Arts & Humanities

Streams and Echoes

The long musical journey of Chou Wen-chung.

By
Tim Page '79CC
|
Fall 2014

Chou Wen-chung (Karli Cadel)

Chou Wen-chung vividly recalls the first time he felt the transformative power of music. It was the 1920s. He was a boy in Qingdao, which was not yet the gigantic metropolitan area of 8.5 million people that it is today, though it was already one of China’s busiest cities.

“I must have been about four years old,” says Chou ’54GSAS, who turned ninety-one this past June. “I had just begun to be aware of things, walking around freely, on my own, in our big garden. I heard sounds coming from the small house where the servants were — they’d left the door open and I was awfully little and they didn’t seem to mind that I came in. There they were, a handful of people, male and female, laughing and drinking a very cheap form of alcohol called kaoliang. They were playing instruments and singing, and I saw that they were happy and relaxed. I understood right away that these sounds were something through which you could express your happiness.”

It was the sort of epiphany that can lead to a life in music. After his family moved to Shanghai in 1937, Chou, then fourteen, was walking by an international newsstand and saw a headline announcing the death of Maurice Ravel.

The news shocked him: it had never occurred to him that a composer could be *living* .

“I thought composers were a gift from nature and that music was written by dead people, because every composer I had heard of, Chinese or Western, was dead,” Chou says. “And I thought, ‘Could *I* become a composer? How wonderful!’ After that, I was fascinated, and this is how I dared, with my kind father’s permission, to begin studying composition a few years later.”

Chou came to the United States in 1946 as a young refugee from the Second World War and the succeeding battles for power in China. He was awarded a graduate fellowship to study architecture at Yale (he had taken a degree in the subject back home at Chongqing University) but dropped out before the semester was finished and came to New York to study music at Columbia in 1952. “I knew at that point,” he says, “that I would either be a composer or have a very unhappy life.”

Chou is a gentle, courtly man who exudes warm interest and kindness. His music, which ranges from settings of early Chinese poetry to masterly string quartets and a haunting cello concerto, combines Western modernism with Eastern styles and sonic textures in a manner that is personal, organic, and beguiling.

The postwar period was remarkable at Columbia. Chou took his master’s degree with the composer Otto Luening at just the time when Luening ’81HON and his colleague Vladimir Ussachevsky were engaged in a collaboration that would lead to the birth, in 1958, of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, the first such institution

in the United States. The center began as a means of experimenting with sound on recording tape, and later ventured into the development of computer music and written music for synthesizers.

Chou came to know some of the most interesting cultural figures of the day. His first finished composition, *Landscapes*, an orchestral setting of three Chinese songs, received its premiere with the San Francisco Symphony in 1953 under the direction of Leopold Stokowski. His several residencies at the upstate New York arts colony Yaddo led to a collaboration with the poet Ted Hughes based on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and to a lifelong friendship with the novelist Dawn Powell.

But he formed his most significant professional relationship with the modernist composer Edgard Varèse, who described his own music as “organized sound” and defined “noise” simply as any sound one didn’t like. Whether Varèse was writing for solo flute (*Density 21.5*) or for a percussion orchestra with bass drums, chimes, piano, glockenspiel, anvils, sleigh bells, and high and low sirens (*Ionisation*), the influence he exerted on such varied admirers as Pierre Boulez, Milton Babbitt, Frank Zappa, and John Zorn was enormous.

Chou met Varèse in 1949 and became his student and assistant as the older composer was creating his last works, such as *Déserts* (1954), for wind instruments, percussion, piano, and magnetic tape, and *Poème Électronique*, an eight-minute work for tape alone that was commissioned for the Brussels World’s Fair of 1958. Scholars who seek out Varèse’s manuscript of *Déserts* will find Chou’s meticulous, unmistakable handwriting.

Chou returned to Columbia in 1964 to teach composition, which he continued to do for twenty-seven years, succeeding Luening as principal instructor in musical composition in 1969. He implemented the college’s music curriculum and was in charge of academic affairs at the newly created School of the Arts.

After Varèse died, in 1965, Chou completed the master’s last piece, *Nocturnal*, for soprano, male chorus, and orchestra (it would be performed for the first time in 1968), and began to edit scores dating back to 1918. As Varèse’s most celebrated pupil, Chou has remained a busy proselytizer for his master’s work, and he has lived for the past four decades in the same Sullivan Street house in Greenwich Village that Varèse bought in 1925.

