-soprano voice for her musical settings goes beyond the singing techniques.

**Performance Strategies**

Many classically trained singers are uncomfortable with singing contemporary repertoire because of the harmonic and rhythmic challenges presented by the composers. The main challenges with performing contemporary vocal works are: a) singing the correct pitch, b) being accurate with the rhythm, and c) giving a convincing performance of the text in an appropriate style.⁴¹

There are five strategies recommended to develop confidence in pitch accuracy: 1) analyze the notation and its structure; 2) develop a second-nature response; 3) pay

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attention to voice placement; 4) learn exact pitches; and 5) make exercises out of difficult-to-hear passages. Rhythm is closely tied to pitches. Strategies used to work with rhythmic issues are: a) strengthening the quarter beat while singing; b) placing marks above the score; and c) conducting while singing. Strategies to work with the text include reading the text slowly as a poem, going over unfamiliar words, and then saying the text in musical rhythms. Nevertheless, a perfect partnership between singer and pianist helps the most in preparing and performing contemporary vocal music, as it familiarizes both performers with a variety of musical aspects of the songs.42

A glance at the musical score of Chen’s Meditation would scare away many singers just by noticing what appears on the page. It is full of unusual notations, unfamiliar marks, and uncommon scoring. However, quite common in contemporary music, “the score is not ‘the music’ and ‘the music’ is not confined to the score.”43 The two songs in Meditation contain the musical elements that offer singers much to learn if they pursue performing contemporary repertoire. The musical score looks atonal in a style with fragmented rhythms and structures. If the singer does not have perfect pitch, a good sense of relative pitch combined with a vocal ability for disjunctive pitches will be the key to quickly finding and retaining a vocal quality for singing Chen’s Meditation comfortably.

Just like they study style and diction in preparing German Lied or French mélodie, singers need to learn the correct pronunciation and the stylistic idioms before


43 Ibid.
starting to work on Chen’s music. One must-do task for learning *Meditation* is that the singer needs to gain basic knowledge of Peking Opera singing and Chinese Mandarin language, because these are the two major sources that Chen Yi used for composing the two songs. For example, the holding tone from Peking Opera singing practice often appears at the end of phrases in song no. 1, it needs to be sung with a good control of airflow and a clear cut-off at the end of the note. If the singer knows about this particular singing style, she will have no hesitation in presenting the vocal phrases properly. The next issue is that in Peking Opera, each Chinese word is sung in a pattern of 头、腹、尾 一 head, body, and tail (Example 18). By knowing this, the singer will get a sense of how to deliver the melismatic phrases in song no. 1. The strategies could be applied to emphasize the head of a word percussively, project the body of a word with sustained energy, and sing the tail of a word with a descending tone and a clear cut-off.

Example 18. *Meditation*, song no. 1, mm. 9-10, the word *xia*:

\[ x (sh) — head; \quad i (i:) — body; \quad ao (aw) — tail \]

After getting a basic knowledge of Mandarin diction, the next task for the singer is to thoroughly study the English translation of the text to gain a deep understanding of

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what the songs are about. The singer needs to determine who she is and where she is in each song—a narrator telling a story or the main speaker talking about her own thoughts. The next task is to read the text aloud over and over until she feels the body connection from normal speech—the breath-support from the abdominal wall while speaking, the tongue and jaw collaborations while projecting loudly, and the sensation of open throat when producing a resonant sound. By reading aloud, the singer is building a vocal foundation for the tessitura that is fundamental for singing the songs, as one of the bel canto concepts states: “Si canta come si parla”45 (one sings as one speaks). After establishing in-depth knowledge of the text and vocal fundamentals for singing the songs, the singer is ready to work on Chen’s music.

