

Defining the Multicultural Moment: A Performance of *The Rain Falls on the Leaves of the Banana Tree* in Context

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Introduction

The sounds of gentle dripping alternate with those of a fierce rainstorm in *The Rain Falls on the Leaves of the Banana Tree*, an improvised programmatic depiction of a torrential downpour for solo Chinese dulcimer performed by Lily Yuan. Yuan's performance represents a defining moment of cultural fusion combining Chinese and Western elements. The images and blurb of Lyrichord Discs' liner notes celebrate the traditional aspects of culture conjured by the album title *The Ancient Art Music of China*, and they outline the organological derivation of Yuan's instrument, the *yangqin*, from Middle Eastern origins.¹ However, the adaptation of the *yangqin* from an accompaniment to a solo instrument is also noted, as is the elevation of Yuan's status to that of virtuoso, suggesting that the musical moment actually defines the pluralism of Chinese musical culture under twentieth-century Western influence.² This paper explores the multicultural origins of Yuan's performance and undertakes a musical analysis of the moment that, thanks to digital access and marketing, can be re-lived at will, and each time re-defined, by the musicologist, the ethnomusicologist, or the shopper. Defining the multicultural moment, Veit Erlmann writes:

. . . the contradiction that characterises our historical moment is this: . . . the truth of an individual or collective identity, the experience of an authentic rooting in a time and a place, is now inextricably bound up with the truths of other places and times . . . if the systemic notion of a cultural totality is to be of any value and if it is to avoid the dangers of Eurocentric monolithic representations, it must precisely capture this dilemma as one of the deepest motivating forces for a global aesthetic production.³

Ontology and Organology

The Rain Falls on the Leaves of the Banana Tree (hereafter *The Rain Falls*) is part of the tradition of instrumental music in China. The programmatic title reflects the fact that the 'old social ideals and literary stories' told by piece titles are assigned high importance by Chinese performers and listeners.⁴ It also places the piece among the kind of solo instrumental music which, according to Bruno Nettl, may describe symbols in Chinese culture by representing 'images, scenes and objects . . . with titles such as "High Mountains, Flowing Streams"'.⁵ This imitation of natural sounds reflects the lack of distinction in Chinese music theory between a natural sound and a musical note, and links to the Daoist philosophy that music should bring the individual closer to the forces of nature.⁶ Complementing Daoism in ancient Chinese aesthetics were the tenets of Confucianism, which viewed music as a method of self-cultivation, and a ritual expression of appropriate behaviour.⁷ According to Alan Merriam, music promoted the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and faith, as well as natural elements.⁸ The nature of *The*

¹ G. Gold, Liner note to *The Ancient Art Music of China*. Lily Yuan, *Yangqin*. Compact Disc, LYRCD 7409 (New York: Lyrichord Discs, 1990), pp. 1-2.

² Ibid, pp. 2-4.

³ V. Erlmann, 'The Politics and Aesthetics of Transnational Musics', in *The World of Music*, 35:2 (1993), p. 7.

⁴ A. Thrasher, 'China', in H. Myers (ed.), *Ethnomusicology: Historical and Regional Studies* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1993), p. 331.

⁵ B. Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 211.

⁶ See L. Mingyue, *Music of the Billion: An Introduction to Chinese Musical Culture* (New York: Heinrichshofen Edition, 1985), p. 18, C. Yingshi, 'Theory and Notation in China', in R. Provine, Y. Tokumaru & J. Witzleben (eds.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 7* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 115 and K. De Woskin, 'Chinese Philosophy and Aesthetics', in R. Provine, Y. Tokumaru & J. Witzleben (eds.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 7* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 97-8.

⁷ See De Woskin, 'Chinese Philosophy and Aesthetics', p. 97 and I. Wong, 'China', in B. Nettl et al (eds.), *Excursions in World Music* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1992), p. 90.

⁸ A. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 93 and 245.

