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## SCENES FROM A JADE TERRACE: FUSING EAST AND WEST THROUGH STRINGS, HAMMERS AND DAMPERS

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*As one of Canada's highly regarded living composers, Alexina Louie has developed a strong reputation that has taken her music to various regions of the world. She presents a unique language, a fusion of Eastern and Western influences appealing to a wide range of audiences. It is this idiom that permeates her most significant work written for solo piano entitled, "Scenes from a Jade Terrace" (1987).*

*This lecture recital will explore the origins, inspiration and compositional techniques of this distinctive three-movement suite. A full performance of the work will take place at the end of the presentation.*

Alexina Louie was born in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1949 of second-generation Canadians of Chinese descent.<sup>1</sup> Her piano studies commenced at the age of seven. A serious wrist injury required her to give up her ambition of becoming a concert pianist. Following her formative education, she went on to complete an undergraduate degree in music history at the University of British Columbia. She continued her formal studies at the University of California at San Diego with a Masters degree in composition. During her graduate work, her main teacher was Pauline Oliveros who introduced Louie to the concept of listening to "music" or "sound" through the use of unconventional methods such as woofing, grunting and crawling on the floor. While in California she also joined a group that practised meditation through exercises in sound and movement. She also took part in timbral experiments that were conducted by the composer Robert Erickson. This enhanced her sensitivity to the layering and blending of sounds.<sup>2</sup> It was also during this time that she attended a concert of Gagaku music bringing her in touch with her Asian/Chinese heritage. This experience had a profound effect on Louie and was an immediate source of inspiration. She said, "It opened my ears, introduced me to oriental music, and in doing so, helped me find my voice."<sup>3</sup> After spending a decade in California, she returned to her home country of Canada and currently resides in Toronto.

Since the early 1980s, Alexina Louie has enjoyed a successful career in composition. Her orchestral works have been programmed by the likes of conductors Sir Andrew Davis, Leonard Slatkin and Charles Dutoit. She was commissioned to write the festival overture "The Ringing Earth" for the gala opening of *Expo 86* where Their Royal Highnesses, the

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<sup>1</sup> Keillor, E and King, B N 2012, The Canadian Encyclopedia, Historica Dominion, viewed 1 June 2013, <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/emc/alexina-louie>>

<sup>2</sup> Chu, E Y-H 1997, 'On the Musical Silk Road: Piano music by Alexina Louie', Doctoral essay, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 3

Prince and Princess of Wales were in attendance. Her music has been performed and broadcast around the world including Beijing, Tokyo, Vienna, Paris, London, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. Her work has been the subject of several doctoral theses and she has been recognized in a variety of ways for her achievements. She has received two Canadian Juno awards and on three occasions, was awarded the SOCAN Jan V. Matejcek Concert Music Award for being the most frequently performed Canadian composer. She is also an Officer of the Order of Canada, and a recipient of the Order of Ontario, the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal.<sup>4</sup>

### **Compositional Output**

With a career that has spanned over thirty years, Alexina Louie has composed a wide variety of works that have made her a celebrated composer in her home country of Canada. She has written a large number of works for orchestra and large ensembles, all commissioned by leading Canadian orchestras and other musical organizations. There are also a number of chamber pieces in her portfolio including a companion piece for Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. She has also composed many solo piano pieces. A number of them are included in the syllabus of Canada's national music examination board, the Royal Conservatory of Music. Her piano works are frequently programmed on recitals of professionals and students alike. Additionally, Louie has been commissioned to write four operas, three ballet scores and two choral pieces.

### **Influences and Compositional Style**

As a Canadian of Chinese heritage, Alexina Louie has been exposed to the culture of the country she grew up in and the ideals and philosophies of her ancestors. Her ability to fuse the essence of the East and West has resulted in a unique language that is typical "Louie". She is particularly struck by the concept of "yin and yang" that comes from her Chinese background. This principle serves as the underlying structure for many of her works. It represents contrast and balance; the fact that opposing forces can still exist in harmony and equilibrium. As a result, the differing sides need to be reconciled through change. A solution must be found in order to either strengthen the weaker or weaken the stronger, a resolution that will achieve perfection.<sup>5</sup> "Yin" represents the earth which is dark, passive, and feminine and "yang" symbolizes heaven characterising a bright, aggressive and masculine character.