To sing Chen’s Meditation in the appropriate style, a classically trained singer needs to make certain vocal adjustments during the preparation, as the vocal quality for singing Chinese music is quite different. It requires more forward placement with little vibrato to make a straight tone ringing in the nasal cavity, which is different from the choral straight tone used in many choirs. The ideal vocal timbre for singing Chen’s Meditation is a type of controlled nasal tone, the singer may use vocal vibrato, as long as it is in a way of slower and wider than the vibrato used in classical operatic singing. The aesthetic standard is summed up by one of the Peking Opera singing principles: 字正腔圆—clear articulation in a mellow and full vocal tone, meaning that the Chinese words

should be delivered accurately and precisely, and the melodic passages should be delivered with controlled vocal flowing.\footnote{Elizabeth Wichmann, "Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Beijing Opera Performance." \url{http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146013} (accessed June 29, 2012).}

To gain the desirable vocal quality for singing Chen’s Meditation, suggested strategies are: 1) using nasal humming and cats’ meowing in daily warm-ups to develop a sensation of nasal resonance; 2) listening to Peking Opera recordings to become familiar with the vocal timbre and singing style; and 3) practicing tongue-rolling and staccato exercises to gain vocal flexibility for the pronunciation of Mandarin diction.

The first song, Spring Dreams, is short in duration but wide in vocal range ($A_{3b}$-$A_{5b}$). The singer does not get any help pitch-wise from the accompaniment as the two parts are running in different modes and rhythms throughout the song. The vocal melody includes several large leaps, while the piano has its own melodic lines playing octaves in both hands. Fragmented melodic structures such as these can be very challenging for the singer. A practical strategy for singing quartertones is proved to be somewhat of a revelation to singers. It is helpful to get a sense of distance between pitches, rather than just drilling intervals. The rhythmic challenge starts from very beginning, where the piano plays an ostinato in an irregular rhythm for the entire first part of the song; the voice enters later, singing in an independent rhythm, but they both need to end at the same spots in measure 16 (Example 19), which is the biggest challenge in the song for both performers. The only way to have it done perfectly is to practice together as much as possible and get the feelings for both parts while presenting your own part.
The second song, *Monologue*, has relatively regular rhythms in both piano and voice parts, even through the two parts are running in different modes for the most time. The melodic structure seems less complicated, but the vocal leaps are much wider, such as the ninth in measures 5-6 (C♯–B♭3) and the two octaves in measures 38-39 (B♭5–B♭3). The vocal range is quite challenging for most mezzo singers, as it hangs in the high register (F5–A5) quite often and for very long. A practical strategy offered here is to warm-up longer in the high register every day for developing a vocal stamina that is strong enough to cope with the challenge.

Overall, Chen’s *Meditation* contains tonal and rhythm challenges as well as interesting dissonances. However, the tonal idiom is accessible and sophisticated, which suggests that this group-song can be suitable repertoire for advanced mezzo-soprano voice students. It also can be an excellent choice to introduce the subject of contemporary vocal repertoire written with world-music practices to the undergraduate voice study.

In terms of performing Chen’s *Bright Moonlight*, the singer must consider its sensitive perceptions and impressions, which are more intellectual than what appears in *Meditation*. Since the melody is more toward the style of Romantic art song and the text
of the song is in English, the singer may sing the song with well-developed bel canto techniques, such as more legato delivering in Section B while singing “near in front, far a way” three times. By studying the typical compositional devices that Chen Yi used for her music settings, such as the pentatonic motive and the Peking Opera holding tone, the singer may develop her own insights for performing this vocal work. Furthermore, to interpret this song profoundly, the singer needs to have a solid skill for singing text-repetition as it appears frequently in the song. Such a skill will allow the voice to capture the emotions and moods depicted in the song, and to present them with complete understanding of Chen’s initial desires of her musical approaches.

Practice makes perfect performances. It is apparent that each singer may have some tailored learning and practicing strategies to better suit specific challenges and technical demands while studying new repertoire and hoping to gain a greater understanding of the craft. Approaching the preparation and performance of Chen’s art songs requires individual and collaborative efforts and dedications. The singer with or without an accompanist may be able to start the preparation for Chen’s art songs, but not the period of studying the works in detail and eventually performing the songs. Therefore, efficiently working with a pianist is must-needed during the preparation for performances. Last but not least, some singers may have stage anxiety/fright issues that often interfere with the performance and take away some of the good qualities gained during the preparation. In this case, the singer might benefit from taking Yoga or Pilates classes to develop the mental control and stamina for dealing with the performance stress, because this type of music is indeed beyond the standard capabilities of majority singers.
CONCLUSION

