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Spirituality and Orientalism in Contemporary Classical Music

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

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Professor Nancy Guy, Chair
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2017

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Chair

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Spirituality and Orientalism in Contemporary Classical Music

by

Neil Evan Ruby

Master of Arts in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2017

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This thesis critically examines the roles and representations of Eastern spirituality in avant-garde classical music from the early twentieth century to the present. By examining the history of Asian religious traditions in the United States and their influence upon musical works that fuse Eastern and Western cultures, I argue that intercultural

contemporary music often perpetuates pervasive attitudes and assumptions regarding the relationship between spirituality, Asia, and artistry that are historically amnesiac, culturally reductionistic, and perversely antithetical to the progressive egalitarian values typically associated with musical interculturalism.

In Chapter 1, I outline how Asian religious traditions were adapted to suit a Western audience in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to the imperialist pressures exerted by European and American military forces, and how those adaptations related to art and aesthetics. Chapter 2 examines how the idea of “spirituality” coalesced in the popular imagination in the context of the political and social rebellion of the counterculture era, further establishing an imagined link between an ambiguous Eastern spirituality and creative ability, before becoming heavily commodified in the 1980s. Chapter 3 surveys how musical representations of Eastern spirituality today continue to systemically support and produce the attitudes and assumptions outlined in the first two chapters without confronting their historically dubious claims.

Chapter 1 – John Cage, New Buddhism, and the Zen Boom

In the foreword to *Silence* John Cage poses the question, “what nowadays, America mid-twentieth century, is Zen?” Hanging conspicuously onto the end of a paragraph, never to be answered or revisited again, the question is clearly meant merely as a rhetorical device. But perhaps in the 1950's, when the “Zen Boom” had only just begun to make its mark in the United States, it could not yet be otherwise.

Sixty years later, we have no reason to continue treating this question rhetorically, nor should we. Scholars of Buddhism including Bernard Faure, Robert Sharf, Donald Lopez, Judith Snodgrass, and many others have published prolifically since the 1990's on the transmission of Buddhism to the United States, the Asian reformers and proselytizers who reinterpreted and represented their traditions to a Western audience, and Buddhism's influence on contemporary art and popular culture. Additionally, we can see a distinct pattern of engagement with Asian religious traditions that has emerged over the past sixty years in American experimental art that differs from early twentieth century engagements with the East. The 2012 Guggenheim Exhibition “The Third Mind” was devoted to surveying this subject, for example, along with recent publications including Ellen Pearlman's *Nothing and Everything: The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant-Garde 1942-1962*. We have new tools to scrutinize not only the brand of Zen that arrived in the United States in the 1950's, but how artistic engagements with Asian religious traditions from that period continue to inform the present. With a richer and more

complex history of Asian religions in America to contextualize it, John Cage's rhetorical musing branches into a multiplicity of questions about international politics, cultural identity, authenticity, and exchange between East and West.

To begin unpacking these questions however, we must first consider the circumstances under which Zen found a popular American audience in the first place. What forces are responsible for the fact that a “Zen Boom,” followed by a surge of popular interest in Asian religions, occurred in the 1950's? What makes artists who were inspired by Eastern cultural traditions in this period and beyond different from their predecessors? What were the mechanisms that propelled these religious traditions out of the domain of scholars and eccentrics and into popular culture?

Although this chapter focuses primarily on Japanese Zen Buddhism, I do not mean to imply that the western reception of Zen Buddhism as outlined here was fundamentally different from that of other Asian religious traditions. Because of influential figures like John Cage, and the extent to which Zen has since been commodified and secularized compared to other Asian religious traditions, Zen offers us a particularly useful archetype for considering broader patterns in the Western reception of Asian religious traditions in the middle and later twentieth century. Many of the patterns discussed here regarding Zen Buddhism have parallels in Hinduism, as well as Buddhist traditions from other parts of East and South Asia. Because these parallels take on greater importance in later chapters, I also include mentions of other Buddhist traditions and of Hinduism as well in order to establish the breadth of various patterns in mid-twentieth century Western receptions of Asian religious traditions.

To develop an adequate context for Zen Buddhism's engagement with Western

culture, we must start with the social, political, and economic upheavals of the mid-19th century. Beginning in the early 17th century, the ruling Tokugawa Shogunate had imposed a closed country policy [sakoku] forbidding trade with most foreigners. Limiting interactions with foreigners was a meant to ensure a degree of political stability, as foreign religion and trade were both seen as means by which a local ruler [daimyo] might accumulate the wealth and power necessary to revolt (Beasley 1972, 74). Trade was thus limited to East Asian countries, primarily China; the Dutch were allowed to conduct some tightly controlled trade through a small man-made island called Deshima.

With the opening of Japan to the West by Commodore Perry in the 1850's came the unequal treaties that both literally constituted and symbolically represented Japan's anxiety over imperialist exploitation by a superior Western military force. While Perry is often celebrated in American history textbooks for opening Japan to the West, the diplomacy he carried out could be described more accurately as outright intimidation. He did not sail to Japan in trading ships, but gunboats. The diplomatic negotiations to open up trade were carried out in the context of an American display of superior military technology and firepower. Perry first landed in Japan in 1853 only after threatening to continue to the capital of Edo and burn it to the ground (Beasley 1972, 89). Especially after the Opium Wars in China, the incursion of Western forces into Japanese society seemed inevitable to many Japanese, while the superior firepower and expansionist ideologies of Western nations guaranteed them the upper hand in any diplomatic negotiations. The Harris Treaty of 1858 opened multiple Japanese ports to American trade, stipulated the rights of Americans to live in those cities, and deprived the Japanese government of the right to apply Japanese laws to Americans in those cities, along with a

number of specific conditions and regulations regarding the conditions of trade itself. For the rest of the 19th century and well into the 20th, anxiety over Japan's autonomy remained a critical concern.

Ten years later, the nearly 300-year reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate ended and the Meiji era began. For centuries the emperors of Japan had been important cultural figures with little if any political function, but the Meiji Restoration brought the emperor back into the seat of political power. According to Shintoism, the indigenous religion of Japan, the emperor is of divine lineage, a direct descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu. Although Buddhism and Shintoism were deeply intertwined for many centuries in Japan, Japanese nationalists had been emphasizing the foreign origins of Buddhism throughout much of the 19th century. The Meiji government, seeking to establish a strong nation with its basis in the divinity of the emperor and Shintoism, was sympathetic to anti-Buddhist sentiments, and officially ended the syncretism of the two traditions through separation edicts. Buddhism was cast as a parasitic and foreign religious institution, an inhibition to Japan's progress towards modernity, and a liability in the face of the Western imperialist threat (Sharf 1995, 109).

The collapse of Buddhist establishments held numerous practical benefits in the eyes of the Meiji government. In Satsuma prefecture for example, priests were forcibly returned to the lay community which increased both labor and collectable taxes; those between ages 18-45 were drafted into the conscription army, those younger were returned to their families, those older became teachers in the domain schools, adding numbers to labor and military forces at virtually no cost; metals in the temples were melted down and used to make cannon; the buildings themselves were used to house soldiers. Satsuma had

Japan's first large blast furnace and was a leading domain in the production of military hardware (Snodgrass 2003, 116-117). Even when Buddhist temples weren't forcibly disbanded, much of the socio-cultural infrastructure that had previously supported them financially was lost to Japan's rapid modernization and urbanization during this time.