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<sup>4</sup> Alexina Louie 2012, Toronto, composer's biography, viewed 1 June 2013, <[www.alexinalouie.ca/bio](http://www.alexinalouie.ca/bio)>

<sup>5</sup> Chu, op. cit., 35

The principle of “yin-yang” can be found in a variety of ways in her pieces. In her piano works, she often uses the very high and very low registers at the same time. The stark contrasts create a new type of unification. When playing her compositions, one can come across the distinction of black versus white keys at the same time. This fusion creates a type of bitonality that can also reflect the “yin-yang” ideal.<sup>6</sup> The philosophy also permeates her use of dynamics. Performers of her pieces are frequently called upon to produce a whispery pianissimo and violent fortissimo all within a short time frame. She also highlights a significant distinction with her use of rhythm. A passage that is more rhythmically calm may allude to the “yin” factor and a passage that is more turbulent signifies the “yang” aspect.<sup>7</sup> Even the use of pedal falls under this law. Sections that involve the *una corda* reflect the more docile “yin” side while segments that do not use the *una corda* echo the opposing side of this principle.<sup>8</sup> In a recent phone conversation I had with her on May 25, 2013, Louie noted that in her earlier days, she used the “yin-yang” principle on a very conscious level. However, as it became more a part of her compositional language, she feels that she does not need to think about it anymore as it comes more naturally.

Additionally, Alexina Louie has also been inspired by Gagaku music, the ancient court music of Japan which in turn was influenced by the Tang dynasty. She was first exposed to this genre during her time in California and found that she was attracted to its meditative quality. In particular, Louie was drawn to two Gagaku wind instruments: the *hichiriki* which is a double reed instrument and the *sho*, a small mouth organ. The intense sound quality created by these instruments produces a strong emotional force which in turn is an important part of Louie’s concept of timbre.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Ms. Louie has been moved by one of the most complicated Chinese instruments to learn, the *ch’in*. Its distilled and restful sound quality along with the figurative patterns often played on the instrument’s seven strings is reflected in Louie’s music in a number of ways. She often favours the upper register with the use of the *una corda* along with very quiet dynamics. Also, she employs running arpeggio or scale-like figurations that can often be found in this instrument’s music. Furthermore, the *ch’in* is

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37

<sup>7</sup> Parker, J 1992, ‘East and West in the Music of Alexina Louie’, *Sound Notes*, Fall/Winter, p. 22

<sup>8</sup> Chu, *op. cit.*, 37

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-10

not played for entertainment purposes but for moral elevation, a philosophical attitude that Louie has also inherited.<sup>10</sup>

While values from the East pervade so much of Louie's music, compositional precepts of the West also play an important role. A sense of tension followed by resolution can always be clearly identified in her pieces.<sup>11</sup> Also, the fast-slow-fast alternation of tempi is a characteristic that can be often found in her works. Louie has at times also adopted a minimalistic approach. This can be seen in her attraction to the interplay of rhythmic patterns created by the juxtaposition of different metrical groups.<sup>12</sup> Reminiscent of the typical Western classical tradition, her works possess their own type of progression, goal and tonal centre.<sup>13</sup> As Esther Yu-Hui Chu states in her doctoral essay about Louie's music, "Even if she uses many sonic devices in a Western manner, they are conditioned by Eastern ways of hearing, seeing, and thinking."<sup>14</sup>

Like all other creators of music, Ms. Louie has been influenced by composers who have come before her, in particular those who are prominent in the world of Western art music. She admires the work of Maurice Ravel, George Crumb and György Ligeti. However, it is Claude Debussy who has served as a significant source of inspiration. She emulates the revered French composer through an elevated importance of dynamics, pedalling and the use of verbal description. Louie carefully places dynamics, especially the use of "hair pins" (crescendo and decrescendo), to create stunning effects. A clear dynamic plan can always be defined throughout her pieces. Regarding the use of pedals, she employs the *una corda* to create convincing, mysterious episodes while the damper pedal facilitates the blending and blurring of sounds both melodically and harmonically. Louie also explores the inside of the piano and at times requires performers to strum and strike the strings while holding the damper pedal down, creating an alluring effect. The pedals are undoubtedly used as an effective tool to vary the tone colour. Finally, as with Debussy, the use of verbal descriptions to create certain musical effects is used frequently in many of her works. Descriptive titles abound in Louie's compositions and they often refer to nature and reflect her understanding of the essence of Chinese poetry and landscape painting.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11-15

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>12</sup> Parker, op. cit., 24

<sup>13</sup> Chu, op. cit., 44

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 23-30

During our recent conversation, Alexina Louie reflected on her music and what she is intending to communicate. She stated that she is always in search of the truth and does not want anything to sound forced, indulgent or simplistic. Her music is communicative, personal and very spiritual. When composing, her musical ideas come to her in two different ways. At times, she first needs to hear the music in her brain and then find it at the piano. Alternatively, she sometimes needs to just sit at the piano, improvise and approach the music from the tactile perspective. She always ensures that an idea of structure is present while composing.