Although Chen Yi is a Western-trained musician who teaches Western music in higher education, her art songs represent bicultural characteristics that catalog them in one of the contemporary songwriting styles: combining the modern compositional methods with the world-music practices. The careful review of her bicultural background in Chapter I and the thorough study of her art songs in Chapter II support the link between Chen’s cultural uniqueness and her musical creativity. The two charts listed below display the influences of her cultural elements on her stylistic elements.

Art song indeed is a small portion of Chen’s entire compositional works, but each of her solo songs is impressively unique. The style of her songwriting is deeply rooted in Chinese folk music and her bicultural life experience, while boldly demonstrating Western musical techniques. Still, it cannot be simply defined by either Western or Chinese musical styles, but labeled as her own creative approaches.

Cultural Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Born and raised place Native language</th>
<th>Guangzhou, China Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>• BA, MM (composition) in China, DMA (composition) in America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Western-trained composer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Professional-trained violinist and pianist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td>32 years in China, 25 years in U.S including 11 years in Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>• Distinguished Professor in University of Missouri-Kansas City since 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Visiting Professor in the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China since 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career output</td>
<td>• Composed about 80 vocal works, numerous instrumental works</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Stylistic Elements

| General                      | • Chinese folk idioms and Western modern techniques mixed  
|                             | • Composing for desirable voices                           |
| Melody                      | • Peking Opera singing style; exotic, fragmented; mostly melismatic  
|                           | • Chinese folk-like—half sung and half spoken, holding tone, large  
|                           |     leaps and wide ranges; many repetitions and recitations  |
| Harmony                     | • Octave-paralleled; many dissonances and Chinese fourths;  
|                           | • Unstable tonal center and atonal mixed—linked with texts  
|                           | • Unconventional, flexible, often unresolved                |
| Rhythm                      | • Regular meters of 2/4 and 4/4 with irregular rhythms  
|                           | • Chinese 5-note pentatonic motive and Western atonal motive  
|                           | • Varied and rich                                          |
| Accompaniment               | • Use of prelude, interlude, and postlude formed with Peking Opera  
|                           |     elements or atonal patterns                           
|                           | • Active and supportive mixed; occasional melodies in both hands  |
| Poetry                      | • Prefer ancient Chinese poems or own texts  
|                           | • Loneliness, unfulfilled dreams, and future hopes  
|                           | • Mainly in Chinese                                       |
| Form                        | • Dictated by poetic structures                            |

Chen Yi had her formal music training at Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China and studied with Chinese composer Wu Zhu-qiang for eight years. She came all the way from the East to the West to pursue her highest music education at Columbia University in New York City. Interestingly, she studied with another Chinese-born composer Chou Wen-chung for six years. Chen Yi recalls that both Professor Wu at CCoM and Professor Chou at Columbia taught her how to use Chinese thinking in writing music for Western performing forces. They both helped her discover her own compositional voice and aesthetic taste, which are the two important qualities for one becoming a creative artist. If she did not have a captivating bicultural background, rich
life experiences, and a fascinating journey of Chinese music connection and Western music training, she would never make her compositional outcomes become an infusion of Western and Eastern music styles, which has earned her a reputation as a unique woman composer in the contemporary music world. All the music education she had in her youth and later years did not nourish her Chinese musical authenticity, nor directly train her for writing the significant music in her own style. It is her bicultural complements and her systematic study of Chinese traditional music in her later career that defines a unique style of her compositions in all genres of music.

When listening to Chen’s music, one cannot remain unmoved by her natural talent for infectious rhythms and colorful harmonies that are built wisely in layers and then fade away beautifully. Her basic intent for composing is that she consciously and unconsciously thinks about music making with her own musical language generated from her Chinese heritage. Her art songs are the revolution of Eastern-inflected Western music, which undoubtedly serve the cultural atmosphere in today’s increasingly global musical world. During her interview with the Minnesota Public Radio in 2001, Chen Yi talked about the power of her music, she said: “It is not only bringing the beauty of the arts but also the fresh inspiration to the audience.” She wishes her music could be a bridge to connect Western and Eastern traditions and cultures, and inspire peoples to reach higher levels of understanding each other’s cultural differences, making the world of consonance.


