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## A GLOBAL VERNACULAR? MUSINGS ON EUROPEAN ART MUSIC IN HONG KONG

In Tarkovsky's film, *Nostalghia* (1983), the Russian poet Gorchakov and his Italian interpreter embark on a geographical and spiritual journey across what Gorchakov memorably calls the «sickeningly beautiful sights of Central Italy». During a stay at a hotel near Arezzo, they overhear Chinese music played on a stereo in another room by an unknown guest. Upon responding to this, and at the interpreter's prompting, Gorchakov makes a mockery of what he sees as frivolous, delusional attempts to understand another culture.

Redolent of Spengler's pessimistic, anti-humanistic interpretation of world history – the old *dictum* that foreign cultures cannot be comprehended, only described<sup>1</sup> – Gorchakov's reaction is for us doubly significant not only because it runs counter to the all-too-frequent eulogies of a free-for-all global culture, the perfunctory celebrations of the dialogue allegedly taking place on a global scale across linguistic, cultural, and political barriers; Gorchakov's, and by implication Tarkovsky's, stance is also significant because it singles out music as the best example of the difficulty of that crossing over, and the impossibility of that dialogue. It is as if the immediate sensory appeal of music and, in this particular case, its exoticism, made it even more palpably opaque. Like poetry, music is a language – yet far from a universal one. On the contrary, it is instantiated by a plethora of highly individual forms and mutually exclusive dialects. When eradicated, stripped of its intimate ties to the land out of which it emerged, and the people for whom it was conceived, a musical repertory is demoted to the mere status of organized sound. Global access and distribution – the film seems to be suggesting – come at a prohibitively high cost.

When asked how to overcome this admittedly bleak state of affairs, how he could ever hope that his own poetry be read and comprehended, Gorchakov replies, cryptically, «by abolishing frontiers». Thus the parable comes to a close; yet it falls just short of delivering the requisite amount of wisdom. For the abolishing of frontiers is not a pre-condition, neither logically nor chronologically, for the exchange and enjoyment of artifacts or the study and understanding of foreign practices. Acculturation is itself an agent in the creation of networks and currents that not only transcend or run parallel to,

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. O. SPENGLER, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, I: *Gestalt und Wirklichkeit*, Wien, Braumüller, 1918; II: *Welthistorische Perspektiven*, München, Beck, 1922 (Engl. version *The Decline of the West*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991).

but underlie the creation of, political entities. Europe is a case in point, its cultural identity now paraded as the perfect antidote to centuries of bloody political separation and infighting, the foundation upon which to build a new, and newly integrated, economic and political union. As music historians, we know that the phenomenal growth of many musical genres, and the attendant exchange of skills and personnel, did not merely fill a space that was already there, but actively contributed to its creation. This was no doubt allowed, indeed encouraged, by the cosmopolitan vocation of many an aristocratic court. But, to stress the point about language, and to echo Professor La Face Bianconi's observations about Gregorian Chant in her introductory remarks to this volume (cf. pp. 1-5), it would have been unthinkable without Latin as a *lingua franca*, and that complex set of shared practices known as the Liturgy of the Church. By contrast, in the eyes of my Hong Kong students, the linguistic situation of what in my own courses passes as 'Europe', seems hopelessly fragmentary (and this is true whether I teach the 13<sup>th</sup>-, 17<sup>th</sup>-, or 20<sup>th</sup>-century). Through them, reflected in their faces, I once again see the specter of a Babel of languages and cultures.

Outside the classroom, tucked away in my office, or walking in the streets, sometimes I, too, get to overhear Chinese music. Only this is an occurrence that I have come to accept or better welcome, as a matter of course. Seven years ago, I was hired by The University of Hong Kong, the oldest of the eight universities of the territory (as Hong Kong is now referred to). Since then I have been teaching a variety of subjects, including the written repertoires of the European medieval, early modern, and modern periods. Like so much else in that uniquely situated city, the teaching of music history is best described as a work-in-progress driven by competing and, in some cases, incompatible agendas. The dizziness that comes from having to constantly redefine what we do and why, accompanied by a similarly dizzying sense of being on the cusp of epochal changes outside our immediate control, strikes at the core of my teaching of the so-called European tradition.

The moniker 'Western Music History', as the sequence of undergraduate courses I teach is called, refers to several things at once. Far from denoting simply a cultural sphere, the adjective 'Western', refreshingly for me, has an immediately graspable geographical meaning. The West, in Hong Kong, is thousands of miles apart, and contact with it is hardly if ever direct, taking instead the form of the exchange of capitals, technologies, and cultural forms (themselves highly mediated). The agents of such mediation, as I see it, are the territory's former administrators – the British – and local residents returning from Europe, Australia, and North America, as well as that great, and still woefully unrecognized, dispatcher of anything Western across East and South-East Asia: Japan. The intensity of the engagement with cultural imports, European art music being one of them, gives one pause. Whether one calls it translation, recontextualisation or appropriation, this process of engagement is

taking place at a long enough distance from the radiating center of the tradition, and under different enough circumstances, to make one revisit the term tradition and everything else that term, so we have been taught, ought to imply.