In October, a “Composer Portraits” concert at Columbia’s Miller Theatre paid homage to Chou. The program was devoted mostly to his later music — the *Ode to Eternal Pine* (2009), the String Quartet no. 2 (2003), and *Echoes from the Gorge* (1989) — and was played entirely by the Brentano String Quartet, the New York New Music Ensemble, and the Talujon percussion quartet, the groups for which it was written.

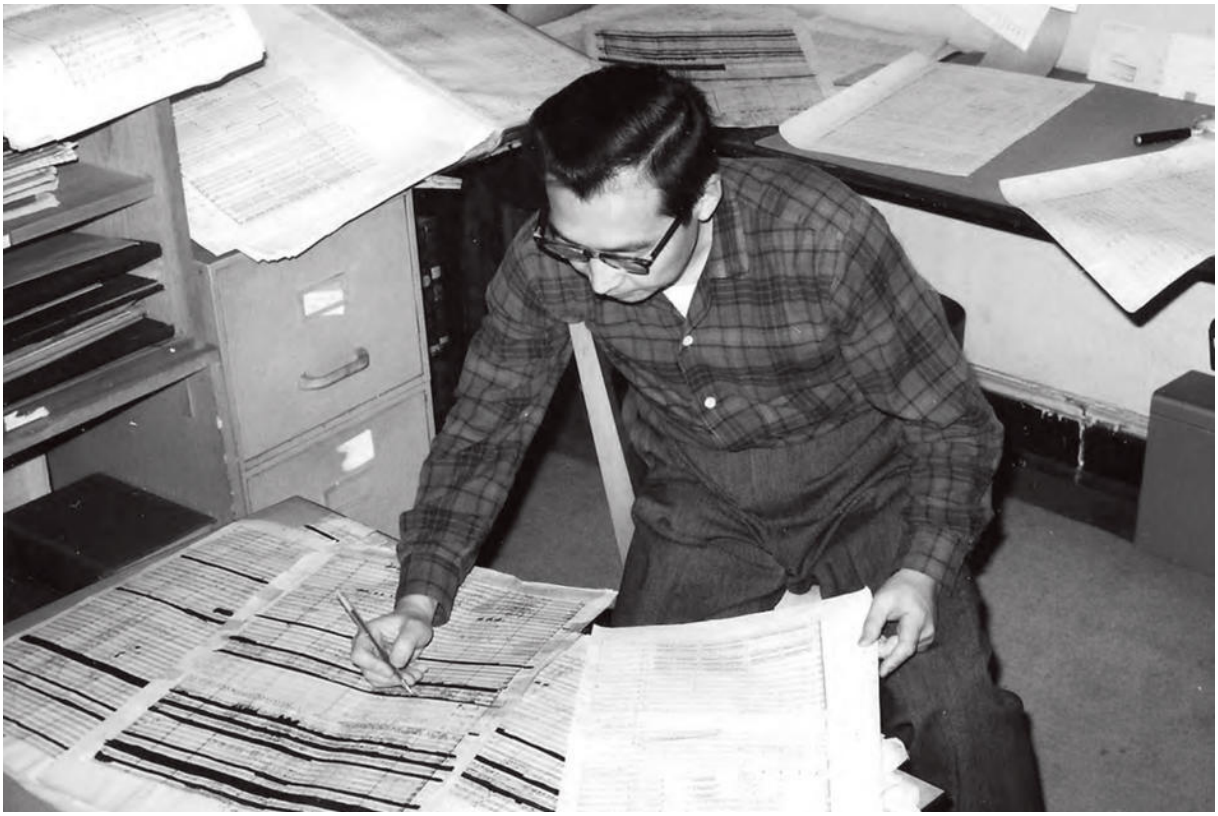
“He’s just an amazing figure, and he has had a huge influence on so many musicians,” says Melissa Smey, who is the executive director of the Miller Theatre and the Arts Initiative at Columbia. “I met him when I was an undergraduate flute player at the University of Connecticut, and I found his work *Cursive* for flute and piano. His lovely spirit comes through in his music, and then you meet him in person and all your preconceptions are validated.”

The Miller Theatre, known for its contemporary-music programming — and which, in its earlier incarnation as McMillin Theater, was where many of the first American performances of early electronic music received their premieres — has been presenting six to eight Composer Portraits every year. “We knew a couple of years back that Chou’s ninetieth birthday was coming up in 2013, but sometimes it takes a little while to put things together,” Smey says. “But then I started talking to Fred Lerdahl and it all came together.”

