

## **Musical Quotation and the Struggle for Canonicity**

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The Greek word “kanon” means “straight rod”. This is an instrument used for setting the standard of measurement. When applied to musical works, such standard points to the transcendental nature of some music; more specifically, its power to earn a right for continuous performances across ages. It is because of this power that some musical works have, overtime, transcended their initial performance context to enter so-called “canon,” thereby preserving a recognizable form.

The struggle of composers to make sure that their works possess such power continues to present day. But musical value is not determined by talent, skill, or popularity alone. No doubt contemporary culture celebrates innovation, diversity as well as tradition. Composers and audiences alike are well aware of the political and socio-cultural meanings that a musical work takes on, and the aesthetic values and multiple meanings that it can embody. Contemporary composers express awareness of cultural diversity in a number of ways; one of this involves the use of musical material from foreign as well as local traditions in their compositions, regardless of the “popular” or “serious” nature of such materials.

The present paper intends to investigate the way in which borrowing may be seen as aesthetically valuable in and of itself. Music has the power to trigger memories and a whole range of other responses. A musical quotation is intrinsically tied in with its expressive purpose, one that is meant to convey meanings to the listeners, rekindle hidden emotions, recall and reshape memories within a personal and collective/social framework. Through this act of recall the listener’s aesthetic response can be enhanced, enabling him/her to hear the piece as an embodiment of artistic and socio-cultural values that ensure its place in the contemporary musical canon.

I will illustrate my approach by examining the works of three contemporary Chinese composers: Tung Lai-shing, Tan Dun and Chan Hing-yan. These composers were writing music for Hong Kong Chinese audiences in or immediately after 1997, when the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China was the “hot” socio-political topic of the day, making extensive of traditional folk material. Their virtuosic transformation of quoted material - be it Tung’s multifarious timbral images, the indigenous sounds of Canto-folk in Chan’s music, or the live recording excerpts of Tan’s street opera - suggests that borrowing procedures may have become a new “rod” by which the worth of a musical work is measured.