

Scions of the Musical West

Sixteen

Joyce Bee-Tuan Koh

Koh (b. 1968, BMus Hons, MMus King's College London, PhD University of York) is a composer, conductor, and Head of Music at School of the Arts (SOTA), a high school for artistically gifted students. She was a fellow at the *Institut de Recherche et Coopération Acoustique/Musique* (IRCAM). A recipient of numerous composition fellowships, including the Nadia Boulanger International Foundation Scholarship, she has studied with David Lumsdaine, Nicola Lefanu, Tristan Murail, Henri Dutilleux, Franco Donatoni, and Brian Ferneyhough. Koh received the Singapore Young Artist Award (Music) in 1998. Based in Paris for many years before joining SOTA, Koh was Composer-in-Residence at Herrenhaus Edenkoben (Germany) in 2004 and Ecole Nationale de Musique de Montbéliard (France) in 2006. Her music has been performed internationally by professional soloists, ensembles, and orchestras. Two of her piano pieces appear in collections published by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM): *la piano magenta* (2001) in *Spectrum III* and *Piano Peals* (2005) in *Spectrum IV*.

I met Koh privately after a group gathering with senior high school teachers in 2006. Koh had been invited by the Ministry of Education to conduct the composition seminar for graduating students that year. She had volunteered to meet up with the teachers on another day after the seminar to discuss pedagogy. For Koh, the key to encouraging contemporary composition is through fostering an environment supportive of ensemble performance. Her position now at SOTA certainly reflects her commitment to building up a culture of contemporary music among students.

On her oeuvre, Koh commented that *TAI* (1998, revised 2002, for orchestra) is a focal point. The spacial dimension in *TAI* is derived from Chinese calligraphic strokes used in the execution of the character *tài* (Figure 1.1), a musical feature that is consonant with Varèse's concept of moving sonic planes. I speculated on the cultural aspect of *TAI*, leading Koh to ruminate on the topic. For her, the Chinese character on which *TAI* is based is more important for its visual appeal than the semantics. Koh also suggested that the stillness at the end of the piece may reflect a deep seated cultural disposition. When I suggested a link to Buddhist meditation, however, she dismissed that idea. Koh sees her music as a continuation of what she described as the 'European musical canon'. Such ambiguity, I think, is inherent in music which crosses culture.

Koh was forthcoming with a list of composers whom she regards as influences (Sofia Gubaidulina, Galina Ustvolskaya, Messiaen, Shostakovich, Dutilleux, Ligeti, Tristan Murail, and Gerard Grisey) or as her peers (Hans

Peter Kyburz, Michael Jarell, and Kaija Saariaho). She associates herself more with spectralists (typically identified with the French, e.g. Tristan Murail) than with serialists (typically identified with the Germans, e.g. Stockhausen). It is the sensual immediacy of spectralism which speaks to Koh's compositional aesthetic. An example of this can be found in what Koh termed as the 'sound complex' of gong and voice in *Six Hermits* (2002, for ensemble). The notes performed by both instruments are related by partials in the sound spectra of these notes. In the opening of the piece, the approximate pitch A of the gong is the fifth partial of the low F sung by the alto. (See Example 3.1.) In *TAI*, the motion of sound complexes formed by groups of instruments suggests calligraphic strokes.

After *TAI*, Koh's music makes use of spacial movement extensively. *Les pierres magenta* (2001, for ensemble), for instance, follows the movement of the initials of the title - 'p', 'm', and 'l'; these letters also form the initials of her husband's name, PerMagnus Lindborg (currently Assistant Professor at Nanyang Technological University, School of Art, Design, and Media). Koh's relationship with her husband is also encoded in *Edenkobener Bagatellen* (2004, for piano). In a concert performance, *Edenkobener Bagatellen* comprises movements from Beethoven's *Elf neue Bagatellen* and newly composed movements by Koh and Lindborg, all interspersed among one another.