48 Ibid.
Art song interpretation has become a rarely practiced craft in modern society and the mechanized world, where the Internet, social media, and YouTube broadcasts have begun to dull common interest in live musical performances. Perhaps because of this, there has been a resurgence of attention to composing and performing art song. Many contemporary composers feel that this important musical genre needs to be preserved, as the spontaneous beauty of art song can help listeners re-connect with authentic experiences.\(^49\) Therefore, composers are attempting to write more art songs, and singers are more encouraged to perform them. On another hand, since recording live operas in theaters has become increasingly expensive today, many gifted singers and music producers prefer to record performances in concert halls in order to reduce the cost of making classical music productions.\(^50\)

Today’s music world has greatly changed with international influences, making it incumbent upon singers to know more about cultural diversity through learning multicultural repertoire. Singers searching for such vocal repertoire by women composers may consider studying the well-crafted art songs by Chen Yi, as she is an ideal composer for understanding the style of contemporary songwriting that reflects cultural diversity, and her vocal works deserve to be better known by new generations. Furthermore, making Chen’s art songs more accessible to performers and listeners will create a greater visibility of her vocal compositions in the standard repertoire, and hopefully help young singers gain deeper appreciation for the tradition of art song.


\(^{50}\) Ibid.
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Wen Zhang (mezzo-soprano)
zhangw7@UNLV.Nevada.edu; http://universitybiltmore.com/wenzhang/

Education & Award
Doctor of Music Arts (voice) University of Nevada, Las Vegas  Fall 2012
Ed. M (music education) Teachers College of Columbia University  2009
MM (vocal performance) University of Western Ontario, Canada  1991
BM (vocal performance) Nanjing College of Fine Arts, China  1986
Graduate Research Grant University of Nevada. Las Vegas  2011
International Study Award Teachers College of Columbia University  2009
Superior Teaching Award Young Performers Competition, NY  1998
Finalist (NYC) International Opera Singer Competition  1997

Teaching Experience
Visiting Lecturer, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, China Oct.-Dec. 2012
Voice PTI & student director of opera workshop, University of Nevada  2010-12
Music teacher, ECL School, Seoul, Korea  2010
Voice TA, Teachers College of Columbia University  2008-09
Teaching Artist, Metropolitan Opera Guild & National Chorale  2003-08
Musical theater lecturer, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts  2006
Voice instructor, Brooklyn Conservatory of Music in New York  1997-98

Publication & Presentation
Peking Opera—Bel Canto in Chinese, Journal of Singing Nov. 2011
The Influence of Cultural Difference on Compositional Style, JOS submission Jun. 2012
Graduate College Research Forum, UNLV Mar.2012
International Society for Music Education world conference Jul. 2010

Performing Experience
Madama Butterfly (Suzuki)
Hong Kong Opera, Toronto City Opera, Belleayre Music Festival, NY
State Repertory Opera, NJ, Natchez Opera Festival, MS, New Jersey Verismo Opera, etc.
Le Nozze di Figaro (Cherubino)--State Repertory Opera, NJ
Rigoletto (Maddalena)--State Repertory Opera, NJ
Falstaff(Dame Quickly)--New York Grand Opera, Central Park, NY
Carmen (Mercedes, Carmen)--State Repertory Opera, NJ & Toronto Opera Repertoire
Golden Ticket (new opera by Peter Ash)--American Lyric Theatre, NY
The King & I (lady Thiang)
National & International Tour Company, West Virginia Public Theater,
Gateway Playhouse, NY, Downtown Cabaret Theater, CT, etc.
Actor’s Playhouse, Miami, FL, Nomination for Best Supporting Actress in Musical Carbonell Award
Soloist, Shanghai Music Festival, China (Oct. 26, Nov. 21, 2012)