Lerdahl, the Fritz Reiner Professor of Musical Composition at Columbia, has known Chou since the mid-1970s. “The world I’ve lived in is due to his efforts,” Lerdahl says. “I worked with him at Columbia in 1979 as a junior professor, I went away and then came back, and now his professorship is my professorship.

“Throughout it all, he’s been a wonderful colleague — very kind, polite, and gracious. Varèse recognized his great idealism and great musicality immediately and, like Varèse, there was nothing superficial about him, and he always wanted to do things his own way. So they understood each other. In my opinion, he is writing the best music of his career right now, in his nineties!

“I’m glad the Miller programmed a percussion piece — he’s always been so very specific with students on how and where to hit the gong,” Lerdahl continues. “His string quartets are among his best pieces — I would have liked to have programmed them both, but it would have been an enormous concert, and we wanted to present the *Ode to Eternal Pine*, which is so pretty and poetic.”



Chou editing Edgard Varèse's orchestra piece "Amériques" in Varèse's studio in the 1960s. Photo courtesy of Chou Wen-chung.

It would be reductive to suggest that Chou writes “Chinese music,” but there is no escaping the influence his native land has had on his work. Lerdahl says that Chou felt a “moral duty to help renew China” after the excesses of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution. As such, he has visited China several times, and he arranged to bring a number of Chinese-born composers to study at Columbia, among them Bright Sheng ’93SOA, Chen Yi ’93SOA, Tan Dun ’93SOA, Chinary Ung ’74SOA, and Zhou Long ’93GSAS, who won the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2011 for his opera *Madame White Snake*. His wife, Chen Yi, was one of three finalists in 2006. Bright Sheng has been a Pulitzer finalist twice, in 1989 and 1991.

Chou had been looking forward to visiting China again this year, but he became sick a few days before he was scheduled to leave. “I was last there about three years ago, and I was so looking forward to going back,” Chou says. “I wanted to go to Shanghai and hear a new piece of mine, as well as participate on the editorial committee for the most important music journal in China. But I have a heart condition now, and so I asked five specialists whether I should go and they all voted it down. It was a deep disappointment.”

He brightens when the discussion turns to a new work that he is finishing for performance next year in San Francisco. “I’m still struggling between naming it in Chinese or English,” he says. “But the main point is that the producer wants it and wants me there, so I hope I’ll be well enough to attend.”

By way of describing the piece, and the difference between Western and Eastern music, Chou invokes one of his great interests: calligraphy.

“It is part of the soul of the Chinese people,” he says. “And it’s very different from Western languages, which are derived from Greek and Latin and fundamentally built on an alphabet. In China, the written language” — built on ideograms — “was developed earlier. Long before the Romans, we invented paper and the use of ink. You would write with the ink and a stick as your brush. It’s a free sort of writing where you decide whether to make a point or a brushstroke, or whether you want the finished work to be light or dark. You can be very fussy — but it has nothing to do with an alphabet.

“What I mean is that this is a *total process* for the composer. In Western music, you might start with a melody, and by and by you will have two or three or four melodies together, which turns into counterpoint, or, if you look at them all vertically, into harmony. Step by step you build the piece that way.” But in Chinese music, Chou says, “you don’t start with melody and counterpoint and find what you will find. Instead, you have to think of the whole piece — right away! — including density and color and stress, and then do your best to bring it to life. It’s a huge and fundamental difference between the thinking in China and in the West.”

Long before “world music” became a popular genre, Chou was creating his own distinct hybrid of sound. Yet for all his innovations, and for all the boundaries he has crossed, he considers himself a “deeply rooted” composer.

“Suppose you are driving and you get lost,” he says. “In that case, you shouldn’t just look forward and keep driving to find out where you should go. Instead, you should think about where you came from and how you came to be here, and there you will find the answer. I’ve spent a lifetime involved with education, and sometimes I’m disappointed by my colleagues who all want to see what will be ‘next’ — the next trend, the next technology.

“I’m not saying that the future is unimportant — not at all! But after two world wars and countless other conflicts, we need to learn from our pasts and carry that

information with us as well. Our faith in the future is nothing unless we know the past.”

Read more from ***Tim Page '79CC***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from ***Tim Page '79CC***