

## Book Reviews

*Music Beyond Sound: The Silk String Zither.* *Qin* solos by John Thompson. 1997. 1 compact disc. Hong Kong: Toadall Sound TDS 10001. Accompanying book, *Music Beyond Sound: Transcriptions of Music for the Chinese Silk String Zither.* xxvi, 120 pp. ISBN 962-85279-24. CD \$20. Book \$25, including postage. Address: John Thompson, 24A Peak Road, Cheung Chau, N.T. Hong Kong. Fax: +852-2981-0206. Email: thompson@iohk.com.



John Thompson's long-standing devotion to early *qin* (seven-string zither) repertoire, prudent scholarship with analytical insights, and subdued yet cultivated musicianship have come together to bring to life *qin* compositions from the fifteenth century. Intellectually compelling and artistically challenging, Thompson effectively presents his work in a veritable form of written transcription and realizes it in an audible form of actual sound. This richly textured, highly detailed package offers a new vantage point to glimpse an almost unexplored portion of the *qin* repertoire.

The book contains a preface, commentary on *Music Beyond Sound*, specific issues in the transcriptions, and transcriptions of 13 pieces from *Zheyin shizi qinpu* (Music from the Zhejiang [School] elucidated through lyrics), a 15th century *qin* handbook compiled by the Beyond-Sound Immortal. Taking an historical approach, Thompson has in his commentary traced the roots of the *Zheyin* handbook, collated versions of compositions in other existing handbooks, and compared textual and musical-technical similarities and differences, particularly with reference to the *Shenqi mipu* (Wondrous and secret notation, 1425 A.D). A point well taken in his commentary is the discussion on the descriptive nature of the *qin jianzipu* tablature (simplified ideogram notation), and its prescriptive function for reconstructing compositions within the "described" style of that particular handbook. The *jianzipu* tablature contains mostly suggestive metric, rhythmic and phrasal directives. To bring to life such notated music, a practitioner undertakes a fascinating process of realization known as *dapu* (literally "beating" the score) that involves appropriate deciphering of notational symbols and literary commentaries along with a creative actualization of the temporal and structural expressions.

While still focusing on the themes and streams of reconstructing early *qin* repertoire in the historical continuum, the section on specific issues in the transcriptions addresses theories of *dapu* in the concrete form of realization. The fifty-six issues deal with the nature of the *qin* tablature, playing techniques, tuning, modes, diachronic changes of systems in indicating fingering positions, types of ornamentation (such as vibratos and portamentos) and their relationship with tempo and rhythmic reconstruction, principles of lyric pairing with music, and guidelines for rhythmic determination. Collectively, these propositions are enlightening in that they seek not only to instruct proper deciphering and accurate execution and to justify the author's modifications that departed from the original tablature, but also to raise questions concerning specificity and flexibility in interpreting *jianzipu*, the authenticity of stylistic realization, and the orthodoxy of artistry in the historical continuum of "creative re-creation" (p. xi).

The main body of the book consists of transcriptions of twelve complete pieces from the *Zheyin shizi qinpu* which did not previously appear in the *Shenqi mipu*, and one of the two incomplete pieces (p. vii). The reconstructed compositions are presented in modern staff notation with the original *jianzipu*, and lyrics printed beneath for quick reference. Aside from Thompson's meticulous collation of notational symbols, the indication of discrepancies between the original directives and his subsequent modifications are particularly beneficial. Most of the deviations, such as re-alignment of lyrics with music according to the formula of one character for almost every right hand and certain left hand strokes (p. xxi) and supplement of missing notes (such as in "Mt. Tiantai Prelude") and musical lines (such as in "Thrice Parting for Yangguan"), are thoughtful and convincing. His modifications of fingerings and, in some cases, the grouping arrangement of playing techniques have, however, raised some interesting concerns about the determination of temporal and textural configurations, as well as musical stylistic traits that may be particular to an individual, school, or historical period.

Rather than conveying a sense of linear continuity as in modern staff notation, the temporal sense in *qin jianzipu* is expressed in the fashion of "successive moments," conveyed through "musical-kinetic units," and presented in the literary convention of ideographic complexes (Huang 1998:28). Each graphic complex prescribes a single, integrated unit of motion, hence a single complete moment in music. The unit of motion may involve a simple movement performed by either right or left hand, a compound kinetic sequence produced by either right or left hand, or a complex motor pattern that involves both hands. Hence, a simple burst of sound, such as *gou* (middle finger plucks the string

inward), is expressed in a single graph ; while a complicated percussive pattern such as *taocuo sanshen* (a combination of left hand thumb and ring finger with right hand thumb and middle finger in a formulaic pattern of eight strokes), is also expressed in a single graph (.