Unlike North America, where the European Tradition has flourished via direct contact, exchange, if not wholesale migration of some of its key practitioners, Hong Kong relies less on the exchange of people, the testimony of card-carrying members of the profession, than the ability of music to travel, as it were, light (all the more so in the digital age). Indeed, it is no exaggeration to claim that the transmission and distribution of European art music hangs on to the intangible, yet extraordinarily resilient, repertory itself: the sonatas, symphonies, cantatas and operas that make up the bulk of the canon in the West as well. This canon is being taught at breakneck speed and with unbridled enthusiasm and transport by performers, composers, and musicologists not only in Hong Kong but throughout the Chinese-speaking world (the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore). The musical work, that discredited notion, declared moribund by the high priests of a new orthodoxy, is thus at the center of arguably the largest transplant of the classical tradition ever to be recorded.

And yet, as a member of the sizable, and still growing, workforce that channels knowledge and repertoires into a new context, I have become fully aware that the work is not a goal in and of itself, but rather a springboard for the creation of networks, and a vehicle for the exchange of knowledge, skills, and capitals. Conservatories are sprouting throughout the region, creating jobs and careers, and feeding into an already booming fauna of private instructors and mentors. Hong Kong, for its part, has not only been the breeding ground for a number of internationally respected pianists, but is also home to what I like to think of as a new form of *Biedermeier*, in which home music-making, especially at the piano, performs various functions: the management of a restless youth often prone to identity crises, a convenient retreat into the domestic sphere in times of political uncertainty, and the acquisition of cultural capital for oneself, or one's children. As part of this complex process of assimilation, appropriation, and capitalization, music history still sits at the margins of both the liberal arts and the conservatory curricula, respectively. Designing courses that emphasize the common practice repertory is fraught with pitfalls and liable to generate misunderstanding, especially among colleagues and critics who view that repertory as little more than a trace of the fading British influence in the territory. But it is also intoxicating in its potential for impact on both students and – it needs stressing – teachers and researchers like myself.

Few of those who teach the tradition have personal roots where it originated or flourished. But rather than provoking sobering thoughts on the sorry prospects of ever producing scholars or performers truly at home with

the repertory, this state of affairs elicited soul-searching on my part. Growing up in Italy at a time when the ‘musealization’ of classical music was all but consummated, between the 1970s and 1980s, one was bound to cast a disenchanted glance at the disappearance of the social and political structures whose needs underpinned the creation of the repertory in the first place, the radical separation of music from the cultural projects that nurtured its emergence and transmission. Murray Schaefer’s notorious term, ‘schizophonia’, denoting the split of sound from its sources,<sup>2</sup> does not begin to capture the radical process of recontextualisation or, better, *neutralization*, as it occurred in Italy, one of the geographical and spiritual hearts of the tradition. Musicology’s quaint antiquarianism, its focus on the musical work and its aesthetic dimensions, decried as the symptom of a hopeless conservatism, seems to me now as the predictable – even sensible – outcome of that historical process.

Back in Hong Kong, the sight of thousands of young Chinese practicing the piano, violin, or readying themselves to become opera singers, need not inspire apocalyptic tales of colonial oppression or post-colonial malaise. The active, deliberate appropriation of Western art music is a *fait accompli* in Hong Kong, as well as in many other regions in East Asia. Music, moreover, remains the focus of a considerable administrative, financial, and infrastructural effort at all levels of education – primary through tertiary. To put this into context, we only need to remind ourselves of the legendary ambition and resourcefulness of an enterprising population, their access to, and familiarity with, goods and knowledge from all over the world, and last but not least the Hong Kong Government’s famed fiscal reserves to back it all up financially. To be sure, the openly utilitarian outlook of students and teachers alike may seem more like a betrayal than a fulfillment of music education. But in a strange and utterly compelling way, there is no question that “our” music has insinuated itself into the very fabric of “their” society, and is now fully integral to the personal projects of countless people across the territory.

In his “Hamlet essay” of 1796, August Wilhelm von Schlegel famously appropriated Shakespeare for German culture: «It can boldly be claimed that, apart from the English, he does not belong as peculiarly to any other people as he does to the Germans. ... Nothing about him is strange to us. We do not have to step out of our character a bit to call him ‘all ours’».<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Schlegel’s language no longer fits our sensibility as mobile, cosmopolitan individuals. But we will do well to heed his acknowledgement of national

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. R. MURRAY SCHAEFER, *The Tuning of the World*, New York, Knopf, 1977, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> A. W. VON SCHLEGEL, *Etwas über William Shakespeare bei Gelegenheit Wilhelm Meisters*, in ID., *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by E. Böcking, VII, Hildesheim - New York, Olms, 1971, p. 38 (partial translation in S. SCHÜLTING, ‘Remember Me’: *Shylock on the Postwar German Stage*, in *Shakespeare Survey*, LXIII: *Shakespeare’s English Histories and their Afterlives*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 290-300: 291).

borders if we want to enter into any discussion with colleagues for whom national identity – and national borders – are the order of the day. As for Schlegel's claim, that «we can call Shakespeare ours», not only is it a truism but, in a new context, it takes on a decidedly ambiguous color. Whether the form of appropriation he describes is possible, let alone desirable, across regions thousands miles apart is a question that we, in the Western World, have been discussing at length and, given the legacy of colonialism, not without a hefty dose of guilt or, worse, self-serving zeal. And yet it is a question, I feel, that as one-part participant and two-parts observer, I can only aspire to pose.