Rain Falls, which is ‘popular’ and ‘light’, reflects the connotations of *yue*, the Chinese word for ‘music’.⁹ This term denotes enjoyment or happiness and, therefore, music in China is ‘not an isolated phenomenon but rather a contextual phenomenon related to all aspects of living’.¹⁰



Cover image for LYRCD 7409, ‘The Ancient Art Music of China’, reproduced with permission from Lyrichord Discs, Inc.

The liner notes to *The Ancient Art Music of China* describe practices of the Tang (618-906 AD) and Sung (960-1279 AD) Dynasties, but the *yangqin* was not used in China until at least the fifteenth century.¹¹ Pronounced *yang chin*, the instrument is a trapezoid-shaped hammered dulcimer belonging to the zither family.¹² One popular name of this chordophone – ‘butterfly harp’ – is owed to the shape of zither used in the Guangdong Province.¹³ The *yangqin* belongs to the “silk” or *si* category of instruments, which originally had their strings made from silk. The category includes plucked string instruments as well as struck strings like the *yangqin*. In the Jiangnan Region, actually distant from the Guangdong, the *si* instruments combined with the *zhu* or ‘bamboo’ category wind instruments to create the *sizhu* wind and string ensemble, performing in traditional tea houses.¹⁴

It is generally thought that the *yangqin* entered China during the late Ming Dynasty of 1368 to 1644.¹⁵ Whilst Wu Ben believes that the instrument originated in Turkey and was imported by sea from Europe, most sources agree that the *yangqin* is derived from the *santur* (or *santaur*, *santir*, *santour* or *santouri*) of Persia.¹⁶ The Persian *santur* has seventy-two strings tuned to twenty-seven different pitches; these are arranged in quadruple courses and pegged, either on both sides of the body like an American dulcimer, or on just one side like the Arab psaltery.¹⁷ The Chinese *yangqin* has a wooden sound box with metal strings arranged in ‘sets’ or ‘courses’ of between two and four strings. The two bridges each hold seven to ten strings, providing a two-octave range which is tuned to a six- or seven-tone scale. During performance, the *yangqin*, which has been developed since the 1950s, is rested on a stand and its strings are hit with light

⁹ Gold, Liner note to *The Ancient Art Music of China*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Mingyue, *Music of the Billion*, p. 11.

¹¹ See Gold, Liner note to *The Ancient Art Music of China*, pp. 1-2 and Mingyue, *Music of the Billion*, p. 275.

¹² Gold, Liner note to *The Ancient Art Music of China*, p. 2.

¹³ Mingyue, *Music of the Billion*, p. 275.

¹⁴ Wong, ‘China’, p. 79.

¹⁵ See A. Thrasher, ‘China, III: Musical Instruments, (vii) Later String Instruments’, in S. Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Volume 5*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 2001), p. 659 and W. Ben, ‘Instruments: Yangqin’, in R. Provine, Y. Tokumaru & J. Witzleben (eds.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 7* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 179.

¹⁶ See Ben, ‘Instruments: Yangqin’, p. 179 and W. Malm, *Music Cultures of the Pacific, the Near East, and Asia* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1971), p. 69 and Thrasher, ‘China III: Musical Instruments’, p. 659.

¹⁷ See Wong, ‘China’, p. 44 and Malm, *Music Cultures of the Pacific*, p. 69.

bamboo sticks.¹⁸ The instrument is popular across China, and has been noted in the Xinjiang and Inner Mongolian Regions, and in the Jiangnan Region, the Shandong Province, and the Sichuan Province.¹⁹ This may be an example of the ‘cultural pluralism’ of modern China, whereby national styles can override local minority traditions.²⁰