### **Scenes from a Jade Terrace**

Written in 1987 for the pianist, Jon Kimura Parker, *Scenes from a Jade Terrace*<sup>16</sup> has enjoyed a place of distinction in the canon of Canadian piano repertoire. It consists of three movements and follows the fast-slow-fast tempi pattern of traditional three-movement works. The title refers to the ancient past. Each movement is also characterized with distinctive descriptions that manifest certain images. The first two movements, *Warrior* and *Memories of an Ancient Garden* refer to a single figure, a ghost on a terrace overlooking an aromatic garden. In the final movement, *Southern Sky*, the figure glances up at the evening sky to see a multitude of stars. This use of descriptive titles reflects the strong influence of Debussy and his utilization of evocative, written depictions in his scores.

The first movement, *Warrior* is a virtuosic piece that is technically demanding and requires a lot of aggression. It opens with a bold, fanfare-like statement with figurations that span the wide range of the keyboard. Right from the beginning, the aspect of the “yin-yang” philosophy is very evident. Louie juxtaposes black keys against white keys and the low register versus the high register. Eventually, the opposing sides meld into the form of a tremolo. The next section features a long scalar passage that meanders up and down the keyboard creating a type of surging effect, reminiscent of the ch’in, the ancient Chinese instrument with seven strings. A subsequent segment also focuses on the “yin-yang” ideal contrasting black versus white keys. The hands move rapidly up and down arpeggiated figures in a balanced format and are of equal importance. Her carefully placed crescendos and diminuendos increase the dramatic effect she has created. This leads into a calmer and more poetic section where the hands are constantly moving in contrary but symmetrical motion. Gradually, the texture increases leading to the intense ending of the movement.

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<sup>16</sup> Louie, A 1987, *Scenes from a Jade Terrace* (Canada Music Centre, [www.musiccentre.ca](http://www.musiccentre.ca), Call number MI 2110 L888sce)

In Alexina Louie's own words, the second movement, *Memories In An Ancient Garden* is "another world." She provides a unique instruction to the performer at the opening: "Play as if intoxicated by the scent of a thousand blossoms." The piece opens with another version of the black versus white idea. Large chord clusters are played with open palms with the right hand covering the black keys and the left hand covering the white keys. The bulk of the introduction consists of a series of chord clusters that move in an organic progression. These passages reflect her distinctive way of combining consonant and dissonant intervals to create vertical sonorities.<sup>17</sup> The very straightforward rhythm used in the first part of the piece is indicative of the simplicity found in Asian melodic writing.<sup>18</sup> Another notable feature of this section is the act of playing *inside* the piano. The pianist is instructed to strum and strike the strings with the damper pedal depressed, creating a haunting and ominous effect. The opening section leads into a segment that again suggests the effect created by the *ch'in*. Running scalar passages moving in contrary motion along with trills are used in abundance here. Much of this section is indicated as *senza misura* – an unmeasured section. However, Louie does include an approximate time frame in seconds within which the performer should attempt to play the passage. This type of indication is helpful for the composer to ensure the music is played within a certain amount of time but without entirely confining the performer's creative freedom.<sup>19</sup> Dual glissandi then hearken the start of a very mystical section of the piece. In the left hand, a constant ostinato of alternating Ds that are an octave apart provides a spine-tingling bed of sonority upon which the right hand creates a variety of effects. After the *senza misura* section, the 6/4 meter that is used in this section creates a mesmerizing result. It is as if the music is conjuring up ghosts of the ancient past. The performer is required to alternate between playing the keyboard and strumming the strings inside the piano. A gradual buildup of intensity leads to a powerful climax focusing on four chords manipulated by rhythm and changing meters. Then, the captivating ostinato returns for the remainder of the movement. The piece concludes with the pianist creating harmonics and overtones by touching the strings at various points.

