

Spin Straw.  
Or, This Is Not a Revolution.

Carolyn Chen

I make music. This has included people playing instruments, covert actions for supermarket, corpse position permutation in rhythmic patterns of light and dark, slow motion facial gymnastics to headphone listening of a Bruckner Adagio, and sonorous costumes of heaped recycled objects clinking as their wearers run through L.A. traffic. Not infrequently, I have been told that my music is not music. On occasion, composition teachers asked me to play piano – perhaps to provide evidence of, or to reconnect me to, more conventional expressions of musicality. I love piano and conventional expressions of musicality. I see all my work in a continuous tradition with them.

My mother put me in piano lessons when I was three. She says she thought it would make me a good child. We have not discussed the results in detail. This is how I learned to play piano: For about 20 years, I met with a teacher once a week to learn music of the Western canon. I practiced, competed, won small prizes. My musical education was not unusual. What I worked on hardest and longest was learning to sing through the instrument.

A piano is a machine, not a human voice. It has no fleshy folds, no necessary breathing, no intrinsic continuity with a feeling, fragile human body. Its quantized pitches and culture of technical virtuosity caused anxiety even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Heine and Hanslick feared pianos turning players into machines, killing all thoughts and feelings.<sup>1</sup> As a piano student, my job was to learn how to turn wooden keys and hammers into singing, Rumpelstiltskin-like.

My teachers sang, and made me sing over my playing. They physically molded my fingers, hands, and arms, pushed my shoulders around in various shapes, and urged me to “feel the music.” Feeling the music involved imagining other environments than the room we were in, other instruments, other people’s feelings – a solitary boatman at night, a bassoon in my left hand, suffering greater than my own. I was taught not to perceive keys of plastic-coated wood, but of softness and fat – pillows, slabs of meat, Garfield. This was my education as a student of the Western classical tradition, long before I encountered any notion of an avant-garde. I learned to play Mozart by trying to find the feeling of massaging an overweight, lasagna-fed, cartoon cat.

Feeling the music thus involved feeling a lot of things not containable in sound, and things I could not literally feel. It was a kind of willed sensory hallucination, trying to inhabit the bodies of people and things I was not – channeling the energies of teachers, sumo wrestlers, bears – and projecting this onto the instrument.

Starting here, it is easy to identify imaginary chickens of varying emotional agendas attached to the bowing arm as a sensible way of modulating a violinist’s playing – they are flyers of appropriate size, weight, and unreliability. They supply variation. These are a few other pieces for people in relation to tradition:

---

<sup>1</sup> Hirt, Katherine. *When machines play Chopin: musical spirit and automation in nineteenth-century Germany* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010) 116.

- *Tragedy* (2009), a corpse permutation play in still and slowly-moving tableaux, tells the Orpheus story in honor of the origins of opera, while comprising a first species counterpoint exercise based on spatial consonance and dissonance between two bodies illuminated in rhythms of light.
- To externalize the richly embellished internal experience of music, I sought to unite physical gesture with sound by sonifying the afterlife of discarded materials. *Human Windchimes* (2009-12) are nature sprites built from everyday detritus that move in site-specific games to the urban environment as knights to windmills. Discovering the richness of L.A. traffic droning in pedal point to the baroque ornamentation of clinking cans and bottles, I explored interactions with social spaces more directly.
- *Supermarket Music* (2010) is a study in orchestration, the diffusion of texture, color, and patterns of activity through space, reflecting on the 24-hour supermarket as another palace to the greatness of capitalism, Technicolor complement to the grandeur of the concert hall. The supermarket's inherent smoothness – its gliding carts, checkout belts, endlessly looped Muzak, and shadowless, fluorescent lights maintain a seamless, private, dream space parallel to the insulated quiet of concert listening, creating an ideal stage for retuning everyday actions by way of color-sorted carts and the transcription of guqin tuning for shelves.
- *The movement of glass through a house* (2013) is a blindfolded audio navigation through a demolished house in China by way of a glass shard scraped continuously against various surfaces of the building. In the tradition of Alvin Lucier and La Monte Young's "Draw a straight line and follow it," the action also enunciates the everlasting stretch of the Romantic singing line through different resonant spaces.
- *Threads* (2013), a story on tape for ASL interpreter with hands strung to chimes at a distance, is a canon in three parts, with voices separated not by a fixed harmonic interval, but by translation into different media. An incomplete memory of a story is recorded, and interpreted in the silent hands of a performer, rustling chimes of paper, wood, glass, and leaves of a suspended tree branch.

Of course this practice does not take exclusive refuge in Western classical music. Part of the joy and responsibility of being alive is not ignoring the entire rest of the world. The work is informed by my engagement with other bodily practices – tai chi, yoga, aikido – and a decade of studying guqin, the Chinese 7-string zither traditionally played for private meditation in nature. I am inspired by its timbral specificity, temporal freedom, arcane tablature, and view of music as vehicle for stilling the spirit and returning to nature. I want to be awake to the place where I am. This place includes fictional documentary, socially engaged art, conceptual poetry, surrealist puppetry, animals, and public radio – the work of Mieko Shiomi, Yasunao Tone, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Raoul Ruiz, Agnes Varda, Marianne Amacher, Thu Tran, Tan Lin, and Vanessa Place, among others.

But piano was my first instrument, and the one I've played the longest. Learning to play required reimagining the physical reality of the instrument and my own body in relation to it. Reading music, I offer my body as a medium for the thoughts of someone whose body is absent. The tradition is already built on translating across divides of time, culture, and media. This is my *matière*. I do not work for shock or originality. I am a very traditional composer. I'm just looking for a nice singing tone.