

“Words About Wen-chung: Concentric Connections”

Thoughts after his passing ... by Roger Reynolds

Chou Wen-chung and I first encountered one another in the early 1960s, in the office of Walter Hinrichsen, the imperious, gruff, and larger-than-life Founder and President of the C. F. Peters Corporation in New York. There was that immediate, inter-personal “recognition” that happens only occasionally as we pass through our days. Shortly after that first encounter, Wen-chung and Yi-an were present with Karen and me for a gathering at the apartment of oboist and publisher, Josef Marx, in Manhattan. It was an *evening that, in memory, celebrated the presence of Edgard Varèse. We were seated with the Chous along an informal perimeter that was forming itself from a haphazard mixture of informal surfaces. Karen offered him her folding chair. He gravely demurred, saying that he “could not sit while a lady stands.”

As it turned out, quite serendipitously, Wen-chung and I had just composed pieces for flute and piano that implicated our partners. His was *Cursive* (Yi-an, pianist), mine, *Mosaic* (Karen, flutist). Both had recently been published by Peters. Subsequently, the four of us met often in New York and elsewhere for various events, sometimes – as at a memorable American Composers Orchestra concert in Carnegie Hall – as a result of our work appearing on the same concert programs. We would go with them on impromptu outings that generously embraced friends and family members, discovering various unfamiliar and intriguing locations in Manhattan (uptown, downtown) and enjoying Wen-chung’s incisive, sometimes uproarious observations – often admiring a feature that others had missed, sometimes sharply and decisively nailing instances in which the elevated ideals that guided him had not been paid their due attention.

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*Balance must be sought. It rarely occurs accidentally, for it implies a considered and deliberated approach to the opportunities and dilemmas that fate contrives to drop into some lives. And not every remarkable individual thinks to seek an ideal equipoise between alternatives, nor, indeed, would everyone approve the value of such an end: the preference of choice over chance. For it must be granted that the unreasonable course is not necessarily an unconsidered or unproductive one.

Chou Wen-chung – and I note the rare circumstance that he is universally addressed family name first, as the tradition of his cultural origins dictates – Chou is one of those whose life has set before him an uncommon, even unreasonable, range of possible engagements. Any one of them (Think about this list.) – composition, cultural mediation, academic administration, mentoring, international relations, writing, integral governance, literary/musical executor – any one of these could have been more than sufficient to absorb the aggregate energies of any gifted woman or man. What astonishes is the fact that Chou charted his course, balanced his engagements so as not only to *address* each of these (and probably others that I have neglected) but to manage in each a formidable, an influential, level of accomplishment.

*Materials in this column are adapted from my Introduction to Chou Wen-chung’s 21 April 2001 talk in the three-year SEARCH initiative organized by UC San Diego’s Department of Music.

When complexivist Brian Ferneyhough decamped from UC San Diego's Music Department for Stanford's in the Spring of 2000, our remaining composition faculty (Chinary Ung, Rand Steiger, Chaya Czernowin, and myself) met throughout the following summer and decided, in response, to mount a three-year initiative entitled SEARCH – devoted to surveying no less than "The Future of Music". We compiled carefully a list of 18 individuals whose diverse perspectives we felt would deliver value to our community (young-old, domestic-foreign, male-female, moderate-radical). Wen-chung was an obvious, in fact, an immediate choice. Chinary had been his student, I his colleague.

Chou's talk, "MUSIC – What Is Its Future?", began not with himself, but by citing the significance he attributed to Varèse, as well as its cost:

**The act of prophecy, especially about culture or the arts, is a perilous one. Yet so many of us are tempted to try it – the brave, the foolhardy, the farsighted and dogmatic. A few do succeed in discerning the future. Edgard Varèse was one. In fact, he was so certain of his vision that he sacrificed much of his creative productivity in pursuit of the future he expected for his own time. Sadly, today we realize that his music still remains a prophesy, unfulfilled even at the beginning of a new millennium. However, we are grateful to him, as his was the lone voice that guided many of us to where we are today, that exhorted other creative artists to share in the vision to which he had dedicated his whole life.*

