

ABSTRACTING CONCRETE MATERIALS: CONTEMPORARY POETRY AS A MUSICAL SOURCE

Rachel C. Walker

ЕЛЕКТРОННО ИЗДАНИЕ НА ФАКУЛТЕТА ПО НАУКИ ЗА ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО И ИЗКУСТВОТА^A

Abstract:

This article summarizes a few ideas shared during lectures delivered at the Chinese University of Hong Kong Shenzhen and the Academy of Music at Hong Kong Baptist University in March 2024. Although there are existing publications focusing on my research in China and other projects as a composer working within the field of contemporary music composition, this focuses primarily on my musical output and research since coming to Germany five years ago, exploring contemporary poetry as a source of abstract musical thought. This brief explanation thus focuses on the technical and notational solutions which I have developed through interacting with poetry recitation, transcription and their derived parameters, as well as my goals behind this approach. I will first provide some general context, before moving on to musical strategies used in recent compositions based on texts by the Chinese poet Ruan Xuefang and the Iraqi poet Nadeem Al-Aloosi.

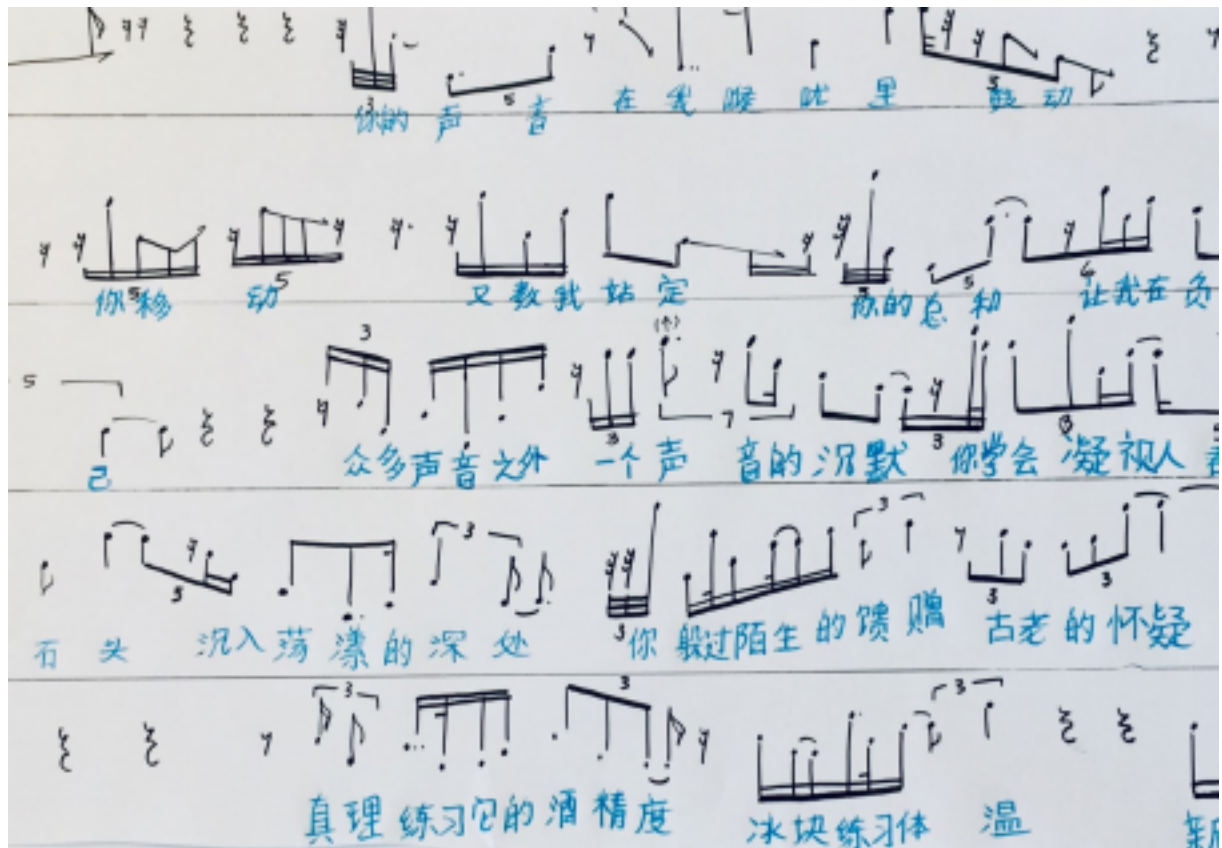
Parallel to my time in China researching traditional music (ca. 2015-2019), I began to read contemporary poetry as a means of improving my Mandarin and broadening my understanding of modern China. It was in this way that I first encountered the work of Zheng Xiaoqiong: first, in translation, and, eventually, in the original. By 2017, we were in touch over WeChat, and, in 2018, she invited me to Guangdong Province to exchange for several days with other writers in the region. It was during this trip that I also became acquainted with the Shenzhen based Chaozhou dialect poet Ruan Xuefang.

