

Ho shang Yao (Songs by the River) (1983)

One of the aspects of Eastern Music that has always fascinated me is the symbolism expressed through the medium of Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian dance, and its musical accompaniment - minute movements of fingers, feet or eye-lashes (and correspondingly minute details in the music), symbolising important aspects in the story being related. My fascination in this subject led me to discover the great Chinese *Shi Jing (Book of Odes)* - a collection of over 300 folk-poems dating from around 700 BC.

Anxious to learn more about these poems, I was put in touch with the renowned translator from Chinese and expert in the evolution of the Chinese script, Arthur Cooper. I selected seven poems, all about courtship and marriage, and with Arthur's help was able to decipher the wealth of images contained within each of the texts' characters, and devise my own set of corresponding symbols in the music. Throughout this fascinating collaboration I also learned that these poems would have been sung, one note to each character, without any repetition of text, to a five-note scale similar to our pentatonic scale, and to an accompaniment of percussion instruments. Whilst it was a happy coincidence that I had always intended to set the poems to an accompaniment of percussion instruments, I was also attracted to the idea of keeping within the other limitations suggested by these traditional performance practices.

Each song in *Ho shang Yao* accordingly uses a simple refrain/verse form, the essentially instrumental (but occasionally melismatic) refrains serving to expand the symbolic, rhythmic and melodic elements of each verse. (The soprano also plays several percussion instruments). The songs' distinctive melodic and harmonic language stems from my own particular five-note scale, which follows the principle of the pentatonic scale in containing only two different intervals between adjacent notes, but is based on the quartertone rather than the semitone. This necessitated the construction of several extra quartertone bars for marimba and glockenspiel, and the careful collection and tuning of all the other percussion instruments to match. Most of the texts' symbols and themes are represented by a musical timbre or device, of which the following are the most important:

The River

wooden instruments (marimba, woodblocks, temple-blocks, wooden and bamboo chimes and bells)

Courtship

bright metallic sounds (glockenspiel, crotales, bells)

Young girl's separation from family

medium metallic sounds with long resonance (medium bronze bells, Javanese bonang)

Young girl's loneliness

low gong, tam-tam, bowed metallophone

Sexual intercourse

skin instruments (bomba, small drum)

Rival suitor/jealousy

thundersheet

Young girl's restlessness

shakers, rattles, maracas

Water vapour (rainbow as omen)

miniature tuned temple blocks

Young girl's journey

repeated figuration, ostinato or trill.

Ho shang Yao was written in 1983 for Sara Stowe and myself. It is dedicated to Arthur Cooper, whose enthusiastic help with the original Chinese texts was not only indispensable but also opened up a whole new chapter of my work. I was honoured to be counted among his friends until his death in 1988.

In *Ho shang Yao* the percussionist (who also uses his voice) and the singer (who also plays several percussion instruments) are seen as equal partners in a duo - correspondingly they are placed to left and right of the stage.

James Wood

Ho shang Yao

I Tao (The Peach Tree)

The peach tree's figure is graceful,
Its blossom is brilliant.
This child is to be married.
Make ready their chamber.

The peach tree's figure is graceful,
Its fruits are swelling.
This child is to be married,
Make ready their chamber.

The peach tree's figure is graceful,
Its leaves are elegant.
This child is to be married,
Make ready for their family.

A simple poem laying out the order of things -
a young girl, like the peach tree, must bear fruit when her time has come.

桃之夭夭灼灼其華之子于歸宜其室家
桃之夭夭有蕢其實之子于歸宜其家室
桃之夭夭其葉蓁蓁之子于歸宜其家人

II(i) He (The River)

Who says the River's broad?
A single reed crosses it.
Who says Sung is far away?
On tiptoe I can see it.

Who says the River's broad?
It's even too narrow for a boat
Who says Sung is far away?
It's not even a morning's journey.

It was the custom for courtship to take place by the river - the man, clad in elegant courtship dress, had to cross the river to claim his bride, who would be waiting for him on the opposite bank. Here the girl is encouraging her suitor to come across, despite his obvious fears.

誰謂河廣一葦杭之誰謂宋遠跂予望之
誰謂河廣曾不容刀誰謂宋遠曾不崇朝

II(ii) Zhen (The Chen)

Chen and Wei
Are in full flood, Oh!
Boys and girls
Are picking orchids, Oh!

Girl says: have you looked?
Boy says: I have indeed!
Beyond the Wei
It's truly open and pleasant.

A boy and a girl
Are playing together -
She gives him a peony.