Aside from her significant compositions for ensemble, Koh has also worked with electronic music (e.g. *Il me plaît à moi des mots*), which she had explored in the year she spent at IRCAM. Her recent multi-disciplinary work has involved dance and electronic music. Koh considers the future of music to lie in electronic creations. At this point, however, her most significant work is in music for ensemble. *TAI* remains an exceptional achievement, but there has been no further orchestral creations. Since the demise of Singapore Symphony Orchestra's Composer-in-Residence programme, it has become all but impossible for composers to present new orchestral music.

Koh is perhaps the most awarded composer right now. One can try to imagine what it is like being a woman composer in a boys' club, where all the musical models are male in origin, and arguably, male in nature. Interestingly, Koh was quick to distance herself from feminism when she mentioned Sofia Gubaidulina and Galina Ustvolskaya as influences. It is clear that Koh regards music as a gender neutral area. Yet when one considers what she called 'German explosions' in modernist music, a stereotypical model of masculinity surfaces, standing in contrast with the stillness at the end of *TAI*.

At this point, Koh and the composers in the final two chapters of this book write the most complicated atonal music among all the composers in Singapore. Koh's own philosophy of music may explain this complexity. Her personal belief in the primacy of democracy in society translates musically into a soloistic difficulty for every instrumental part, and liberal use of all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Maybe Koh's stance is consonant with Adorno's view of new music (in the modernist sense of the word) as a means of resisting the culture industry, or perhaps, her music has an underlying *avante garde* spirit resisting the conservative tonal orientation of music in

general. (See the end of chapter 1 section III on the culture industry.) But then again, contemporary classical music has been taking an atonal turn, especially with the recent addition of the prestigious Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music to the music scene. When all twelve tones reside in the hallowed walls of academia, liberalism and conservatism seem to find strange harmony.

RESOURCES

1. Permission could not be obtained to include the composer's contact details.
2. Website: <http://www.basca.org.uk/member-profile/view-466.html>. Koh's profile in the British Academy of Songwriters, Composers, and Authors website contains a biography and list of compositions. More biographical details can be found in *AC20*.
3. Scores and recordings:

Year of composition	Available from	Title	Publ.	Available from	Title	Prod.
Score:				Recording:		
Choral						
1998	NIE	Le (for chamber choir, Tibetan bowls)	-			
Orches.						
1998/2002	NIE	TAI	-	NIE	TAI. In: 'TAI, for orches.'	-
Chamber						
1994	NIE	IX Lives of a Cat (pf. trio).	-	NLB	IX Lives of a Cat. In: 'New Inspiration: Singapore Arts Festival 2000'.	NAC
				NIE	IX Lives of a Cat. In: 'Six Hermits'.	-
2001	NIE	Les pierres magenta (nine instruments).	-	NIE	Les pierres magenta. In: 'Six Hermits'.	-
2002	NIE	Le piano magenta: piano concertino (with nine instruments)	-	NIE	Le piano magenta. In: 'Six Hermits'.	-
2002	NIE	Kai (three pf.)	-			
2002	NIE	Six Hermits (three pieces for sop., alto, ten., bar., sheng, xiao, erhu)	-	NIE	Six Hermits. In: 'Six Hermits'.	-
Solo						
2001	ABRSM	La piano magenta (pf.). In: 'Spectrum III'.	ABRSM	ABRSM	La piano magenta. In: 'Spectrum III'.	ABRSM
2004	NIE	Edenkobener Bagatellen (pf., with movements by PerMagnus Lindborg)	-	NIE	Edenkobener Bagatellen (p.f., composed with PerMagnus Lindborg)	-
2005	ABRSM	Piano Peals. In: 'Spectrum IV'.	ABRSM	ABRSM	Piano Peals. In: 'Spectrum IV'.	ABRSM
Electronic						
1998	NIE	Au bord de l'ombre (with accordion)	-	NIE	Au bord de l'ombre. In: 'Six Hermits'.	-
2001	NIE	Project Time, Singapore: Theatre of Music (for theatre; tabla, biangu, keyboard, computer)	-	NIE	Project Time, Singapore. In: 'TAI, for orches.'	-