Key words: Music, Composition, Contemporary music, Contemporary Poetry, Lectures, Translation

In the beginning, exchanges with both poets focused more on their

texts and my translations thereof, rather than seeking a direct musical implementation of either. During the early days of the pandemic in 2020, Ruan Xuefang and I began an active online artistic exchange which included her sending voice recordings of the poems I was reading and translating. Like many other Chinese-language poets, she enjoys the intimacy of her own dialect during poetry readings, and thus sent both Chaozhou dialect and Mandarin recordings of the texts in question. This was in many ways a revelation: to read the text to oneself in Mandarin, and then hear Xuefang's recitations in Chaozhou dialect, is akin to wearing sunglasses in a landscape. Upon taking them off, one finds oneself in a multi-dimensional world with a distinct coloristic and rhythmic topography, both unexpected and hiding just beneath the surface.

It was the strength of Xuefang's recitations that prompted my initial attempts at transcribing her texts. These presented numerous technical challenges: firstly, Chaozhou dialect is extremely rhythmically complex. In addition to its heavy usage of triplets and syncopations, the rhythmic irregularity pushes the boundaries of what standard metrical approaches will comfortably accommodate. This is further complicated by tempo modulations within Xuefang's own 'semi-performative' readings. The process of transcribing Xuefang's poetry also required time to learn, as it necessitated my own memorization of the Chaozhou pronunciation, in order to be able to hear the vowel modifications as opposed to Mandarin and to accurately organize the material in real time.



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IMAGE 1: A FIRST ATTEMPT AT TRANSCRIBING RUAN XUEFANG'S TEXTS INTO NOTATED RHYTHMS, WORKING FROM HER POEM 逼近 CLOSING IN ON

This process of gathering the source material is a subjective musical act in which I use my own hearing — including the limitations of my own perception — as an additional filter on the poem itself. Although one could use software to arrive at a perhaps ‘more accurate’ transcription, I prefer to attempt to create the best version I can while acknowledging the gaps of grasping towards a non native language. In addition to the time spent translating a text, this time spent fighting against the difficulties that arise from this process allows me to enter more deeply into the work. At the stage of transcription, the resulting musical piece, its expressive language, and how it will emerge are entirely removed from

consideration — unknown, even to me. It is only when the transcription is fully completed, and there has been a long period of memorization and contact with that source, that it is possibly to consider methods of assembly from the resulting ‘fixed objects’.

Indeed, I see these transcribed rhythmical fragments of the original text as ‘statues’ within my compositions: immovable stones which may pose musical questions (which can be answered with material from other places in the text, or with material from one’s own intuition at the suggestion of the fragment at hand); which may be built into composites (counterpoint from layers of simultaneous transcription); or which may be ‘pressed’ into submission by other parameters. For instance, in addition to the rhythmic transcription itself, there are various other pieces of information from the poem which may be identified and used within subsections, single instruments and preparations, or single phrases. By looking at the nature of the language at hand — e.g. the stroke count or number of tones in Chinese — one can generate additional patterns which can play as a third dimension across non-linear portions of the transcription across the piece.