The social and political pressures exerted on Buddhist institutions did not squash Japanese Buddhism outright, but they did force Buddhist religious leaders to carve out a new place and identity for Buddhism in a society that was undergoing enormous changes in structure, technology, and values. Meiji era Buddhism was not simply a process of reform or revival, but a complete redefinition of the relationships between Buddhist institutions, the state, and the lay community (Snodgrass 2003, 116). These pressures coalesced into a movement that came to be known as “Shin Bukkyo,” meaning “New Buddhism.” New Buddhism confronted the criticisms faced by Japanese Buddhist institutions in Meiji era Japan by identifying their alleged faults as mere trappings of a “true” Japanese Buddhism, corruptions that simply needed to be purged or corrected in order to restore Buddhism to its pure state. Since Buddhism had been perceived as parasitic, reformers recast it as religion committed to social welfare and philanthropy; it had been superstitious, so it became a religion of rationality compatible with modern science; it had been elitist, so instruction was offered to the lay public for the first time; it was no longer a foreign tradition, but a world religion with a universal message that had not degenerated in Japan, but rather had been cultivated into its most refined state by the unique spiritual sensibilities of the Japanese people. (Sharf 1995, 109-111)

The Meiji government's project of building a strong, wealthy, unified country based on Shintoism, and of establishing Japanese culture as an equal to Western culture,

were both critical components in the larger project of safeguarding against Western imperialism in the late nineteenth century. This offered Buddhist reformers an opening that they knowingly capitalized on. Buddhist reforms that sought to pacify the attitudes of the Meiji government often did so by appealing to Western sensibilities, because establishing Buddhism as a cultural asset in the eyes of the West rather than a shameful mark of cultural indebtedness to China would challenge much of the rationale for anti-Buddhist sentiment. Most of the leaders in the New Buddhism movement were university-educated intellectuals who had cultivated some degree of familiarity with the religious climate in the West, allowing them to strategically emphasize or deemphasize various aspects of Buddhism to offer a compelling and easily comprehensible presentation to Western audiences (Sharf 1995, 109). One Japanese delegate to the 1893 World Parliament of Religions spelled it out explicitly: “(There is) a distress among Christians conscious of the destruction of the basis of their faith by the forces at work in civilization...Here is hope for Buddhism” (Verhoeven 1998, 218).

This “destruction” referred to the growing schism between religious dogma and Enlightenment rationality in the West, sometimes referred to as the Victorian crisis of faith. As the above quotation suggests, this friction created particularly fertile ground for religious reformers throughout Asia to assert the sophistication or even superiority of their traditions in comparison to their Western counterparts. For example, at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, almost every Buddhist or Hindu delegate at the World Parliament of Religions, including Swami Vivekananda, Shaku Soyen, and Anagarika Dharmapala, emphasized the inherently rational nature of their religions (Tweed 1999, 127-140). Delegates were aware of the values and concerns of their predominantly well-educated,

liberal protestant audience, and crafted their presentations to posit their religious traditions as an answer to the Victorian crisis of faith, while also insisting on an equal status with Christianity by drawing certain parallels between them. This also meant that certain aspects of Buddhism were strategically left out. A Buddhism that was fundamentally rational had little room for Bodhisattvas performing miraculous or fantastical deeds, esoteric rituals, cosmology, and so forth, which could have reinforced Western preconceptions of backwardness and superstition.

Existing professional and popular attitudes toward Asian religions made this particularly easy for reformers to accomplish. Westerners who encountered Asian religious traditions firsthand, often missionaries, had usually considered religious texts to be more authoritative than living practitioners, leading them to interpret ancient tracts and sutras as documentation of the “true” Buddhism or Hinduism while dismissing discrepancies between text and practice as evidence of degeneration or corruption. This is especially well-documented in the writings of missionaries and officials in India during British rule (Sugirtharajah 2003, 76), and it is an attitude that carried over to some extent into popular understandings as well. James Freeman Clarke's *Ten Great Religions*, published in 1871, was the most widely read book on Asian religions written in America in the 19th century. It stated that “the religions of China, Islam, Buddha, and Judaea have all been arrested, and remain unchanged and seemingly unchangeable. Like great vessels anchored in a stream, the current of time flows past them, and each year they are further behind the spirit of the age, and less in harmony with its demands” (Tweed 1999, 171).

A far cry from Clarke's belief in religious stasis, many of the religions on display at the World Parliament of Religions were undergoing profound structural and conceptual

changes in response to encounters with Western colonialism and imperialism. Shifting social, political, and economic structures had necessitated sweeping changes amongst Japanese Buddhist institutions, regardless of their sectarian affiliations, but Buddhism was assumed by Western attendees to be a static, unchanging tradition of over a thousand years. Hinduism had undergone many changes in response to the British missionary presence in India through reformers like Swami Vivekananda, Dayananda Saraswati, and Ram Mohan Roy, and Anagarika Dharmapala of Ceylon, representing the Theravada Buddhist tradition at the parliament, had been deeply influenced by the Theosophical Society and traditional Western religious sensibilities (Tweed 1999, 133-136). Japanese delegate Shaku Soen attended the parliament with a young lay student, Daisetsu Suzuki, who later became one of the most influential popularizers of Zen Buddhism in America. However, as a layperson, Suzuki would not have been able to receive instruction prior to the New Buddhism movement.

Western attendees at the World Parliament of Religions became enamored with ancient traditions that offered cures to the ills of modernity, but could not see that those traditions were as much a product of the Enlightenment as the Victorian crisis of faith itself. To borrow Robert Sharf's words, "like Narcissus, Western enthusiasts failed to recognize their own reflection in the mirror being held out to them" (Sharf 1995, 140). Inverted Orientalist tropes and deliberately Westernized interpretations of those traditions were deployed by Asian reformers with an antiquitous authority falsely assumed by the audience, hence implying the natural superiority of Asian religious thought. Eastern spirituality succeeded – and by implication had always succeeded – where Western religion ultimately failed. Western preconceptions about religious stasis in the East

disguised the origins of religious reforms that actively sought to posit Asian spirituality as the panacea to a distinctly modern Western spiritual angst.

German-American essayist Paul Carus, whose professional life was in a sense defined by the Victorian crisis of faith, was thoroughly convinced by the common themes presented by the Buddhist delegates at the World Parliament of Religions. Carus believed that scientific progress and religious truth ultimately labored toward the same goal, and that the two would ultimately become one, a “Religion of Science.” He was the founder and managing editor of The Open Court Publishing Company, which included two periodicals, *The Open Court* and *The Monist*, both of which were devoted to this topic. Carus became convinced at the World Parliament of Religions that the religion most suited to ultimately become his “Religion of Science” was Buddhism. Shortly after the parliament, he compiled and published his *Gospel of the Buddha*, which was met by Western academics with disapproval, but by Buddhist reformers and Westerners alike with great enthusiasm as it was largely in line with the Westernized interpretations presented by the World Parliament of Religions delegates. The Japanese translation was done by Daisetsu Suzuki (1870-1966), who ended up traveling to America shortly thereafter to work for Carus' publishing company as editor and translator for eleven years. It is worth noting that this is nearly twice the time Suzuki spent formally studying Zen Buddhism in Japan (Sharf 1995, 116-117).

Suzuki's Zen is *the* version of Zen Buddhism, and by extension of Zen Buddhist history, that successfully took root in the American popular imagination. The bulk of Suzuki's career was devoted to the popularization of Zen for an American audience, and he was easily the single most influential figure to do so. However, as scholars including

Robert Sharf and Bernard Faure have pointed out, there are many problems with Suzuki's Zen philosophy that went largely unrecognized until the 1990's, and even now, primarily only by scholars. He was a product of a nationalizing, modernizing, militarizing Japan, he emerged from the turbulence of "New Buddhism" reformations that were deeply invested in creating a positive reception in the West, and he drew at least as much on his experiences as a university student of Western philosophy and editor for Paul Carus as he did on his formal Buddhist studies with Shaku Soen. There are huge discrepancies between Suzuki's interpretation of Zen and the historical reality of pre-Meiji Zen practice, but as was the case with the attendees at the World Parliament of Religions, Suzuki's audience in mid-twentieth century America had no precedent to be skeptical of his claims. Yet, this is the vision of Zen that Americans encountered during the "Zen Boom" in the 1950's, and which inspired a slew of influential artists and counterculture era thinkers, including John Cage, one of Suzuki's closest and most celebrated disciples. Here we begin to have an answer to Cage's question: "what nowadays, America mid-twentieth century, is Zen?"

Historically speaking, Zen Buddhism is a form of Mahayana Buddhism that originated in China where it is referred to as Chan. The oldest schools of Japanese Zen, Soto and Rinzai, both date back to the early 13th century, with the Soto school placing greater emphasis on meditation and Rinzai on koan practice. Suzuki himself emphasized the Rinzai school, but the problematic aspects of Suzuki's sectarian biases have been discussed at length elsewhere and it is not necessary to revisit the subject here (see Faure 1993, 55-60). For our purposes, there are two particular aspects of Suzuki's interpretation of Zen for a Western audience that merit a close examination: the

relationship between Zen and the arts, and the roles that race and culture play in experiencing or accessing Zen. In some sense both are products of the friction created between Suzuki's desire to present Zen as something universal and the reality that Zen Buddhism was only a single esoteric sect of Japanese Buddhism within a much larger religious and cultural landscape for most of its history. This becomes particularly clear when examining the relationship between Zen and Japanese traditional arts.