Twentieth-Century Context

While the *yangqin* traditionally has featured in instrumental ensembles, and accompanied Shandong and Cantonese opera as well as sung narrative genres, its use as a solo concert instrument in *The Rain Falls* shows the Western influence on China’s twentieth-century performance practice.²¹ Although the *qin* – China’s most revered string instrument – has always been played solo, this took place only in private.²² The *yangqin* was traditionally played in public, but Western influence has elevated its performers from cultivated amateurs providing background music at social events – with people ‘talking and moving about a great deal’ – to expert soloists performing to a silent, listening audience.²³ This change was enabled by the education available to performers from Western-style conservatories established in the 1920s, as well as from the rise in status of the professional musician brought about by Communist Party reforms in 1949.²⁴ *The Ancient Art Music of China* reflects China’s modern aesthetic, promoting Yuan’s education at the Beijing and Shanghai Conservatories, and praising her ‘virtuosity on the Chinese dulcimer’.²⁵ Also, whilst ‘only a few traditional Chinese pieces have any attributed authorship’, *The Rain Falls* is thought to have existed in score format from 1921, and is attributed to the composer, Yua Da Ba Jiao.²⁶ *The Rain Falls*, therefore, has quite a recent direct lineage, despite its associations with the ‘ancient art music’ of China.

Structure and Style

Of the four main styles of music for solo *yangqin*, *The Rain Falls* – with its virtuosic effects and range of moods contrasting the triumphant with the poignant – may be part of the north-eastern Chinese style. This ‘features *vibrato* and ornamentation generated by repeatedly pressing and relaxing the strings beyond the bridges’, and uses pieces in a ‘theme-and-variations form’.²⁷ Although the embellishment and the lack of definite closure after some sections make this piece sound through-composed, its structure can be represented in the following table.²⁸

Intro	A	A'	Link	B	C	D	Link	E	A''	Link	C'	A'''	Link	A''''	Coda
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Structural interpretation of ‘The Rain Falls on the Leaves of the Banana Tree’

The varied repetition of the A section, interspersed with contrasting material, links to the northern Chinese technique of ‘embellished variation’ that is often used for wind instruments.²⁹ The form may echo the Confucian principle of ‘resonance’, whereby similar sections of a piece can connect, in the mind of the listener, across a distance.³⁰ Although the introduction is not in free meter, the form of *The Rain Falls*

¹⁸ Ben, ‘Instruments: *Yangqin*’, p. 181.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 179.

²⁰ Thrasher, ‘China’, p. 330.

²¹ Ben, ‘Instruments: *Yangqin*’, p. 180.

²² Wong, ‘China’, pp. 84, 87.

²³ Ibid, p. 78.

²⁴ H. Kuo-Huang, ‘The Introduction of Western Music in Modern Times’, in R. Provine, Y. Tokumaru & J. Witzleben (eds.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 7* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 373-8.

Wong, ‘China’, p. 92.

²⁵ Gold, Liner notes to *The Ancient Art Music of China*, p. 4.

²⁶ Wong, ‘China’, p. 91.

²⁷ Ben, ‘Instruments: *Yangqin*’, p. 180.

²⁸ Wong, ‘China’, p. 82.

²⁹ Thrasher, ‘Instrumental Music: Structures and Performance Practices’, in R. Provine, Y. Tokumaru & J. Witzleben (eds.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 7* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 236.

³⁰ De Woskin, ‘Chinese Philosophy and Aesthetics’, p. 98.

embodies what Isabel Wong calls ‘the typical *qin* piece’ in which, once mode and metre are established, the principal motives are varied by ‘extension, reduction, and changes in timbre, tempo and register’.³¹

Of all the musical features in *The Rain Falls*, timbre is the most interesting, along with other features resulting directly from the construction of the *yangqin*. The instrument is capable of three distinct timbres – a low, dry register, a *vibrato* timbre and a soft, high register – which help distinguish the different structural sections. For example, the A sections usually have the *vibrato* timbre, while the four link phrases always have the dry register. This differentiation assists the programmatic effect by mixing depictions of the rainstorm (section A) with that of leaves dripping (link passages). Sometimes, as in section D, two layers of timbre are combined. The important role of timbre in *The Rain Falls* reflects the fact that Chinese music is ‘medium oriented rather than repertoire oriented’, so it is usually timbre more than melody that identifies a piece.³² The delicate sound of the *yangqin* may exemplify the way timbre in Chinese music has been refined with the influence of Western concert aesthetics.³³