The finale, *Southern Sky*, is generally based in the upper register of the keyboard. Referring back to the overall narrative of the piano suite, it is during this movement that the lone figure looks up to the sky and sees the ravishing spectacle of stars. The focus

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<sup>17</sup> Parker, op. cit., 22

<sup>18</sup> Bennett, J 2004, 'Asian Influences in the Music of Alexina Louie', *Institute for Canadian Music Newsletter*, January, online edition [www.utoronto.ca/icm/0201b.html](http://www.utoronto.ca/icm/0201b.html)

<sup>19</sup> Hahn, C 2005, 'Canadian Pedagogical Piano Repertoire since 1970: A Survey of Contemporary Compositional Styles and Techniques', DMA document, University of Oklahoma, Norman, 86

on the upper range of the piano, reflects the stars that are high above the earth. The bright sound quality and aggressive rhythmic nature of the movement suggests the “yang” side while the preceding movement’s dark and earthy tones implies the quieter and introspective “yin” character. Much of the opening consists of quartal chords in the right hand juxtaposed against triads in the left hand creating a type of bitonality. This is a compositional feature that Louie uses throughout her writing. Tonalities constantly move often in opposite directions. New harmonic relationships are created on every beat.<sup>20</sup> The rhythmic incisiveness creates an exciting musical landscape. Scurrying sixteenth notes are frequently contrasted with more stable chords. She has also included specific instructions regarding when to employ the *una corda* and damper pedal. Louie retains a traditional ABA structure with the return of the opening theme prior to the end of the movement. The entire work concludes with an exciting and luminous flurry of chords.

### **Pedagogical Output**

As this is a conference focused on the realm of piano pedagogy, I feel that it would be appropriate to comment on Louie’s pieces for developing pianists. The set of four pieces, *Music for Piano* (written in 1982) was not specifically intended for pianists in their formative years. However, to Louie’s delight, the pieces are regularly performed by young students due to their imaginative qualities and relative accessibility<sup>21</sup>.

Written in 1995, *Star Light, Star Bright* is a set of pieces written with young pianists in mind.<sup>22</sup> While speaking with Ms. Louie recently, I acquired the sense that she wrote these pieces with the same care and thought she uses when composing the commissioned works for professional musicians. Louie started teaching at the age of fourteen and so she is fully aware of all the pedagogical materials available for youngsters. She wanted to ensure that this set of pieces would be exciting and enjoyable for young musicians to play. As always, it was imperative for her to write music that was spiritual and communicative, even for children. Louie believes that young people are more sophisticated than what we give them credit for and it was her intention to write pieces that spoke to children at that same level. The task was actually quite difficult for her as she was keenly aware that she was probably writing for individuals with small hands. The teacher in her also wanted to impart several lessons with these pieces. She wanted to highlight the importance of using the pedal as a tool to create resonance. Additionally, it was her intention for students to gain experience using the pedal to blend

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<sup>20</sup> Parker, op. cit., 23

<sup>21</sup> Louie, A 1982, *Music for Piano* (Alfred Music, Catalogue Number AP. V1438)

<sup>22</sup> Louie, A 1995, *Star Light Star Bright* (Frederick Harris Music, Catalogue Number FH.SIG03)

sounds and create new tone colours that they would not have encountered in their other repertoire. With many of the pieces involving changing metres, the important concepts of rhythmic stability and counting is reinforced for the students. It is imperative to note that students who play these pieces, receive the full Louie experience. These solo works are not partial representations of the composer. Rather, they introduce young pianists to the colouristic and mystical world of this fascinating musician.

Although more than a quarter of a century has elapsed since Alexina Louie composed *Scenes from a Jade Terrace*, new audiences continue to be captivated by this exciting piano suite. We now live in a global community and we constantly encounter numerous examples of how cultures and traditions intermingle. While the familiarity of structure and form helps to present her innovative writing in a recognizable format, it is Louie's idiom, her fusion of East and West that makes this work so appealing to many listeners. Thank you and I hope you enjoy my performance of Alexina Louie's, *Scenes from a Jade Terrace*.

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Diana Dumlavwalla is an Assistant Professor at Western University, Canada, where she teaches the doctoral and undergraduate piano pedagogy courses as well as studio piano. Previously, Diana was on faculty at the University of Windsor. She also serves as an examiner for the Royal Conservatory, has performed in North America and Europe and is the pianist of the San Agustin Duo.

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