To Suzuki and contemporaries such as Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, virtually all Japanese arts, from flower arranging to swordsmanship to calligraphy, were expressions of Zen thought (Sharf 1995, 134). While it is true that traditional arts flourished in Zen institutions during the medieval period, it is not because those art forms were considered to be some kind of religious or spiritual exercise, but because of the strong connections between Zen monasteries and high culture (ibid.). In other words, the proximity of arts such as Noh, tea, and calligraphy to Zen institutions was a product of patronage, not ideology. It is not particularly surprising that Zen doctrinal themes emerged in the arts, but the affiliations between monastic institutions, Chinese literati, and wealthy Japanese patrons was largely ignored by figures like Suzuki and Shin'ichi in favor of a reductionistic, nativist interpretation of those arts as expressions of a unique and pervasive Japanese spirituality (ibid.). The disjuncture between the idea of Zen as a totalizing Japanese aesthetic, which we can largely attribute to Suzuki and his contemporaries, and its regionally, socio-economically specific institutional reality, begat an historically amnesiac homogenization of Japanese cultural history. There is no evidence, for example, that what we now refer to as "Zen rock gardens" were ever considered to be expressions or manifestations of Zen doctrines (ibid.). They were

cultivated by Buddhist monasteries to cater to the tastes of the patrons, but there exists no suggestion that they expressed Zen thought or enlightenment prior to a 1935 English-language pamphlet written by a former neighbor of Daisetsu Suzuki, Loraine Kuck (ibid.).

To American artists in the 1950's, however, the precedent for such skepticism did not yet exist. As a world religion, Suzuki's claims about the relationship between Zen and artistic potency extended beyond the traditional Japanese arts to art generally, providing Western enthusiasts with new and stimulating ways of thinking about their work without actually straying far from familiar paradigms. David McMahan has argued in his 2008 book *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* that the connections Suzuki made between art, spontaneity and truth were in fact indebted to European Romanticism, and regardless of whether one accepts the proposition that Suzuki borrowed his ideas directly from German and English Romantics, it does offer one explanation for why his claims proved to be enticing for so many. They offered a seemingly fresh approach to an ultimately familiar territory and set of expectations about art and the artist in Western culture.

As McMahan points out, Suzuki claimed a privileged relationship between Zen and the arts using language and assumptions derived from European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism (McMahan 2008, 120-121). From the time of Plato up until the Romantic period, the role of the artist was to act as a kind of mirror, reflecting or imitating reality. In the Romantic period, emphasis was shifted away from literal representation and toward subjective interpretation, and artists' work came to be understood as an expression of their individual genius and creativity (ibid.). Religious

themes had long been ubiquitous in art, but the Romantic shift toward individual genius applied a spiritual dimension to the individual artists themselves. The Romantic shift essentially made the artist into a vessel through which the absolute was expressed, imbuing the artist with a privileged relationship with, or access to, the divine. Critical to this role was the concept of spontaneity. Many artists claimed that sudden, unpredictable, epiphanic inspiration fueled their works, which was often interpreted as evidence of divine influence (ibid.). Individual artistic genius was the product of a privileged relationship to the divine, an almost priestly or shamanistic potency, evidenced by the spontaneity of their inspiration (ibid.). Psychoanalytic theory would later develop this relationship further by claiming that the site of such spontaneity was the unconscious (ibid.)

The parallels to be drawn to Suzuki's own ruminations on art and Zen are striking. There are many accounts in classical Zen literature of Zen masters engaging in bizarre and spontaneous behavior, such as cutting a cat in half or putting their shoes on their head, which often results in a disciple achieving enlightenment. This offered Suzuki a convenient rationale for connecting Zen institutions, and the arts produced by them, to Romanticist preconceptions about the relationship between spontaneity, religious truth, and art. Consider how closely Suzuki's description of the relationship between art, spontaneity, and God mirrors the European Romantic approaches outlined above:

The greatest productions of art, whether painting, music, sculpture, or poetry, have invariably this quality – something approaching the work of God. The artist, at the moment when his creativeness is at its height, is transformed into an agent of the creator. This supreme moment in the life of an artist, when expressed in Zen terms, is the experience of *satori*. To experience *satori* is to become conscious of the Unconscious (mushin, no-

mind), psychologically speaking. Art always has something of the Unconscious about it. (Suzuki 1959, 219-220)

If we substitute God for Zen, we are left with little if any distinction. Like the Romantics, Suzuki argues that God, or Zen, acts through the artist, who then produces art via a surge of spontaneity, emanating from their unconscious. Equating Zen with God in this way is grounds for some suspicion on its own, but I would like to draw attention to the psychoanalytical term “unconscious” as well. It is safe to say that the term “unconscious,” which is specific to the Western field of psychoanalysis in the 20th century, does not have a neat parallel in the literature of a Buddhist tradition that precedes psychoanalysis by 700 years. McMahan has also pointed out that Suzuki relied heavily on the similarly problematic term “nature” to articulate Zen to the West despite the lack of any equivalent term in Buddhist languages (McMahan 2008, 123-124). In a similar vein, Sharf notes that the word “experience,” which Suzuki leans on just as often and heavily as “unconscious” or “nature,” lacks a reasonable corollary in Japanese or Chinese Buddhist literature prior to the Meiji period (Sharf 1995, 124-125). Suzuki's choice of language itself illustrates how he took Zen Buddhism out of its historical and cultural context to present it as an answer to Western religious and philosophical anxieties particular to the early 20th century.

On its own, a reformulation of Romanticism in which Zen stands in for God may not seem particularly insidious, but it does put us in an awkward position when we consider who does and does not have access to Zen experience. To Suzuki, although Zen was universal, access to the Zen experience was culturally, if not racially, specific. To downplay Zen's origins in Chinese Chan Buddhism, Suzuki insisted that Zen was refined

into its most pure state by the innate spiritual sensibilities of the Japanese people. “It was so adaptable to the character of the Japanese people, especially in its moral and aesthetic aspects, that it has penetrated far more deeply into Japanese life than into Chinese” (Suzuki 1959, 346). It was a universal principle, but one that the Asian mind, and Japanese people especially, were uniquely suited to grasp. Westerners, on the other hand, were innately ill-equipped if not incapable of doing so. Suzuki offers no shortage of essentialized comparisons of the Western and Eastern mind in his writings: “There is truth in saying that the Oriental mind is intuitive while the Western mind is logical and discursive. An intuitive mind has its weaknesses, it is true, but its strongest point is demonstrated when it deals with things most fundamental in life, that is, things related to religion, art, and metaphysics” (Suzuki 1959, 219).

This is a direct inversion of earlier depictions of Asian cultures by Western Orientalists. Suzuki took early accounts of Asia, mostly from European missionaries, who had portrayed Asian cultures as childlike, innocent, and naïve, and claimed those qualities as evidence of the inherently spiritually enlightened nature of the Japanese mind. These were the same qualities that spared Eastern cultures from the ills of modernity – the conflict of religion and science, man's alienation from nature, the rise of a dehumanizing industrialized labor system – that were being experienced by the rational, but spiritually deficient, Western world. This is an attitude that Suzuki continued to hold onto late into his life and career as evidenced by this private conversation with Hisamatsu Shin'ichi recorded at Harvard in 1958:

Hisamatsu: Among the many people you've met or heard of (in the West) is there anyone who you think has some understanding of Zen?

Suzuki: No one. Not yet anyway.

Hisamatsu: I see. Not yet. Well then, is there at least someone you have hope for? (laughter)

Suzuki: No. Not even that.

Hisamatsu: So, of the many people (in the West) who have written about Zen there aren't any who understand it?

Suzuki: That's right.

Hisamatsu: Well, is there at least some book written (by a Westerner) which is at least fairly accurate?

Suzuki: No. Not to my knowledge. (Sharf 1995, 130)

If Zen is fundamental and universal, the wellspring of art and spontaneity, but innately out of reach for the Western mind, the implications for Western art are not particularly flattering. Yet, many Western artists found Suzuki's philosophy enticing nonetheless. After all, the essentialized racial differences between East and West that he leaned on in many of his writings were not constructed or suggested by him, but merely repurposed from Western sources. In the context of existing Western scholarship of Eastern cultures, Suzuki's claims were compliant rather than adversarial. This isn't substantially different from the strategies used by religious reformers at the World Parliament of Religions. Western Orientalists' depictions of Asian culture were not challenged, but merely “corrected” into an asset rather than a sign of inferiority.