Chen and Wei -
How beautiful and clear their waters.
The boys and girls
Pick all they need.

Girl says: have you looked? (etc...)

○ 溱與洧方渙渙兮。士與女方秉蘭兮。女曰觀
乎。士曰既且。且往觀乎洧之外。洧訏且樂。維
士與女伊其相謔。贈之以芍藥。
○ 溱與洧瀏其清矣。士與女殷其盈矣。女曰觀

The peony, with its dark red colour, symbolised physical and spiritual union through intercourse - it was customary for a lover to give her partner a peony as a sign of affection.

II(iii) Pao (The Gourd)

He: The gourd has bitter leaves,
The ford is deep to cross!
She: Where it's deep, use stepping-stones,
Where it's shallow, just lift your clothes!

He: But the ford is full of rushing water,
And there is the pheasant's grating call!
She: A cart would get not even its axles wet,
And that was the pheasant's mating call!

Moat-birds and wild geese are singing
As warm sun gives birth to dawn.
Whoever would bring home a wife
Should do so before the winter's ice has melted.

The boatman beckons and beckons
Let others cross - not I.
Let others cross - not I.
I await my love.

○ 匏有苦葉。濟有深涉。深則厲。淺則揭。
○ 有彌濟盈。有鶩雉鳴。濟盈不濡軌。雉鳴求其牡。
○ 雖雝鳴。旭日始旦。士如歸妻。道冰未泮。
○ 招招舟子。人涉卬否。人涉卬否。須我友。

It was customary for riverside courtship to take place in the early spring. This exchange between lovers (on opposite sides of the river) is another example of the suitor making excuses for not coming across - he argues that it is too late in the Spring (hence the gourd's bitter leaves, the deep rushing water and the pheasant's grating call). She tries offering alternative explanations of these signs, but he remains bound by the customs, and not even the beckoning boatman, so eager for business, can persuade him to change his mind!

III(i) Ho (The Fox)

That fox creeps creeps
On yon Chi bank -
Oh, my heart's grief!
This lordling has no proper robes.

That fox creeps creeps
On yon Chi stepping-stones -
Oh, my heart's grief!
This lordling has no girdle.

That fox creeps creeps
On yon Chi side -
Oh, my heart's grief!
This lordling has no costume.

○有狐綏綏在彼淇梁心之憂矣之子無裳
○有狐綏綏在彼淇厲心之憂矣之子無帶
○有狐綏綏在彼淇側心之憂矣之子無服

The fox is the rival suitor - in this song (which should really be sung by a man) we see the courtship robes as a status symbol. A poor suitor worries that he will lose his bride to another on account of his more elegant clothes.

III(ii) Di dong (The Rainbow)

A rainbow is in the east -
No one dares point at it.
This young girl is to journey
Far from father, mother, elder brother ,
younger brother.

At dawn it rises in the west -
It will rain all morning.
This young girl is to journey
Far from elder brother, younger brother ,
father and mother.

For such a one is she!
Thinking of her wedding is she!
Greatly without confidence is she!
Not knowing her fate is she!

○蜺在東莫之敢指女子有行遠父母兄弟
○朝濟于西崇朝其雨女子有行遠兄弟父母
○乃如之人也懷昏姻也大無信也不知命也

This is one of many poems preoccupied with the young girl's anxiety about leaving her family, often for ever, and going to marry a man she has never met. Here she looks desperately for some sign that will tell her fortune. One day a rainbow appears in the east, therefore at dusk - another day it appears in the west (at dawn) - such conflicting omens merely increase the girl's anxiety.

III(iii) Zhu gan (Bamboo Rods)

How slender are the bamboo rods
With which we fished the Chi.
How can I not think of you,
So far away I cannot reach you.

Ts'uan Spring to the left,
Chi stream to the right.
This young girl has journeyed
Far from elder brother, younger brother,
father and mother.

Chi stream to the right,
Ts'uan Spring to the left.
Those happy smiles, shining jewels,
The magic of those tinkling gems.

Chi stream flowing, flowing -
Cedarwood oars, pinewood boat -
Oh! to harness horse and depart on journey -
So that I may wipe away my grief!

○籊籊竹竿。以釣于淇。豈不爾思。遠莫致之。
○淇水在右。泉源在左。淇水在右。巧笑之瑳。遠父母兄弟。
○淇水在右。泉源在左。巧笑之瑳。佩玉之儺。以寫我憂。

A poem lamenting an unhappy marriage. The girl thinks of her distant home, her family and happy childhood. As she longs for a boat to take her back home, the river takes on a new meaning.