Symbolism and Text Painting in Tan Dun’s *Marco Polo*

Recent opera repertoire has seen a wide variety of styles in opera composition. *Marco Polo* represents a rather unique corner of this wide variety. Tan Dun explores a capacious array of influences in this work. Starting from his own roots, Chinese traditional music, he explores European art tradition to some extent. Tan Dun also touches the styles and elements that are present along the journey of Marco Polo. What makes *Marco Polo* an interesting case study for symbolism and –to use the “old” term- madrigalism\(^1\), is the fact that this opera incorporates so many different allusions and remarks alongside with direct references. Tan Dun does not refrain from using direct references to elements outside of the European art music idiom which were/are generally left as distant allusions when used by Europe-origin composers. This might be because of the confidence brought out by the fact that he is of Chinese origin and the general opinion of European art music community that one should always embrace their own roots. This is, of course, just idle speculation. Here, the article will try to demonstrate aforementioned elements within with concrete musical examples.

Tan Dun describes the departure point for composing *Marco Polo* as the longing to find the answer to the question that was posed to him by a Southern Chinese Monk

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\(^1\) Text painting.
twenty years ago\(^2\): “Do you compose music, or does the music compose you?” From this point, Tan Dun arrives to the universality of phenomenon: “Marco Polo is everyone and everything; you, me, and it.”\(^3\) Tan Dun also quotes here the librettist Paul Griffiths saying that he describes the opera “well”. Paul Griffiths states that “journeys are like dawns in having no beginning or ending but only continuing”.\(^4\) This quote from Paul Griffiths clearly shows Tan Dun’s inspiration, besides Chinese philosophy and traditions, from the Japanese concept *ma*.

*Marco Polo* consists of 3 different “journeys” as Tan Dun calls them\(^5\): Physical, Spiritual, and Musical. There are three journeys in spite of the title of the opera, which is “an opera within opera”. Physical and Spiritual journeys are axiomatic operas mentioned in the title. The musical journey is the auxiliary tool that accompanies the other “operas” throughout the overall journey.

Physical journey is about the actual story of Marco Polo, which he travels from Venice to Beijing. This story can be thought similar to composer’s own life journey. Where Marco Polo travels from Italy to China, Tan Dun traveled the opposite way, which is from China to USA.\(^6\) This story is lived by the split formations of consciousness of Marco Polo – Marco, representing the real Marco Polo in flesh, and Polo, representing the memory of Marco Polo- and Rustichello, the cowriter of Marco Polo’s autobiography who actually accompanies Marco Polo through Physical journey. However as Tan Dun asserts that the only real characters in *Marco Polo* are

\(^2\) Tan Dun, 1997.
\(^3\) Tan Dun, 1997.
\(^4\) Tan Dun, 1997.
\(^5\) Tan Dun, 1997.
\(^6\) Lee, n.d.
Marco and Kublai Khan\textsuperscript{7}, so Rustichello can be thought as an imagination of a companion rather than the physical embodiment of Rustichello himself. Spiritual journey is about introspection. This story follows the inner world of Marco Polo as well as the nature. As Tan Dun describes it Spiritual journey reflects “on the three states of the human being –past, present, and future- and on the cycle of nature”\textsuperscript{8}. In this journey, Marco and Polo are consorted by different figures from history and nature, and shadows that are beyond humanistic beings. Spiritual journey also incorporates a narrator. Figures from the history and nature are: Dante, Shakespeare, Sheherazada, Li Po, Mahler, and Water. Musical journey is one, which has no characters in it but rather the orchestra and the audience travel together alongside “actual” storylines. The musical journey that accompanies Spiritual journey is largely based on Beijing Opera tradition. As Meritz mentions, one can think the representation of more than one character using only one actor/singer is also an important influence of Beijing Opera tradition when one looks at the larger scale structure of \textit{Marco Polo}\textsuperscript{9}. The rest of the musical journey, which follows Physical journey, incorporates more discrete stylistic differences. When Physical journey occurs in Venice, music is mainly influenced by European tradition. As Physical journey moves towards east, music becomes more “Eastern” going through Middle Eastern, Indian, Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese traditions in accordance with the physical location of Marco.

Apart from pitch relations used in music, Tan Dun uses different composition techniques in order to create different musical styles. For example, he extensively

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uses indeterminacy as a tool of composition. His indeterminacy method can be seen in special instructions of the score (Figure 1). A large number of vocal and percussion parts use this kind of staff throughout the opera. As a more traditional type of indeterminacy, Tan Dun uses improvisation technique. He states where is to be improvised on the score. His thought of this as a more traditional method can be derived from the fact that improvisation is used mainly in characteristically Eastern parts.  