To return to John Cage's question, then: what, in mid-twentieth century America, was Zen? Having only covered a brief history of Zen's reformulation for a Western audience here, we can begin to understand some the forces behind that transformation, allowing us to rethink the discussion around Asian religions and art in America. The Zen Buddhism that Cage and subsequent American artists encountered in the middle of the twentieth century had been reformed according to Western tastes and values, and posited as a solution to modern existential angst by religious leaders who were invested in

pushing against the imperialist and colonialist pressures exerted on their own institutions by Western powers. Negative depictions of Asian religion, race, and culture were not challenged outright, but reinterpreted to affirm a fundamental difference between East and West that, rather than presenting a dichotomy of superior and inferior, depicted East and West as equal foils to one another: rational/material vs. intuitive/spiritual. This is the same basic formulation that proved to be captivating to so many during the “Zen Boom” of the 1950's. Other Buddhist traditions, along with Hinduism, would soon come to find sizable sympathetic American audiences along similar lines as well.

While this was no doubt an effective means of challenging Western presumptions of cultural superiority, it did not challenge the cultural categorizations that had been part and parcel of imperialist logic. Eastern and Western cultures continued to be understood in binary terms, each relying on the other to define itself, drawing on characteristics laid out by early European Orientalists. Hence, many of these religious reformers ended up reinforcing the idea of an essentialized dichotomous difference between cultures, as had been prescribed by Western missionaries and scholars of previous centuries. In doing so, however, they acquired the leverage needed to negotiate the meaning and value of that difference. This was the Zen that made waves in mid-twentieth century America. Having sketched its origins, in the next chapter we can begin to examine its legacy.

Chapter 2 – Beat Zen, Square Zen, and the Politics of Spirituality

“**Lisa Simpson:** Richard Gere?!”

Lenny Leonard: Oooh, the world's most famous Buddhist!

Richard Gere: What about the Dalai Lama?

Lenny Leonard: Who?”

-*The Simpsons*, Season 13 Episode 6

Asian religious reformers had been working to appeal to a Western audience since the mid to late 19th century, but it wasn't until the post-WWII era that Asian religious traditions began to become a recognizable staple in pop culture. Artists were naturally a crucial element of this development, but their engagements with Asian religious traditions cannot be fully understood separately from the social and political context of the counterculture era. Likewise, modern day works that incorporate Eastern and Western elements must be considered alongside shifting Western attitudes toward Asian aesthetics and spirituality.

To some extent, the increase of artistic engagements with Asian religious traditions in the 1950's can be attributed to the special relationship between spirituality and artistry established by reformers and popularizers. Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, a widely read autobiographical account of his studies of archery in Japan, was published in the United States in 1953 and provided additional reinforcement to Suzuki's claim that Zen practice and artistry were deeply connected. Suzuki himself gave a lecture tour at American universities in 1951 and subsequently taught at Columbia university from 1952-1957, with a number of influential counterculture artists and thinkers in

attendance at one time or another: John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Philip Guston, Ad Reinhardt, Sari Dienes, Isamu Noguchi, Ibram Lassaw, Arthur Danto, Karen Horney, and Erich Fromm, to name just a few notables (Pearlman 2012, 14-15). I argue in this chapter that Suzuki's conception of Zen as the wellspring of artistic potency would be extended to Western conceptions of Asian spirituality generally throughout the following decades.

However, it would be a disservice to suggest that artists were only drawn to Asian religious traditions for purely aesthetic or conceptual reasons, as Asian religious traditions were simultaneously becoming affiliated with various aspects of social and political activism throughout the counterculture era. The aesthetic and conceptual dimensions of these works cannot be fully understood without being placed in their appropriate socio-political context. In order to generate a context for examining the ideologies underlying modern works that deal with East and West, this chapter will outline some patterns and issues in Western popular understandings of Asian religious traditions from the 1950's until the present. These formative attitudes in popular culture in the mid to late twentieth century constitute the very foundation of how intercultural music continues to be understood today, especially when it comes to the relationships depicted between Asian spirituality, artistic skill, and aesthetics in intercultural compositions and the institutions devoted to supporting them.

Since Edward Said's 1978 work *Orientalism*, scholars in a wide variety of disciplines have examined the ways in which Western cultures have used Eastern cultures as a kind of mirror, an "Other" by which they assess the status of their own societies. Although Said's work focused primarily on the Middle East, many of his points have

been applied to non-Western encounters with Western imperialism generally, including in East Asia. For centuries, missionaries depicted Asian religions and cultures as backwards and idolatrous, reflecting and reaffirming their own world-view as culturally and spiritually superior members of true “civilization.” Later however, sympathetic groups like the American Transcendentalists were profoundly impressed by translated texts like the Bhagavad Gita, which they saw as an affirmation of their own critiques of Western religion and society.

In both cases, and countless others, Western interpretations of Asian religions were not simply about acquiring knowledge of another place or culture. Such encounters functioned as a means for individuals to assess the status of their own societies and to determine their relationship to it, regardless of whether that assessment was positive or negative. In this context, it is not particularly surprising that Asian religious traditions, after a century or more of reformations informed by Western religious and philosophical concerns, acquired sufficient popular interest to collectively become the religious flagship of the counterculture movement in the '60s. The word “counterculture” itself literally states the rejection of normalcy, and according to Said, the East has functioned as the mirror against which normalcy is defined for centuries.

It may seem like an overgeneralization to say that these religions *collectively* became the religious flagship for the counterculture movement, but in fact, this is a reflection of an important trend amongst Americans who were drawn to Asian religious traditions during that time. Individuals often borrowed liberally from whichever religious sources appealed to them, following the model of the historical Buddha as the autonomous spiritual seeker, rather than prescribing to a single sect or even geographical

region in pursuing their interests in Asian religious traditions.

This is what Alan Watts, an enormously influential popularizer of Buddhism who was active in the San Francisco Bay Area, described in his short 1959 publication “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen.” Watts identified two main approaches to Zen amongst enthusiasts in America, “Beat” and “Square,” and argued that true Zen is somewhere in between. “Beat Zen” referred to the autonomous, eclectic approach already mentioned, and was named after the “Beat” poets who helped popularize it: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and their contemporaries. All three of these artists exemplified the autonomous spiritual seeker model, borrowing liberally from anything and everything that suited them rather than adhering to strict notions of institutional authority or authenticity. Watts' objections to “Beat Zen” were somewhat predictable. As he saw it, their understandings were not correct or authentic, and their engagement with Asian religious thought merely served as justification for “sheer caprice in art, literature and life” (Watts 1959, 9) and a means of social criticism. What Watts' called “Square Zen,” on the other hand, referred to those who valued institutional authority too highly. To some extent, this critique invites suspicion because Watts himself was an unconventional and eclectic popularizer of Zen himself, but there have certainly been important examples since Watts' writing where his warning against a quixotic pursuit of “authenticity” still rings true, as we will see.

The Beat/Square model remains a useful tool for examining the state of modern Buddhism and artistic engagements with it: the qualities and critiques of both Beat and Square Zen were especially visible in the works of artists who sought to express and celebrate their fascination with Zen Buddhism. Both trends also offer cautionary tales

that continue to resonate in contemporary works that depict Asian spirituality. I will attempt a brief sketch of both here, beginning with the Beat poets themselves.

Gary Snyder's 1969 poem, "Smokey the Bear Sutra," playfully depicts the familiar Forest Service mascot as an awakened, protective Buddha with a very particular yet familiar agenda: "Trampling underfoot wasteful freeways and needless / suburbs; smashing the worms of capitalism and totalitarianism; / Indicating the Task: his followers, becoming free of cars, / houses, canned foods, universities, and shoes; master the / Three Mysteries of their own Body, Speech, and Mind; and / fearlessly chop down the rotten trees and prune out the / sick limbs of this country America and then burn the leftover / trash" (Tweed 1999, 344). It would seem that the religious reformers of the previous century were quite successful in presenting their traditions as the cure to the ills of Western modernity. For Snyder, American capitalism and consumerism are quite literally the declared enemies of Buddhism.