Hearing him speak then, about Varèse's achievement, about the interfacing of different cultures, about his own music, I grasped quite suddenly how strongly the calligraphic gestures in his music tied him both to his cultural heritage and to the visionary musical imagination of his own mentor who had realized music as a kind of sonic geometry unfolding across time. In the body of his comprehensive and stirring remarks, however, Chou's emphasis was on the neglected values of intercultural awareness. He lamented that although

in the past half-century, there has been an increasing interest in the concepts and practices of other musical cultures. Together with a changing demography and rising commercial promotion, this interest has given birth to a musical environment that is more multicultural than existed in any other society since China's Tang Dynasty. But this phenomenon is more a veneer than substance. Under the shiny surface, we can find very little that is real. Heritage on all sides of the cultural equation, including the West, is forgotten and forsaken.

But he did not dwell on regret, proffering, rather, an affirmation of what is needed if we are to fulfill what he saw as our common responsibility:

We need a new beginning. We need to go back to research and education. Modern ethnomusicologists have made good

advances over the past few decades, as have their colleagues in allied fields. But their training is too limited ... We need new procedures in fieldwork and research so as to pursue the kind of intercultural studies required for our future, collective and coordinated efforts involving diverse disciplines, such as historical musicology, theory, linguistics, history, aesthetics, cultural anthropology, and sociology.

His recipe is daunting, and perhaps understandably omits an essential component: that one be able to accept self-sacrifice. One must, as did Varèse, push towards the perimeter of whatever field one enters if one is to arrive at elevated ends. Notably, Wen-chung's call to change closely echoes similar urgings insisted upon by his radical contemporary, Iannis Xenakis, who argued that provision for training in the sciences was a bedrock component of a healthy artist's life in our time. One sees that these visionaries grasped clearly that fostering ideal futures requires new forms of preparation and commitment.

The SEARCH lecture quoted above was perhaps the first in a series of culminating statements – delivered at distinguished forums around the world – in which Wen-chung laid out his belief in the fundamental necessity of cultural awareness and interpenetration – for him, particularly between “East and West” – and that we must learn from one another, finding a productive melding that advances the deepest values and resources of both ... He had little patience with those he saw as unable to commit to the degree and in the fashion he cherished.

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Each time I encounter him, a question enters and will not exit my mind: How has Chou Wen-chung managed to accomplish all of this – to be all that he evidently is – without an apparent trace of imperiousness, closed-mindedness, or hardening? As a human being, he remains what he was when I first met him ... almost forty years ago. There was, not an innocence, but a receptivity and elasticity of mind (There was compassion too.) that was an ideal complement to, a buffer around his articulated spine of knowledge and conviction which might otherwise have weighed on one's interactions with him.

Long before cultural fusion had become a recognized and widely applauded endeavor, Chou hazarded for himself the position that a composer could forge a music that carried within it elements of both the traditions of China and of the West. He conceived, and then realized as early as 1949 (in *Landscape* for orchestra), the possibility of a confluence of musical aims and means that would not devolve into a catalog of uneasy references and awkward coexistences. He saw, I believe, the formative implications of thinking calligraphically with sound: attending to the *weight* of events – dynamically, registrally, timbrically. And, after all, weight, placement, connectivity and directionality inscribed upon time are signature features of what I hear in his music. In any case, the prospect of an art that draws on – but somehow manages to *balance* – the competing forces of several independently evolved cultural resources has endured as a strong current in the ebb and flow of his composing life. It is, manifested with particular memorability in the 1996 *String Quartet "Clouds"*, which is a radiantly lyrical succession

of linked episodes – visions, perhaps – that must be counted a stirring achievement against *any* imagined standard.

In 2010, percussionist and conductor Steven Schick and I decided to embark on a study of Varèse's music. We formed a "Varèse Study Group" that met for 6-months preceding a planned Fall Quarter graduate seminar at UC San Diego. It developed that Wen-chung and Yi-an would be in residence at the University's Santa Cruz campus during the following Spring, and we arranged for them to visit San Diego to advise our group as we explored, among other threads, the multi-channel computer spatialization of Varèse's music. Wen-chung had been highly skeptical about the practicality of moving from *imagined* spatial dimensions to *the actual instantiation* of them through multi-channel electronic dissemination. In addition, when he learned of Steven's transcription of *Ionization* (reducing the score-designated 13 percussionists to a sextet), he shook his lowered head gravely.