Articulation and dynamics in *The Rain Falls* support the timbral contrasts in heightening the programmatic effect and identifying sections. While the link phrases are articulated in a ‘dripping’, staccato manner, the A sections usually have a ‘wet’, sustained sound. At E, the *yangqin* is able to sustain the lower register while executing the staccato *g* motive in the upper register, and most of the ‘dry’ link passages have the final note of the preceding section sustained through them. William Malm describes how the modern *santur* has a piano-style dampening mechanism used for separation purposes, and the sound of the recording suggests the same for the *yangqin*.³⁴ The use of dynamics also creates variation. The high-pitched part of section B and the entire A''' section are the softest parts of the piece, and this helps differentiate them from the other appearances of section A. Dynamics can vary from *forte* to *piano* at just a note’s distance, as in the final part of section E. The *fortissimo* dynamic is a characteristic feature of the virtuosic coda, and the *crescendo* and *diminuendo* within the penultimate note are indicative of the performance capabilities of the *yangqin*.

Melody and Improvisation

Although timbre is very important in Chinese musical aesthetics, the melody of *The Rain Falls* is another of its characteristic features. Yehudi Menuhin believes that ‘melody has reached a higher level of sophistication in the Far East than in the West’, and in the case of the *yangqin* this may be because its solo repertoire has developed from the vocal music it originally accompanied.³⁵ Melodic nuances from vocal music are reflected by the large amount of ornamentation in *The Rain Falls*. This can be heard in sections A and A''', where ascending and descending semiquaver runs change the shape of the melody by embellishing the principal notes. Two main types of ornamentation occur: the ‘shimmering’ effect used throughout to evoke raindrop sounds by rolling between two notes an octave apart; and the rapid repetition of a single note over a moving bass line, which helps distinguish section A''' from section A. Enabled by the dual-stick playing technique, these embellishments reflect a Chinese notion that the performer is also ‘acting as composer’ because of their improvisation during the defining moment of performance.³⁶ Central to assessment of the performer’s ability, this improvisation involves treatment of dynamics, tempo, ornamentation, and even the ordering of thematic material.³⁷ The improvisation techniques are learnt by imitation and executed according to the characteristics of the instrument, and the tastes of the audience.³⁸ Therefore, the melody of *The Rain Falls* may be unique to this Lyricord Discs recording.³⁹

The improvisation in *The Rain Falls* appears to be driven by melody, and this is the feature I have used to determine the structure for my analysis. The main feature of the melody is the organic nature of its development. Even though the piece has a sectional structure with refrain, there are overlaps between adjacent sections, and not every reprise of section A is the same length. Organicism is also shown by the way the A section takes the minor third that concludes the introduction and explores it. The start of the A section has notes *e, g, e* in crotchet meter, but this motive has been explored, inverted to *g, e, g*, and diminished to quaver meter by the end of the section. The exploration is continued in section A', which

³¹ Wong, ‘China’, p. 89.

³² Mingyue, *Music of the Billion*, p. 24.

³³ J. Stock, ‘China, IV: Western-Influenced Styles, (i) Mass Song and Conservatory Style’, in S. Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Volume 5* (London: Macmillan, 2001), p. 692.

³⁴ Malm, *Music Cultures of the Pacific*, p. 69.

³⁵ See Y. Menuhin, *The Book of Music*, 2nd edn. (London: Arrow Books Ltd, 1980), p. 86 and Ben, ‘Instruments: *Yangqin*’, p. 180.

³⁶ Wong, ‘China’, pp. 83, 92.

³⁷ Mingyue, *Music of the Billion*, p. 21.

³⁸ See Wong, ‘China’, p. 83 and Malm, *Music Cultures of the Pacific*, p. 169.