Because there are many ‘clichés’ and expectations that emerge when one thinks of composing with text, it is important to clarify my goals. The combination of music and text can be far more nuanced than seeking only to ‘text-paint’, or ‘describe’ the poem, neither of which are personal motivations. Indeed, many of the pieces created with text involve no vocalization at all, and they can and should be able to stand on their own. Instead, through a sort of research process that coincides with a direct handling of the materiality of the text, I hope that it is possible to arrive at ‘parallel body’ to the original. This body is imbued with the building blocks (speech rhythms) of the text, but relies equally on a multi-faceted analysis of the source to provide clues to its DNA. The expressive territory of these pieces is then colored by my own aesthetics and musical ideas, and supported in parallel by a syntactical approach to instrumental research and preparations— a piece created in this way is therefore not an attempt at replication, but a type of encounter.

It is perhaps important to add that my transcription is primarily focused on the rhythmic content, rather than pitch, although some general ideas about relative height are taken into consideration. Allowing myself freedom with pitch

that is untethered from the source further diversifies the resulting work's sound world and direction. And, as previously alluded to, all of this work with transcription and rhythmic material happens in tandem with research on the instruments. The goal here is to create a syntactical approach to timbre which, when combined with the text transcription, is able to create another layer of identification to 'imprint' temporal markers within the piece.

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In each work I have composed with this approach, I have sought out new ways of dealing with the resulting transcriptions, both as a challenge to myself and to push the material in new directions. In the case of Xuefang's texts, the rhythmic transcription has often served as a 'spine'. Material which that can then be built into composite webs created through hocketing and erasure of several parts of the text at once — a type of 'recomposition' of the text onto itself, which allows ideas to interact more freely than in the linear form of the original.

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IMAGE 2: EXCERPT FROM THIRD EXISTENCE (2021), CONNECTED TO RUAN XUEFANG'S TEXT 第三



IMAGE 3: EXCERPT FROM HAJIR (2022), CONNECTED TO THE TEXT I FALL ASLEEP ON A JAGGED ROCK (ANAMU ALLA AL-HAJIRI AL-NATAYI) BY NADEEM AL-ALOOSI

In 2021, I became acquainted with the Iraqi poet Nadeem Al-Aloosi and began a series of pieces connected to the prose poems surrounding his character Malak alzumrud (the Emerald Angel). Unlike previous projects with the Chinese texts of Xuefang — where, despite the difference in dialect, I had already achieved a degree of fluency and could at least easily read and relate to the materials — working with Fusha Arabic presented an entirely new, but welcome, set of practical and musical challenges.

The relative regularity of beating within Arabic poetry is a strong contrast to Chaozhou dialect, although individual words and tempo shifts can still lead to rhythmic irregularities. Nadeem's texts are more extended in overall length and linguistically also feature longer 'chains' of material which require many listens to fully grasp. The benefit of these chains has been more extended musical and dramatic possibilities which are not easily presented in a more concise linguistic expression. Within Nadeem's recitative style, vowel elisions are frequent. Further, his recursive usage of words and phrases that change location in terms of both distance and time in relationship to the autobiographical speaker (himself) provide suggestions for formal construction. Within these texts, the use of imagery is so strong that — while not being distinctly programmatic — they offer at least the possibilities of metaphor, of leaning in referential directions within pockets of the work, and of creating highly abstracted playing techniques from the images presented.

Because of these and other differences, compositional solutions that had worked effectively in Xuefang's poems did not, however, directly translate into the texts of Nadeem. For instance, despite the rhythmic irregularity of Chaozhou dialect, her shorter phrase structure still allows for material to be squeezed more easily into metrical frameworks, as in *Third existence* (2021). To get around the question of how to maintain Nadeem's longer phrase structure, without having to simplify or superimpose a conflicting meter, there have been several strategies. Although my music uses a mix of metrical approaches, some of my music exists in a type of free time which allows individual instruments to break into separate, simultaneous time streams. One solution that has worked well with Nadeem's texts has been to remove meter at points, but to break longer streams of text between subsets of the full instrumentation. (This strategy was applied within *Hajir*, as well as *al'thalj*, both from 2022). In the following example from *Hajir*, a composite melody from a single phrase within the text was presented across the ensemble,

in dynamic counterpoint with the percussionist, who plays another transcribed phrase in a separate, parallel stream.