So, it was fascinating to experience, during those days in San Diego and Del Mar, the wisdom and flexibility of Wen-chung's mind. Though he had resisted the premise that Varèse's abstract ideas regarding spatialization might now be realized as actual experiences through computer analysis and re-synthesis, he was also curious. Our group had processed two of the electroacoustic Interludes from Varèse's *Déserts*, and also worked to spatially distinguish the initial, incantatory line of *Intégrales* from the re-contextualizing massed sonorities in high woodwinds and low brass that later impinge upon it. Our purpose was to discover whether one could actually experience in sound the descriptive terms [plane, beam, projection, penetration, and so on] Varèse had employed in order to invoke for others his vision and anticipations regarding sound spatialization. We were attempting – provisionally, to be sure – to manifest Varèse's imaginings regarding musical space, to go beyond prophesy to actual experience.

When Wen-chung walked into the Experimental Theater of UC San Diego's Conrad Prebys Music Center, he was immediately captivated as (then) graduate students Jaime Oliver and Paul Hembree presented him with the Varèse sound materials in their 8-channel computer-enabled antiphonies and choreographies. Equipped with Meyer Sound's Constellation electroacoustic architecture that invokes the coordinated use of dozens of loud-speakers and associated microphones, to control the ambient acoustic character of a space, and to allow for precise and flexible repositioning of sounds.

This occasion can serve as an example of a central characteristic of Wen-chung's (mentioned elsewhere): he usually had an informed opinion on most significant matters, but new information could bring about re-consideration. His deep engagement with Varèse, not only as a person, but, perhaps even more, with what he thought that Varèse "stood for", meant that his convictions on that subject were both intellectually grounded and also deeply emotional. Still, when, so to speak, a light went on for him as Varèse's sounds choreographically circled the listening space, he was able to immediately embrace a new outlook and wonder at its implications.

My own interest in Varèse was both stirred and continually enriched by Wen-chung – both during our discussions and by facilitations that he brought about so that I could gain access to the Sacher Collection of the master's works. As a result of the project just described, I determined to go outside my normal patterns of activity, to embrace, if only for a time, the life of a scholarly researcher seeking documentary evidence to support or chal-

lenge held assumptions. I realized that many of the statements attributed to Varèse regarding the spatial dimensions of music struck many, even fervent admirers, as unsubstantiated flights of fancy. I wanted to examine what forms of authority he had used in arriving at his prophetic aims. Wen-chung was my essential guide, pointing me towards (and sometimes away from) individuals and sources that could be trusted. As a result of several visits and a residency in Basel, I was able to publish two studies relating Varèse to space. It would not have happened were it not for Wen-chung's encouragement.

Steven Schick had arranged to perform his heretical sextet version of *Ionization* for Wen-chung, and, listening, the doubter nodded approvingly. He then surprised us all by asking whether the ensemble could perform the piece at half tempo. After that, then, at a quarter tempo.*

As (one imagines) Wen-chung was speculating, the events and relationships that Varèse had inscribed in his score seem to have been conceived within an accelerated time frame – as can happen when one is moving in unknown terrain and their imagination is freed from the physical inertia of actual instruments and attitudes. Varèse's structure functioned beautifully, and in some regards more revealingly as a roughly 16-minute experience.

In 2020, almost six decades after my first encounter with Wen-chung, we have among our UC San Diego Music faculty the Chinese composer, Lei Liang, who joins the eminent Chinary Ung in providing for our institution, poised at the edge of the Pacific, an unparalleled strength of creative vision and achievement from a vital Asian perspective. Chinary and Lei would not be what they are, our Department be what it is, without Wen-chung's example and counsel.

Reynolds 2001

The conviction – that, if you will, "a larger picture" not only can be grasped but also become a guide to transformative action – this conviction continued to underlie much that Chou accomplished. His mentorship of a disparate collection of Asian composers (with their various but considerable successes), attests to the validity of his supposition that grafting one stock onto another can elicit an illuminating new fruition. But the recent prominence of these relocated, hybrid energies is, he thought, only a beginning, with the promise of a deeper confluence still to be hoped for.