Since habitual grouping of formalized technical repertoire often carries strong stylistic traits that are culture- and genre-specific, discrepancies in grouping arrangements and/or modifications of techniques in a particular sequence will likely alter the rhythmic-dynamics inherent in the execution of playing techniques, and subsequently change the timbral and textural characteristics. Such re-interpretative re-creation is, however, encouraged and widely cultivated in the *qin* tradition, within which the “perceived past is constantly being reconstructed and revised” (Yung 1987:83). The re-created composition, thus, inevitably reflects the aesthetic principles and techniques of the “dapuist” and his contemporaries.

Quite distinct from such traditional recreative realization, Thompson has approached his *dapu* project with specific interests in reconstructing an “idealized form” (p. xi) according to historically “correct” stylistic parameters, and in attempting to be faithful to the tablature for an historically “accurate” interpretation (p. xi). In such instances, the inclusion of a more systematic analysis of instrumental idioms in the broader context of historical continuum and a calibrated comparison of technical/stylistic interpretations among fellow expert dapuists (such as Chen Changlin, whose outstanding realization of early *qin* repertoire can be heard on his CD, *Min River Qin Music* [1996]) would, perhaps, have further reinforced an argument which, though plausible as it stands, came across as somewhat tentative.

The CD features Thompson’s performance of his reconstructed compositions from the *Zheyin shizi qinpu*. The thirteen tracks recorded on silk strings are aesthetically attractive, particularly in balancing musical and “extraneous” sound, and in capturing the wide spectrums of tonal nuances. Also handsomely produced are the accompanying liner notes, which contain a wealth of information on the context, meaning, historical occurrences, and Thompson’s commentary on each of the pieces. The preface and section titles of each of the compositions that appeared in the original manuscript are thoughtfully included with English translations.

The noticeable discrepancies between Thompson's transcriptions and recorded performances present an interesting juxtaposition of his "idealized" reconstruction and his actual realization. Such variance seems to confirm Bell Yung's view of "historical interdependency": the past influences the present and the present reconstructs the past (Yung 1987:89). The question of authenticity, thus, remains to be further explored; meanwhile an "authentic" realization may exist only in the historical imagination of constantly evolving reality.

The differences between Thompson's transcriptions and performances, nevertheless, enable listeners to further explore their artfulness. Quite in contrast to the widely held expressive "ideal" in contemporary practice that incorporates overtly explicit tendencies in the temporal, dynamic, and ornamental expressions, Thompson's performance beautifully demonstrates the nuances of expressiveness in a rather restrained fashion. One of the few reservations I have on Thompson's realization is the lack of elasticity in his "schematic" rhythmic and phrasal reconstruction, which may have hindered the fluidity of the performance - a phenomenon often described by *qin* practitioners as an imbalance of *qi* (breath). In some pieces, the sense of structural transition and coherence in melodic progression is not sufficiently pronounced, which may be partly due to the absence of rhythmic diversity and dynamic contrast in phrasal punctuation.

While the artistry of Thompson's master musicianship is, for the most part, well conveyed through his subdued style, some emphases on ornamental articulations—such as *yin* and *nao* vibrato-like techniques—that were prescribed in the original tablature but were frequently omitted in the performance, would probably add stylistic sophistication and further the expressive potential of the music. In addition, the author notes that the existence of lyrics in each of the compositions was a distinctive characteristic of the *Zheyin shizi qinpu*, and discusses at some length the relationship between lyrics and rhythmic phrasing (p. xi and p. xxv). Consequently, the inclusion of lyrics to accompany the reconstructed music would probably provide one of the intended ways of realization by the editor of the handbook centuries ago, and would certainly satisfy many contemporary *qin* practitioners' curiosity, like my own, on the particularity of this handbook.

Overall, Thompson's work is both a unique scholarly accomplishment and a courageous artistic adventure. His detailed account of the process of reconstruction offers rare and invaluable insights into a *dapui*'s private journey, while his descriptive and analytical approach that attempts an historically reliable interpretation is commendable. Likewise, his compositional renderings are

genuinely sensible and his performance never fails to convey the sense of sincerity that is particular to the literati tradition. As I eagerly await Thompson's forthcoming publication on the music of the *Shenqi mipu*, it is with pleasure and admiration that I recommend the current package to the growing music community of the *qin*.

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