

Unraveling the Musical Canon: *My Song* by Bright Sheng

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In the past fifty years, there has been a proliferation of new compositions with a blend of cultural forces. Among those are the works produced by Chinese and other Asian composers, many of which have combined Western compositional techniques with elements from their own musical heritages, such as the traditional folk music and dance forms of their native land.

The prevalence of non-Western elements in contemporary music complicates the idea of any one musical canon. Since the meaning of such compositions now lies not only in one particular performance tradition but in diverse musical practices, interpreting a new piece of this genre becomes more challenging. Performers and analysts would need to conduct research on related disciplines before they can address how these works fit into a canon, but the existing scholarship is either too technical or superficial to provide hands-on information that would be useful to them. Therefore, to aid in the dissemination of this type of music, there is the need for methods of analysis which are more user-friendly and work-specific: those which will preserve the composer's individuality yet reveal the core musical elements in the amalgamation of Western compositional techniques and Chinese aesthetics.

The original solo piano version of *My Song* by Bright Sheng is clearly a Western-style composition that draws upon characteristics from Chinese folk songs. Through detailed analyses presented from a performer's perspective, this paper will attempt to unravel the canonic position of *My Song*, a necessary prerequisite for interpreting the composition. The approach taken will encourage one to look beyond what constitutes it to be Chinese or Western; rather, to observe the resulting synthesis through careful examination of musical subtleties that might not sound apparent on the surface of this work.

Understanding the wide array of Chinese and Western compositional techniques used in *My Song*—whether it is the heterophony characteristic of so much Chinese folk performance practice in the first movement, the Western theory of pitch-class sets in the second, “Chinese sequences” and rhythmic canons in the third, enharmonic notation in the fourth; or the formal unity and pitch organization used in this work as a whole—will facilitate our evaluation of its aesthetic value, enabling us to focus our attention not on the act of canonization but on appreciating the musical depth and meaning of this piece. Above all, my aim is to offer insights that would pertain not only to *My Song* but to other similar works as well.