Chou's creation, at Columbia University, of The Center for United States-China Arts Exchange (in 1978), brought about – as a result of his prescient and energetic stewardship – imaginative actions that no compromise-hobbled governmental program would have undertaken. And, in fact, his Arts Exchange became the launching pad for a more massive initiative in the service of integrated planning for China's Yunnan province, a visionary scheme to bring under one considered authority, cultural and nature conservancy along with economic and social development. Could there be in our world, as it is today, a more relevant aim?

But, now, on a totally different plane – one, however, that I can imagine having its own major significance – let me point to the fact that one of the most original and prophetic figures in the history of music as it is known –

*Chou's close relationship with Dr. Felix Meyer, Director of the Sacher Stiftung in Basel, allowed him to serve as my guarantor as I undertook studies in their collection of Varèse's materials. My work there resulted in *The Last Word is Imagination*, a study in two parts published by *Perspectives of New Music* (Part I, Written Evidence) and *Leonardo* (Part II, The Visual Evidence).

Edgard Varèse – welcomed Chou Wen-chung into his home, eventually bequeathing him his life's work. This was not – surely – an accidental circumstance; think of the significance of such personal trust. And Chou accepted this gift with its heavy responsibilities, coming to see, over time, the possible larger significance of Varèse's work – what lay beyond its immediate musical values. He has spoken of Varèse as the exemplar of an ideal creator who perceives, embraces, and then transcends the history out of which he arose. Varèse established in a circumscribed but indelible fashion, the possibility of an art that embraces traditions, extrapolates from non-musical models of order, embodies physical passion, posits the outline of that which is as yet unfulfilled. Chou grasped how this model can speak to our current (and inescapable) dilemma: how similarly powerful and apparently incommensurable forces can be brought into balance.

Karen and I hosted several social events at our Del Mar home during the Chou's Spring, 2011 visit, and I remember vividly their observant joy in encountering previously unknown flowers in abundant bloom – their vivid colors, their olfactory emanations. Strolling slowly with them along the sun-dappled Crest Drive, which itself meanders along the edge of a canyon, created then, and in memory now, a refreshing complement to less leisurely ventures amid the clatter and roar of Greenwich Village bustle near their cozy 3-story home by the corner of Sullivan and Bleecker streets. With them, there at 188 Sullivan Street, one was conscious not only of the resonances of their own lives – of Yi-an's flower arrangements, of their treasured possessions, and of the depths of their connection to Chinese history (ancient and modern), but also of fragile traces of Edgard and Louise Varèse that hovered above as ghostly tendrils during hours spent in the ground floor's living area, in the garden behind its French doors, and while gathered around a simple wooden table in the street-facing kitchen.

I won't forget the warmth and communicativeness of the many suppers shared there, often with Yi-an's delectable meat loaves, a glass or more of good red wine, and conversations about matters large and small, local and international, ancient and anticipatory. Wen-chung noticed, as one talked with him, both what was "there" on the surface of evolving exchanges, but also the threads, the time- and distance-blurred images of other eras, other ways. And – always present – of his hope that things as they were would evolve into better alternatives as yet unidentified.

In releasing Varèse's manuscripts to the distinguished Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, and also on numerous other occasions in New York or at UC San Diego during his various visits, Wen-chung argued for *extensions* of his thoughts, his works, not slavish fidelities. "Go beyond what is already known" was the message.

Reynolds 2001

Chou Wen-chung encountered and then engaged with cultures, musics, even losing his own essential center on their behalf, but continuing to produce music that rises out of and then speaks out above it all. What a life this man led with his essential partner and companion Yi-an. How fortunate we are that he shared it all with us – both for what it has already meant – and also, more importantly, for what it yet will mean.

And that, of course, is *our* responsibility.

He has done his work.

The majority of the indented texts in this tribute essay have been adapted from my introduction for Chou Wen-chung on the occasion of his UC San Diego SEARCH lecture in 2001. The three paragraphs in italics are extracted from Chou's lecture on that occasion. Also incorporated are materials from my introduction of him on the occasion of his 85th Birthday tribute at the Greenwich House Music School, New York City, 9 December 2008. My hope is that the parallels across these texts, written over two decades, can add dimensionality to our impressions and evaluations.