³⁹ Thrasher, ‘Instrumental Music: Structures and Performance Practices’, p. 243.

grows organically out of A by using only its middle line, and in A'''', where it is preceded by a development of the melodic outline from the introduction. Even the contrasting section D uses several third relationships, which suggests it may derive from section A. Octave relationships are also important in *The Rain Falls*: note the repeated octave *g* notes in section E, imitation at the octave in section D, doubling at the octave during the coda, and the fact that closure of a section is usually signalled by a quiet repetition of the final note, one octave below. The rhythms within the piece drum continuously, enhancing the 'dripping' effects, and the *accelerando* within the final link phrase might suggest an intensification of the rainstorm.

With its emphasis on timbre and melody, *The Rain Falls* demonstrates some characteristics of pieces from China's 'New Wave' music of the 1980s, though the presence of Western-style harmony in the piece makes any link to this movement somewhat tenuous.⁴⁰ The melody of section A', for example, contains all the notes of the C-major scale, and it is perhaps the recurrent focus on third relationships that creates an oriental sound.⁴¹ This could be an example of the way conservatory-taught composers 'made an effort to fuse Western harmony . . . with Chinese pentatonic material'.⁴² There is certainly a sense of tonality as the piece begins and ends on *e*, has a tonic-like bass *g* concluding most sections, and includes movement from G major to E minor to F major at A'. Whilst Western elements should not be enforced by analysis, even the texture at A' switches from monophony to a homophony apparently reminiscent of a Western piano arrangement. So a combination of features, of Chinese and Western derivation, achieves the programmatic effect of Yuan's improvisation.

China and the 'World Music' Moment

Lyrichord Discs' recording of *The Rain Falls* represents the defining moment encapsulated by China's 1898 slogan, 'Chinese culture as the essence, and Western learning for practical use.'⁴³ This moment is digitally preserved but also defined by our method of access: via the album *Ancient Art Music of China*, available to consumers in a record shop's 'world music' section. For Ian Anderson, this 'emerged as a useful marketing concept back in 1987', but, for Jocelyne Guilbault, the 'world music' category is calculated to keep 'at bay' the music perceived to originate outside the mainstream or from 'disadvantaged' populations.⁴⁴ As my analysis has shown, the notion of 'ancient art music' tells only part of the story: it is a good sales technique, but hardly presents a complete image of the post-colonial musical moment in China. For scholars such as Robert Burnett and Philip Bohlman, the global promotion of particular national styles as 'world music' can create a homogenising effect that is sonically detrimental to local styles.⁴⁵ For Steven Feld, this represents the postmodern crisis of 'Schizophonia', whereby all styles of music are spatially or historically dislocated and disconnected.⁴⁶ For the listener in the age of pluralism, the problem may be schizophrenia: not knowing whether to listen as musicologist, ethnomusicologist or consumer, whether to situate the moment in time or in space, or whether his/her race, gender, or nationality will hinder musical appreciation. Certainly the digital preservation of *The Rain Falls* encapsulates Erlmann's contradiction: here the multicultural moment – its double bind of homogenisation and hybridity – can be re-lived, and re-defined, *ad infinitum*.

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⁴⁰ J. Zhou, 'Syncretic Traditions and Western Idioms: Trends and Ideology in Chinese Art Music', in R. Provine, Y. Tokumaru & J. Witzleben (eds.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Volume 7* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 342.

⁴¹ Yingshi, 'Theory and Notation in China', p. 116.

⁴² Zhou, 'Syncretic Traditions and Western Idioms', p. 339.

⁴³ Wong, 'China', p. 75.

⁴⁴ I. Anderson, 'World Wars', *Folk Roots*, 201 (2000), pp. 36-9. J. Guilbault, 'World Music', in S. Frith, W. Straw, & J. Street (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 178, 191.

⁴⁵ R. Burnett, *The Global Jukebox: The International Music Industry* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 9, and P. V. Bohlman, *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. xii.

⁴⁶ S. Feld, 'From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis: On the Discourses and Commodification Practices of 'World Music' and 'World Beat', in C. Keil & S. Feld (eds.), *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), pp. 257-289, and S. Feld, 'A Sweet Lullaby for World Music', *Public Culture*, 12:1 (1999), pp. 145-6.

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