Poet Allen Ginsberg, perhaps best known for his poem "Howl," offers no shortage of explicit condemnations of American culture in his work – "CIA dope calypso" and "America" criticize quite directly – and it is clear both from his written work and personal correspondences that he saw Asian spirituality as an antidote. In "Sunflower Sutra," tellingly named, he depicts a sad and ragged sunflower that, in its grimy and worn-down state, has confused itself with the passing locomotives. The sunflower is a clear analogy for humanity, and the locomotives, industrialized modern society. The poem concludes: "We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread bleak dusty imageless locomotive, / we're all golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our own seed & hairy naked / accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied /

on by our eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly / tincan evening sitdown vision” (Ginsberg 1984, 139). Through the sunflower, Ginsberg aligns the natural state of humanity with Buddhism, while presenting the locomotive, a symbol of modern industrialized society, as its innate antagonist. Perhaps more concise is his 1957 letter to Jack Kerouac, in which he commented: “Now the bitter American reality encounters the Oriental century to come” (Tytell 2006, 105).

One of Jack Kerouac's more popular novels, *The Dharma Bums*, was comprised of characters based on his own real life inner circle. “Japhy Ryder” is an alias for Gary Snyder, Kerouac himself is the protagonist Ray Smith, and so on. The novel highlights and romanticizes the role of Asian spirituality in the Beat poets' own particular brand of socio-cultural rebellion. Even the title itself is telling, aligning the concept of dharma with non-conformism in three short words. The character Japhy Ryder cites everything from Japanese Rinzai to Chinese poetry to Indian Bodhisattvas in his conversations with Ray throughout the book, but in a particularly telling episode, cites a Tibetan tantric ritual (yab-yum) as precedent for having an orgy (Kerouac 1958, 21).

While practitioners in the “Beat Zen” camp may be criticized for having warped Buddhist teachings to justify their own hedonism, or for problematically projecting particular political causes onto Zen Buddhism, Square Zen was dangerous precisely because of the excessive importance some placed on “correct” practice. Even Westerners who traveled to Japan or other parts of East Asia in pursuit of a more authentic experience of Asian religious thought often framed their experiences in terms that validated their own pre-existing expectations and desires. The authority of having “been there” falsely validates claims that are no less problematic than the openly non-sectarian

interpretations of Beat Zen types in this context. Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, a popular autobiographical book published in America in 1953 detailing Herrigel's studies of Zen and Japanese archery in Japan, offers an excellent example of how the legacies of “Square Zen” approaches were often just as problematic as “Beat” ones.

The first half of Yamada Shoji's 2009 book *Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen, and the West* is exclusively devoted to critically examining the historical accuracy of Herrigel's claims, and by extension, the basis of the associations between artistic skill and enlightenment portrayed in the original. Many of the claims made in Herrigel's work contradict historical evidence or are the product of tragic mistranslations and projected expectations. Herrigel traveled to Japan and studied Japanese archery in hopes of gleaned some understanding of Zen, but Herrigel assumed that his archery teacher, Awa Kenzo, was just like any other, when he was in fact an eccentric whom the archery community treated “like a lunatic” for his unusually spiritual approach, with rocks even being thrown at him occasionally by traditionalists (Yamada 2009, 62-63). There was no connection between Zen Buddhism and Awa's unusually spiritual “Daishadokyo” school of archery, but Herrigel, having read the writings of Daisetsu Suzuki, approached Japanese archery with the understanding that all Japanese arts were expressions of Zen. Awa himself had a predilection for speaking in an abstruse way that made the job of translating particularly difficult, and at times nearly impossible (ibid., 48). It is not difficult to imagine how profoundly Herrigel misunderstood much of his instruction as an affirmation of his preconceived notions about Zen, along with its relationship to the arts. Yet, Herrigel wrote his book with the authority of first-hand experience in Japan, and

having studied with someone whom Westerners accepted as an authoritative source on Zen Buddhism.

This is a particularly important example because *Zen in the Art of Archery* has left a powerful imprint on popular understandings of the relationship between Zen and artistry to this day. A cursory survey of nearly any neighborhood bookstore, particularly the self-help or how-to sections, will reveal a plethora of books with titles paying homage to Herrigel's work: *Zen and the Art of Faking It*, *Zen in the Art of Writing*, *Zen and the Art of Making a Living*, *Zen and the Art of Songwriting*, the list goes on and on. During my own time as an undergraduate student, I knew of at least two professors of performing arts who would have their students read *Zen in the Art of Archery* as part of their studies, with one claiming that they could tell whether students had actually read it based on changes in their performance style. Herrigel's book, however, has less to do with the historical reality of Japanese Zen Buddhism than with his own fantasy of Japanese spirituality as a German philosopher.

Contemporary examples of the dangers of “Square” approaches to Zen, Buddhism, or spirituality generally, might hit even closer to home. A series of sexual and financial scandals were exposed at Buddhist centers throughout the United States in the 1980's, with the case at the San Francisco Zen Center being one of the most widely known (Leonard 2013, 135). For this reason, the 1980's is sometimes referred to as a period of crisis for Buddhism in the United States (ibid., 135). The scandals raised questions about the tenability of traditional monastic structures in American culture, as nearly all of the scandals centered around teachers engaged in some combination of “sexual misconduct, abuse of power, financial transgressions, and alcoholism” (ibid.,

135). In many cases these organizations responded by adopting new hierarchies that departed from traditional models, emphasizing gender equity, democratic governance, and challenges to the conventional teacher-student dynamic (ibid., 136). These non-traditional models were adopted after it became clear that traditional power structures were leading to chronic abuses of authority in the United States.

Even more recent are the scandals surrounding Bikram yoga founder Bikram Choudhury, an eccentric character who garnered what is often described as a cult-like following for his wildly popular brand of hot yoga. Choudhury first drew controversy when he sought to trademark his sequence of yoga poses, filing lawsuits against a huge number of former students and competitors. A judge ruled that yoga poses could not be copyrighted in 2012, bringing an end to the proceedings. More recently however, a number of women have come forth accusing Choudhury of crimes ranging from sexual harassment to rape. As of February 2017, one case has been decided against Choudhury, with six more still underway (Godwin 2017).

While Bikram yoga classes and Buddhist centers are obviously not one and the same, both practices have been faced with the question of how to adapt (or not adapt) to Western societies. Both scandals are centered around the problem of a charismatic leader exploiting their authority for financial gain and sexual satisfaction. And while debates regarding whether yoga is a religious or secular practice continue, it is historically a form of religious asceticism. While this component of yoga is treated differently depending on where one receives yoga instruction, some balance must always be struck between its history as a religious or spiritual practice in India and its contemporary manifestation as a mostly secular health and wellness activity worldwide. In the case of Bikram yoga,

Choudhury himself included lectures on spirituality in his infamous training sessions, is frequently compared to a cult leader, and claimed that “his form of yoga was more rigorous and authentic than westernised forms preaching peace and love” (ibid.).

The issues being faced by both Buddhism and yoga in the United States today are not limited to those surrounding traditional structures and individual authority. Both also face difficult questions regarding the secularization and commodification of historically religious practices. The extent of the common ground between the two is not coincidental, but can be traced back to American attitudes toward Asian religious practices that emerged in the 1950's-70's. The eclecticism of “Beat Zen” was ultimately not constrained to Zen at all.

While Watt's delineation between “Beat” and “Square” Zen may suggest a strict dichotomy, with individuals falling neatly into one category or another, that was hardly the case. “Beat” and “Square” were not two separate movements that went off in different directions. They were useful terms for thinking about attitudes and values surrounding institutional authority and authenticity, but in practice the lines between them were often blurred. For example, Gary Snyder is one of the individuals “Beat Zen” was named after, but in fact he spent several years studying Zen in a Kyoto monastery. On the other side of things, Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* was based on his first-hand experiences in Japan, but had no actual connection to any traditional Buddhist institution. “Square Zen” was often still ultimately caught up in the broader approaches exemplified by the Beats in which many different traditions, practices, and concepts were exchanged freely. “Beat Zen” could co-opt “Square Zen,” but not vice versa.