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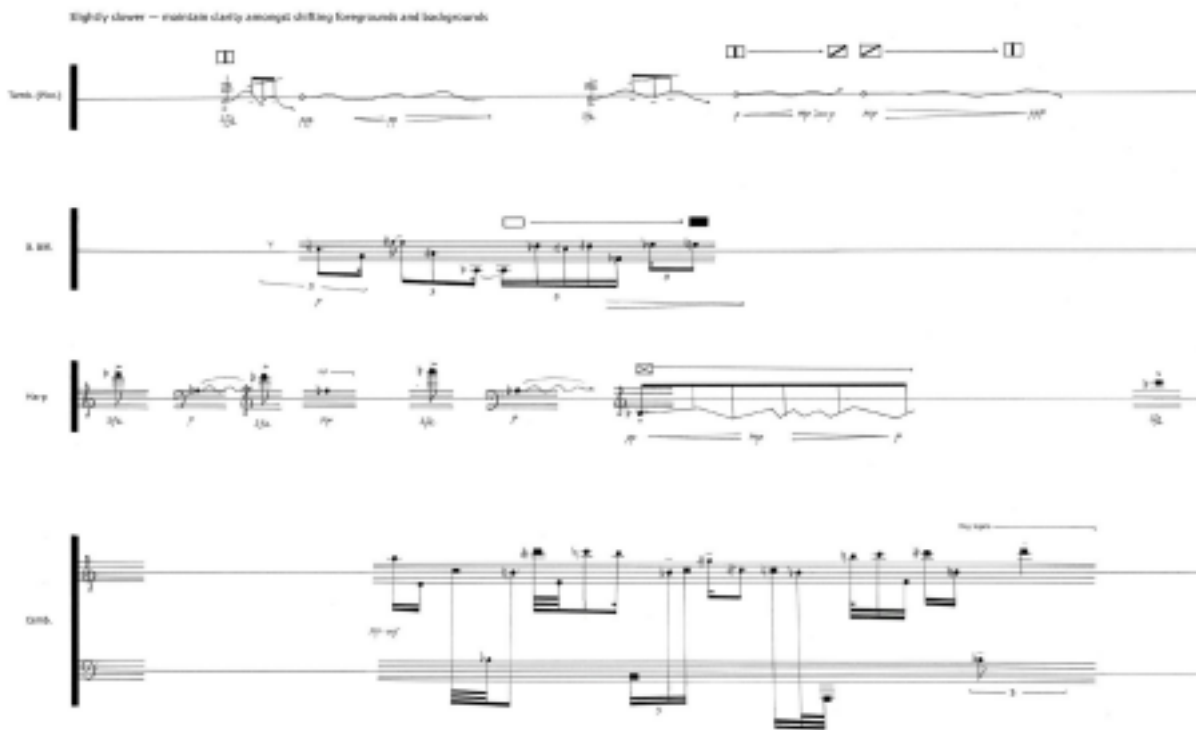


IMAGE 4: EXCERPT FROM AL'THALJ (2022), CONNECTED TO THE EPONYMOUS POEM OF NADEEM AL-ALOOSI

Other works featuring Nadeem's texts, such as al'thalj (2022), have sought out further methods: for instance, mixing multiple types of transcription at once to create floating musical mobiles. In the following example, there are strict transcriptions mixed with impulse-point transcriptions. The exact coordination of time has some flexibility, but events should fall roughly within the frame of one another according to the spatially-notated arrangement. This possibility for slight differences in synchronization may also be understood as a metaphor for poetic recitation: that any one recording is only a floating mirage of the text.

Overall, these musical examples offer a small glimpse into the possibilities for musical realization from poetry on a local level, without going further into the

structural or larger-frame possibilities of working with the texts. Ultimately,

however, these are all only background compositional methods that allow me to play musically within a given piece, and to possibly break out of the habits and limited eyesight of my own musical thinking. The expectation is that the listener can remain unaware of these processes and still engage in a work on a purely musical level — that the pieces retain a drama and a thumbprint of the original, but stand effectively on their own two feet.