![Figure 1. Indeterminacy in Marco Polo score](image)

If one starts to look at more specific occurrences of symbolism and word painting, one can observe these examples spread across the opera. Figure 2 shows the beginning of the *Book of Timespace: Winter*. There appears the tempo marking “Peking Opera Style♩ = 50~60”. There is also a stereotypical Eastern melody that follows this tempo marking in Violin I. The melody is embellished densely with grace notes, and while the main note is an almost constant E5, the grace notes move around to give the desired effect. This type of easternized musical elements can be found in all the parts of Spiritual journey. As another example, one can look at the beginning of *Book of Timespace: Spring*. Figure 3 shows the score of this section. One can observe that orchestration drastically changes at that moment. Percussion instruments used are Xylophone, Peking Opera small gong, pipa, and Chinese cymbals. The

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10 e. g. Sitar solo in “Desert” scene.
rhythm is highly complex and non-Western and a very small rhythmic motive is repeated.

![Musical notation image](image)

**Figure 2.** Beginning of *Book of Timespace: Winter*

Next, one can observe the relationship between Marco and Polo in musical terms. At first, these two characters appear together in the opera. However during *Book of Timespace: Winter*, they get separated and they do not musically contact again until *Wall (continued)* in Beijing. In the beginning Marco and Polo follow each other musically very closely (Figure 4). Their selected ranges of singing (in terms of indeterminacy) fall in the same register. The words are identical and Polo follows
with rhythmical variation. This close relationship gets separated throughout the opera.

Starting from interchanging syllables, Marco and Polo end up interchanging phrases. But at the big climax point of the opera, Marco and Polo meet again and become one again with a homophonic duet (Figure 5).

Figure 3. Beginning of Book of Timespace: Spring

One has to delve deeper into Musical journey that accompanies Physical journey in order to appreciate the subtleties of symbols used in music in connection with the story. In Piazza scene, Physical journey is in Venice. Hence European art music style characteristics can be easily observed. First European motif of the opera appears right after Polo utters the words: “Piazza is my home” (Figure 6).
Figure 7. Traditionally European Choral section

Figure 8. Monophonic chant imitation
Another traditional European harmony appears in *Piazza* scene, this time it is choral. It is accompanied by a descending string *glissando* (Figure 7). With these two distinct examples, Tan Dun clearly establishes some sense of place. However Tan Dun gives more specialized hints in terms of geography and the missing time indication is to be indicated during this scene. Figure 8 demonstrates Tan Dun’s imitation of monophonic chant that was in use during medieval era in Europe. Even though the actual music is clearly not monophonic, the fact that indeterministic registers of distinctive vocal lines are the same and that the vocal lines enter in a Renaissance imitation fashion strongly suggest –if not Medieval- a pre-Baroque European vocal tradition. This figure (8) also shows the first occurrence of the obsession with the word “go”, which is to be discussed later. Towards the end of *Piazza* scene, Tan Dun gives absolute information, musically, to the listener regarding the place of this “piazza”, even though it is rather clear from the language of the name of the place. Polo begins singing in Italian in a very bel canto-like style with its dense legato markings and highly melodic lines (Figure 9).

![Bel canto-like singing by Polo](image)

This bel canto melody is, towards the end of *Piazza* scene, is supported by a big Romantic era orchestration (Figure 10). This also marks the first full-textured moment in the opera. *Sea* scene that follows *Piazza* in Physical journey does not add anything different stylistically. Musical journey stays in mostly European territory, which was the case in the previous scene.
When Sea is crossed, Physical journey arrives in a Middle Eastern Bazaar. Musical journey shows its location by placing an Eastern melodic progression with a male voice choir. This melody appears in string section of the orchestra then further developed in brass section (Figure 11).
Figure 10. Full texture orchestration
Figure 11. Beginning of Bazaar. The Eastern melody.
After another Spiritual journey break\textsuperscript{12}, Polo finds himself in Desert. Desert is the first scene that a significant change in orchestration occurs. Until now, Musical journey made use of Western instruments, even though in the previous scene, musical and physical location was Middle East. However starting with Desert scene, Tan Dun makes use of genuine traditional instruments in the orchestra. Following the scene change, after a short while, a sitar-tabla duet appears (Figure 12).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{sitar-tabla_duet.png}
\caption{Sitar-tabla duet in Desert}
\end{figure}

In this scene, Tan Dun also gives sitar the permission for improvisation, which again is the first occurrence of improvised sections of the opera and it is followed by later wholly improvised/indeterminate\textsuperscript{13} sections.

The chant-like vocal section signals the arrival to the Tibetan monks on Himalaya Mountains after scene change (Figure 13). The chant is marked as “Misterioso” in the score, which depicts the mysterious aura that is present. This chant is also coupled with the use of Tibetan singing bowls in the orchestra, thus strengthening the image of Himalaya.

\textsuperscript{12} Book of Timespace: Summer.
\textsuperscript{13} In terms of time (Cage-ian time-varied indeterminacy).
One of the most obvious musical style alterations occurs, when Physical journey arrives at the Wall’s Mongolian side (Figure 14). Tan Dun clearly states “Mongolian Overtone Singing” here, and Polo starts among the choir and other characters\textsuperscript{14} singing in Mongolian style.