We can understand in retrospect why Watts was inclined in 1959 to label the non-

sectarian individualism of the Beat poets “Beat Zen.” It was an accurate portrayal of the prominent place Zen occupied compared to other Asian religions in America at that time. However, the emphasis on individualism, as well as the aversion to institutional authority and sectarianism, made labelling this trend belonging to any single religious tradition increasingly problematic as time went on. Zen is only a single sect of Japanese Buddhism, and the “Beat Zen” mentality was averse to adherence to any single institution. Thus, the “Beat Zen” mentality extended to Asian religious traditions generally over the course of the '60s and '70s, especially as other Buddhist traditions and Hinduism became increasingly familiar to the general public, whether in political contexts like the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war, or through the work of artists like the Beatles, and George Harrison in particular, with their blossoming interest in Hinduism in the mid 1960s. What for Watts in the late 1950s was “Beat Zen,” we might more comfortably refer to today using the umbrella term “spirituality.”

Although we are not likely to frame contemporary Buddhism today using terms like “Beat” and “Square,” Watts' critiques of the two trends remain relevant when thinking about spirituality in contemporary music today. The same anxiety over authenticity and appropriation that we can identify in Square Zen, for example, remains a critical concern in the discourse surrounding almost any proclaimed intercultural work, while the ambiguous and indiscriminate Eastern spirituality beloved by the Beats has since become entangled with uses of Asian instruments or particular musical aesthetics. For example, composer Tazul Izan Tajuddin features the theme of interculturalism prominently on his website. The homepage itself is subtitled “The Mediation of East and West,” followed by the autobiographical snippet, “Tazul Tajuddin – Malaysian-born

composer, resident in the UK” (Tajuddin 2017). The page then lists a long series of reviews of concerts. Musicologist Robert Orledge tellingly writes: “...one might justifiably say that Tajuddin, with his Malaysian background, was a genuine example of East-West aesthetic fusion” (ibid.). The inclusion of the word genuine is particularly informative because it implies that false East-West aesthetic fusions abound, and that the audience is sensitive to this fact. This anxiety over authenticity echoes the formal, institutional inclinations of Square Zen. Another review, cited from the *Malay Mail* and *Borneo Post* on January 30, 2015, states: “At times the spiritual meanderings of the rebab are incised by a pianissimo discord from the first violins, at others the oboe is employed to imitate a serunai” (ibid.). The violins, with their Western orchestral associations, “incise” with a “pianissimo discord,” while the rebab, as an Eastern instrument, “meanders spiritually.” The former is described in technical and precise terms, even suggesting a display of violent power through their metaphorical “incision,” while the latter is depicted as passive, aimless, and spiritual. This homogenizing dichotomy between Eastern intuition and Western rationality, reminiscent of Daisetsu Suzuki and Beat Zen, continues to inform perceptions of musical interculturalism on a reflexive level. Musical expressions of popular attitudes toward Eastern spirituality such as this will be further examined in chapter 3.

The term “spirituality” carries such a broad and complex array of possible meanings today that pinning down a single definition is remarkably difficult. Most dictionaries will define the term using the oldest meaning – the antithesis of “material” or “physical” – but this hardly begins to cover contemporary uses of the term. We know this intuitively. The by now cliché phrase “I’m not religious, I’m spiritual” is not a way of

saying “I don't go to church, and also I don't have a body,” but a way of expressing one's affinity for the kind of religious autonomy valued in the “Beat Zen” of the 1950's.

Unsurprisingly, we find a significant rise in use of the term “spirituality” in the 1950's, concurrent with the rising interest in Asian religious traditions (Carrett 2005, 34). This also reflects an expansion of the meaning of the term. From the 17th century onward, “spirituality” could be understood to reference a direct, interiorized, individual experience of the divine (ibid., 38). This is certainly one of the things meant by the aforementioned contemporary phrase: if one is “not religious, but spiritual,” we can deduce that one does not affiliate with any particular religious institution, but still cultivates or recognizes their own personal religious experiences. Throughout the twentieth century though, “spirituality” became increasingly associated with Asian religious traditions, largely due to the efforts of reformers and popularizers like Daisetsu Suzuki, Swami Vivekananda, and Anagarika Dharmapala. As discussed in the previous chapter, many such reformers responded to Western technological superiority by emphasizing the fundamentally spiritual nature of their own cultural traditions, which the West apparently lacked. It is the fact that this approach was so common amongst Asian religious popularizers, regardless of their country or institutional affiliation, that set the stage for “spirituality” as a concept to be linked to Asian religious traditions in general by the 1950's. “Beat Zen” enthusiasts could see a common theme of “spirituality” amongst various Asian religious traditions, not realizing that the common theme of “spirituality” was a reflection of those countries' shared encounters with various forms of Western imperialism.

Spirituality also came to be more strongly associated with the occult. The early

twentieth century had seen a rise of Western interest in mysticism and the occult, and the East was often the presumed site of such lost or mysterious knowledge (ibid., 39). Asian religious traditions were sometimes explicitly linked to the occult by figures like Theosophical Society co-founder Madam Blavatsky, who claimed to have received the teachings of the Theosophical Society through psychic contact with enlightened masters from the East, and articulated her ideas using Hindu terminology like *atman* (ibid., 40).

Thus, while Zen Buddhism was a relatively early and particularly influential Asian religious tradition in mid-twentieth century American popular culture, the attitudes and approaches exemplified by “Beat Zen” would later be subsumed by the term “spirituality” in the counterculture era. The term was, and continues to be, an ambiguous constellation of associations between mysticism and superstition, Asia, and religious autonomy, rather than being defined exclusively by any single meaning. At times, these meanings appear to contradict one another outright, yet they remain encompassed by this single term. The elements of mysticism that were appealing to Theosophical society, for example, might appear to contradict the messages of the early twentieth century Asian religious popularizers discussed in chapter 1, who emphasized the compatibility of Buddhism with modern science. These various meanings are further complicated by the politicized deployments of Asian religious traditions in the counterculture era.

The political dimension of “spirituality” transformed engagement with Asian religious traditions into a symbol of anti-establishment dissidence. For example, psychedelic drug use was often depicted as a means of accessing a distinctly Asian enlightenment experience. Aldous Huxley, in his 1954 book *Doors of Perception* framed his experience on mescaline in terms derived from Hindu and Tantric mysticism.

Timothy Leary, once called the most dangerous man in America by president Richard Nixon, along with his contemporary Ram Dass, went on to make direct claims about the relationship between hallucinogenic drugs and a distinctly Asian religious enlightenment. Ram Dass relayed this account of his Hindu guru, Neem Karoli Baba, in a public lecture, published in written form in 1974:

When I said that God came to the United States in the form of LSD, I was quoting my teacher, with whom I lived for six months, who was, as far as I could see, one of the purest and highest beings I have met. When I asked him what LSD was he went away and several weeks later came back and he wrote, and the quote is almost exact, 'LSD is like a Christ coming to America in the *Kali-Yuga*. America is a most materialistic country and they wanted their Avatar in the form of a material. The young people wanted their Avatar in the form of a material. And so they got LSD. If they had not tasted of such things, how will they know—how will they know?' was his actual wording. Now, this plus the fact that my guru took 900 micrograms of LSD and nothing happened to him, and I watched this process happen, were the two bits of new information I had collected about LSD which I reported back to the intellectual community. (Tweed 1999, 239)

In 1968 Leary had an essay published entitled “The Buddha as Drop-out” which essentially identified the historical Buddha as the original hippie. Accounts of this nature were so ubiquitous and compelling that Daisetsu Suzuki himself penned an essay entitled “Religion and Drugs,” published posthumously in 1971, explicitly denying that there was a link between hallucinogens and Zen.

Spirituality was also symbolically sympathetic to anti-war protests and the civil rights movement, particularly through their emphasis on pacifism, and associations with iconic figures. It is well-known that the non-violent means of protest championed by Dr. Martin Luther King drew inspiration from Gandhi, and few could forget the image of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức immolating himself in 1963 in protest of

the Vietnam war. Spirituality meant not just the rejection of Western religious institutions and structures, but of cultural and political conservatism as well. Even the Beats embraced their spirituality within the context of their rejection of Western consumerism, as Snyder's poem "Smokey the Bear Sutra" attests. The enemies of Snyder's enlightened forest mascot are "the worms of capitalism and totalitarianism," he tramples "wasteful freeways and needless suburbs," and the task of his followers is to become "free of cars, houses, canned foods, universities, and shoes" (Tweed 1999, 344). Smokey the Buddha Bear is at least as concerned with purging the evils of Western materialism as with expounding the dharma, if not more so, and in this sense is a typical embodiment of counterculture spirituality.

Unfortunately for Smokey, the term "spirituality" acquired yet another set of meanings as the progressive sensibilities of the counterculture era spirituality began to be appropriated by corporate culture and American consumerism in the 1980s. From Zen dietary supplements to Nirvana brand artificial sweetener to Samsara perfume, spirituality has become an apparently effective branding device, particularly for lines of products that claim to be more socially or environmentally responsible than their competitors by being labelled as organic, sustainable, non-GMO, etc. This is to say nothing of the market that directly caters to those sympathetic to New Age spirituality. "From feng shui to holistic medicine, from aromatherapy candles to yoga weekends, from Christian mystics to New Age gurus, spirituality is big business" (Carrette 2006, 1).

The commodification of spirituality points to another difficult contemporary issue, that of its secularization. The emphasis on autonomy, on spirituality as a kind of not-religion, has created a gray area regarding the relationship of traditionally religious

practices to the state. Is introducing yoga to public schools a violation of the separation of church and state? Is it still a religious discipline today, or just physical exercise? A San Diego judge ruled that it did not violate the separation of church and state in 2013, but it remains a highly contested issue (Devine, 2013). What about corporations like Goldman Sachs, which offer their employees free meditation training to give them a competitive edge (Goldberg, 2015)? Has corporate America perversely instrumentalized the technique of a religious tradition that emphasizes freedom from worldly attachments to maximize their profit margins? Zen in particular is implicated in these kinds of problems. What is historically an 800-year-old sect of Japanese Buddhism is today often simply a word for a certain way of doing just about anything, so long as it is characterized by efficiency and inner peace.

Unpacking the messiness of “spirituality” gives us a new ways of thinking about artists who bridge East and West in their works today. These works and artists do not exist in a conceptual or aesthetic vacuum, but are part of a common practice that formed during, and as a part of, the counterculture movement, a time when popular interest in Asian religious traditions soared and their social and political relevance took on a wide array of new meanings. Beginning around the 1950's, we can see a clear and vibrant lineage of artists whose works both reproduced, and were produced by, this particular brand of “spirituality.” Composers such as Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison studied and borrowed from Asian musical and theatrical forms ranging from Javanese gamelan to Noh theater, while the lectures and writings of John Cage were steeped in references to Zen and Daisetsu Suzuki. Visual artists such as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Mark Tobey were inspired by Asian aesthetics in many of their works, particularly calligraphy,

while others such as Philip Guston, Gordon Onslow-Ford and his Dynaton Group contemporaries, the sculptor David Smith, and many others drew inspiration specifically from Asian religions and metaphysics in their work.

As demonstrated in this chapter however, the history of Asian religious traditions in the works of counterculture era artists can be problematized both by looking to their future and their past. Such artists had no way of seeing the legacy of imperialism that had shaped the messages of the Asian religious reformers and popularizers that they revered. They were also working before Asian religious practices were embraced by corporate culture in the 1980's, and before a string of sexual and financial scandals were exposed in Buddhist centers across the United States. What are the implications for intercultural artworks when Asian religious practices go from being symbols of anti-establishment dissidence to a tool for corporate management and worker efficiency? After all, in today's world, the wolves of wall street are meditating too. In the next chapter, it is along these lines that I will consider intercultural aesthetics in contemporary classical music. The times have changed in countless ways, but has the music?

Chapter 3 – The Specter of the Spiritual

“East is East and West is West and ne'er the twain shall meet.”

-Rudyard Kipling

Intercultural engagement has been a badge of honor in experimental classical music for at least a century, and no form of hybridity has been more thoroughly visited than the meeting of East and West. From the progressive sensibilities of Henry Cowell, to the Zen-informed aesthetic philosophy of John Cage, to living composers like Tan Dun, Lei Liang, and countless others who have been hailed for bridging East and West in their work, it is a theme that doubtlessly remains familiar to regular attendees of contemporary music performances.

Of course, the approaches and meanings of such intercultural works have changed substantially over time. The ambiguous exoticisms of Albert Roussel or Claude Debussy are certainly a far cry from the ethnographic sensibilities of Lou Harrison, the radical aesthetics of John Cage, or the compositional stylings of Toru Takemitsu or Chou Wen-Chung. It is tempting to imagine this as a narrative of relative progress: unlike early twentieth century examples and their predecessors, recent musical meetings of East and West are informed by modern sensibilities and sensitivities regarding globalization, colonialism, appropriation and exploitation. However, I argue here that intercultural works continue to reproduce essentialized depictions of Asian spirituality that remain just as problematic as they were one hundred years ago.

We might begin to challenge this notion of progress by suggesting that shallow musical exoticism, rather than diminishing, has simply come to thrive in other forms of entertainment media. For example the soundtrack to the popular 2017 video game *Nioh*, primarily set in medieval Japan, features a solo flute playing pseudo-pentatonic melodic lines suggestive of commercial shakuhachi recordings, as opposed to the noisier, less accessible “old-style” practiced by traditionalists like Kentaro Idemitsu (Wallmark 2012). In other words, the melodic line has more to do with the way medieval Japan is imagined today, drawing on Western musical tropes that have long been used to stereotype Eastern cultures, than with what is historically accurate. This track plays at the title screen, as well as any time the protagonist dies, with the single glaring exception of two levels that are set in England. If the protagonist dies in these levels, a different track plays featuring a string quartet. Geographical and cultural difference is signaled by a shift in musical accompaniment, but not between actual musical traditions – both tracks are firmly rooted in the Western classical music tradition, and the ways in which Western classical music has imagined itself and its “Others.” As Derek Scott puts it, “Orientalist styles have related to previous Orientalist styles rather than to Eastern ethnic practices, just as myths have been described by Levi-Strauss as relating to other myths” (Scott 1998, 309).

If there is any single factor separating successful pieces of contemporary classical music from the exoticism of earlier works, it is the shift away from this very kind of Orientalist ambiguity toward realistic representations of traditional forms and authenticity. For example, Lou Harrison's gamelan-inspired pieces are informed by years of practice and research of traditional Javanese gamelan techniques, vocabulary, forms and timbres. This is a sharp contrast to early 20th century composers like Albert Roussel,

whose symphony *Evocations* drew from his experiences in India, but included deliberately ambiguous Eastern musical snippets that functioned merely “as a signal for Western listeners to dream” (Pasler 2000, 94). The work was not intended to represent India, but simply the Western experience of an exotic and faraway land, just as the soundtrack to *Nioh* is not meant to literally represent historically accurate Japanese musical styles, but merely to entice listeners who are attuned to Western musical depictions of Asia to play a game set in medieval Japan. Toru Takemitsu's *November Steps* on the other hand provides another excellent example of the more sensitive, modern approach: the piece is written for a Western orchestra with two soloists playing traditional Japanese instruments, the shakuhachi and biwa. In spite of the fact that orchestra and soloists share the same stage, their playing remains strongly grounded in their own musical traditions, rather than being absorbed into Western musical forms and idioms. In other words, rather than a passive, ambiguous Asian tradition being caricatured or absorbed by a Western compositional voice, as in Roussel's work, we literally see traditions being juxtaposed as equals, both on stage and through their playing. This was a conscious decision on the part of the composer: “I came to realize that a fundamental, indescribable difference existed between Western and Japanese instruments...I completed the work in order to show as great a difference between the two traditions as possible without blending them” (Takemitsu 1995, 57).

This shift from fantasy to realism has generated a new set of questions however, as the line demarcating who is and isn't sufficiently familiar with non-Western musical forms to incorporate them into their own compositions responsibly is in a constant state of contestation. One of the criticisms often levied at composers like Lou Harrison or

Steve Reich is that they borrowed, or attempted to borrow, the sounds and structures of non-Western musics too literally, leading to accusations of cultural appropriation. The question of how, where, and when this line is drawn is a rich topic in and of itself, but rather than attempt to provide a definite answer – a task that I suspect is impossible, as the target is always moving – I would have us complicate the question further. Musical works that take influence from Asian cultures do not do so solely through the adoption of musical devices, but often via claimed religious or spiritual influences as well. The historical relationship between American experimental classical music and the concept of “Asian spirituality” subsumes these familiar issues surrounding authenticity and appropriation into larger ethical considerations.