Musical journey as well as Physical Journey ends at the Chinese side of the Wall. Tan Dun symbolizes the arrival with a pipa solo (Figure 15). Furthermore, Polo, for the last time, changes his language and starts singing in Chinese (Figure 16).

\textsuperscript{14} Kublai Khan, Dante, Rustichello, and T+B choir.
After the general symbolized journey that Musical journey provides, one may look into more specific musical objects, contradictions, or even *Leitmotive*. However I will not be calling these musical objects/text paintings *Leitmotive*, because when one considers Perle’s definition of *Leitmotiv*\(^\text{15}\), I will not always be looking for a second occurrence of a specific object or motif and *Leitmotiv* term – in my opinion – does require a German/Austrian context, which is absent in this case. These text paintings may or may not be about the internal content of this opera. The reason I say that it may not be about the internal content of the opera, is because this opera somewhat depicts a journey similar to Tan Dun’s own as mentioned in the beginning of this article, there may be some allusions to external factors that are relevant to composer’s own life. And my reasoning related to this fact is supported by the apparent existence of at least one such case as described shortly above.

\(^{15}\) Perle, 1989.
A concrete occurrence of the phenomena described in the previous paragraph can be observed when one looks at the idea of remembrance throughout the opera. The idea of remembrance or memory appears three times in this opera. The first occurrence is in Sea scene. Second and third appearances are in Bazaar and Himalaya respectively. Even though in all three cases, music is supposed to be elsewhere – Europe, Middle East, and Himalaya-, when memory is mentioned, a clear Chinese\textsuperscript{16} motif appears in orchestration. First occurrence is when Polo reminisces about a “forest city” (Figure 17). Immediately follows the line “What a plane that was” is the Chinese motif played by the brass section. The second appearance is with the word “memory” at the page turn (Figure 18). The Eastern melody is orchestrated in different registers this time. And the final occurrence is Marco’s “rememberings” where strings section plays the melody (Figure 19). The connection of this musical object and an external factor of the opera is wherever Physical and Musical journey may be, music after/during reminiscent moments always point to China, which strongly suggest the reminiscing done by not Marco Polo but the composer himself since Marco Polo should not be reminiscing about China when he talks of home. In a similar fashion, one can also interpret the whole of Spiritual journey as an incarnation of Tan Dun’s spiritual journey when one looks at it strictly in musical terms.

\textsuperscript{16} This is my own aural judgment relating the mentioned motifs to the ones that are used in Book of Timespace scenes.
Figure 17. Memory no. 1
Figure 18. Memory no. 2
Another important concept that emerges musically throughout the opera is obsession. There are two distinct kinds of obsession occurring: obsessions on the words “go” and “gold”. Firstly, the obsession on the word “go” starts early on. As mentioned above, it starts with Figure 8. Except for the first (Figure 8) and second (Figure 20) occurrences, shadows and the choir force the other appearances. In the first two appearances, all the characters are present. This obsession or insistence on the word “go” symbolizes the need for this journey of Marco Polo. And the fact that it is usually enforced by the shadows symbolizes the internal need rather than an external coercion. Finally there is no appearance of this type of object after Physical journey moves beyond Venice or Piazza. There are 4 types of stressing the word “go”. First one is demonstrated in Figure 8 as a monophonic chant-like object. Second type is accentuated and homophonic as shown in Figure 20. Third type is continuous and
ascending (Figure 21). The final type is the climax of the idea. A fully orchestrated version of this “go” insistence occurs as the final occurrence of this idea and it disappears afterwards (Figure 22).

![Figure 20. Homophonic “go”](image)

Second obsession is on the word “gold”. This first appears in Piazza and carried throughout Bazaar and Desert scenes. This may depict the thirst for gold and silk of Marco Polo, and in a way gold and silk becoming one of the main purposes of the journey after leaving Venice. This obsession is usually illustrated through Rustichello and Dante characters. In all four occurrences of this musical object, it is always in the same style. The word “gold” is repeated three or four times with quaver rests in
between, intensifying in dynamics with each repetition with *crescendo*. An example is shown in Figure 23.
Figure 22. “go” climax
According to the big climax moment of the opera, Tan Dun may be said to have thought reaching to the Chinese side of the Wall as the main purpose of this journey of Marco Polo. This climax occurs in the Wall (continued) scene. The re-meeting of Marco and Polo, one of the rare moments of full orchestration, the insistence of the word “wall”, all occur at the same time. Figure 24 shows this moment in full score. After this moment, things settle down in general and there no other peak moments in terms of music or story.

In conclusion, in this opera, Tan Dun depicts a journey, which seems very dear to his heart. He shows his refined skills as a text painter. There are many more text paintings than those that are discussed in this article, which would be redundant to talk about them all. Even though some of these paintings are rather obvious, there are also some subtler ones. And Tan Dun demonstrates his clear ideas about certain symbols about different cultures that are encountered throughout this journey.
Figure 24. Climax
Bibliography