When we praise works and composers of contemporary classical music for successfully bridging East and West today, we often do so by unintentionally reinscribing cultural stereotypes that emerged as a response to Western imperialism in the 19th century, particularly the notion that the East is spiritual while the West is rational. While these reductionistic cultural caricatures can be traced back to Asian encounters with Western imperialism and the biases of proselytizing missionaries, their social and cultural currency has only increased rather than diminished over the past hundred years. As a result, contemporary artworks that invoke Asia in some way are still often understood to implicitly express Eastern “spirituality,” with all of its fraught and messy meanings, inadvertently reifying age-old cultural stereotypes in the process.

This is further complicated by the social and political issues surrounding spirituality today. The fact that “East meets West” rhetoric has such a long-standing presence in contemporary music imbues intercultural works with additional potential

value. Numerous grants, conferences, awards, and ensembles are dedicated to supporting such endeavors, affording works that can be labelled “intercultural” additional opportunities to attain professional and/or financial success. At face value this hardly seems objectionable. However, when we see that huge corporations have been exploiting the virtues of “spirituality” to sell everything from cereal to deodorant for several decades, it raises important questions about what exactly is being represented in these works, what kind of discourse surrounds them, and what greater impact these systemic incentives to produce intercultural works have on popular understandings of East/West cultural formations. The way that we curate, perform, write, and write *about* intercultural works in contemporary classical music often reproduces and institutionalizes categories that are detrimental to the egalitarian values such works are implicitly understood to express.

That being said, it is not my intention to demean the efforts of the composers, performers, curators, scholars, and critics who have engaged in “East meets West” rhetoric. The intentions of the groups and individuals involved are usually laudable, even compassionate. I do not wish to demonize or trivialize them, nor to make some mundane point about what makes certain intercultural works more successful than others, or which kinds of works deserve more funding, or which composers were authentic and which were phony, etc. My aim is instead to enrich discussions surrounding the relationships between spirituality and art, interculturalism and exchange, by challenging commonly held assumptions.

John Cage and Aestheticizing Spirituality

When it comes to Asian religions in contemporary classical music, no figure looms larger than John Cage. Entire books have been written about John Cage's life and work already, so I limit myself to the most cursory summary.

John Cage and his music are closely associated with Zen Buddhism, which he became deeply invested in beginning in the late 1940's, and often used to explain the radical aesthetic philosophy that informed his work. Arguably, Cage's most important contribution to contemporary classical music is not his actual compositions, but this philosophy of musical aesthetics in which all sounds are understood to be musical, at least potentially. For example, his most famous composition, *4'33"*, is essentially four minutes and thirty-three seconds of a pianist sitting silently on stage. The music is produced not by the pianist themselves, but by the murmurs of discomfort from the perplexed audience as their anticipation of conventional musical performance is never gratified. This is not meant as a kind of prank, but quite literally as the production of aesthetically beautiful music. As Cage himself once put it: "Which is more musical, a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school?" (Cage 1961, 41). To the enlightened listener, non-musical sounds are made musical. For example, several other pieces, including *Water Walk* (1959) and *Credo in Us* (1942), instruct performers to turn on a radio during the performance without determining in advance what will be on the air at the time. When a union dispute over who was responsible for plugging in the radios prevented Cage from utilizing them as planned in his performance of *Water Walk* on the show *I've Got A Secret* in 1960, he adapted the piece by simply pushing the radios off of

the table and onto the floor at the designated times (Cage, 1960). Bewildered chuckles can be heard emanating from the audience.

The indeterminate nature of these pieces is classically Cage. Along with the use of unpredictable materials like radios and audiences, in the early 1950's he came to be well-known for using chance operations, sometimes via the Chinese divination text the *I Ching*, to generate his compositions, essentially muting the authorial element of his works. Cage wrote and lectured about his musical philosophy extensively, drawing heavily on his interest in Zen Buddhism to express his ideas. His book *Silence*, a widely read compilation of his writings and lectures, is steeped in references to both Zen and Daisetsu Suzuki specifically. Because of this, Cage's aesthetic principles, such as indeterminacy and the musicalization of everyday objects, came to be seen as expressions of his interest in Eastern spirituality. As he himself wrote in *Silence*, “what I do, I do not wish blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen (attendance at lectures by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki, reading of the literature) I doubt whether I would have done what I have done” (Cage 1961, 25).

Although his interest in Zen Buddhism is better known, he was first inspired by Hinduism in the mid-1940's, particularly through an exchange of lessons with Indian musician Gita Sarabhai and the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy. Similarly to Suzuki, Coomaraswamy stated in no uncertain terms in *The Transformation of Nature in Art* that religion and art were synonymous (Coomaraswamy [1934] 1956, 62). This idea would be confirmed again through Cage's engagement with Zen in the 1950's via the Columbia University lectures of Daisetsu Suzuki. However, it is clearly Cage's encounters with Indian religious thought that were the source of at least two important recurring

statements in his lectures and writings: that the purpose of music is to “sober and quiet the mind thus making it susceptible to divine influences,” and that art should “imitate Nature in her manner of operation” (Pritchett 1993, 37). The latter statement especially resonates with Cage's musicalization of conventionally unmusical sounds. While Cage mainly attributed significance to Zen Buddhism specifically in his work, his engagement with Asian religious traditions was slightly more eclectic – including the written works of Sri Ramakrishna, Alduous Huxley, Chuang Tze, Huang Po, Lao Tze, Meister Eckhart, and as already mentioned Ananda Coomaraswamy – while his knowledge of Zen came primarily through the filter of Daisetsu Suzuki (ibid., 36).

Cage's fusion of art and spirituality was not unique in the musical world. As an influential artist and teacher, the connections between Cage's aesthetic principles and Eastern spirituality came to be reproduced and celebrated in the works of others as well. The first official Fluxus event, for example, included event based scores like Philip Corner's *The Piano Activities* in which a piano is thoroughly destroyed on stage, and was described in 2006 by performer Alison Knowles as follows: “I was thinking of the Zen encounter of the koan and the breakthrough a person makes through their own of [sic.] understanding of it. It is a metaphor of the piano destruction event, of breaking through into a new kind of music though it involved a destructive act...It was strongly flavored with Eastern philosophy” (Pearlman 2012, 71). Similarly, when Allan Kaprow, originator of the term “happenings,” tapped on glasses of water with various mundane objects like hammers and forks, he was seen by some as “making good use of the Zen idea that everything in every moment is available to make art” (ibid., 57-58).

Is the context provided by Eastern philosophy truly necessary to make sense of these aesthetics, though? One of the pitfalls of conceptual rather than literal musical exchange is that it is very easy to graft abstract aspects of culture, such as spirituality, onto aesthetics arbitrarily. The shocking, event-based approach was in many ways similar to the Dadaists of the early twentieth century, but it is even more telling to compare Fluxus to its Japanese contemporaries, the Gutai group and Hi Red Center. Gutai, founded in 1954, preceded Fluxus by almost a decade. In Kazuo Shiraga's 1955 *Challenge to the Mud*, he buried himself in a pile of mud outdoors and thrashed about to unearth himself; the piece was created by the impressions in the ground that remained after his escape (Pearlman 2012, 93). Atsuko Tanaka's *Electric Dress* was made entirely of light-bulbs and could not be worn for more than five minutes with a protective covering due to the risk of electrocution (ibid.). Saburo Murakami tore through screens of paper and then used them to frame the sky in his performance *Laceration of Paper* (ibid.). The immediate, provocative aesthetics of these works is virtually indistinguishable from that of Fluxus and “happenings,” but they challenged conventional artistic forms and values without the religious or spiritual contexts of their Western contemporaries. In fact, in the post-war era, Zen was particularly repugnant to most young Japanese people, as it was closely associated with fervent nationalism of the pre-war era. For Western groups like Fluxus, Asian spirituality was a useful ally in their challenge to artistic and cultural conservatism; for Japanese groups, those Asian religious traditions were synonymous with very artistic and cultural conservatism they sought to challenge. Shozo Shimamoto demonstrated this wonderfully when he satirized the “strength of the brushstroke,” an artistic principle in calligraphy, by filling cannons with

paint and firing them at blank canvases (ibid.). When Cage visited Japan in the early 60's, his works were at least as shocking for their apparent indebtedness to Zen Buddhism as for their aesthetic principles, if not more so (Galliano 2002, 222).

John Corbett has argued that Cage's utilization of spiritual rather than musical materials became a standard model for intercultural compositions, particularly for many Asian composers (Corbett 2000, 178). To some extent this claim holds up: Galliano has argued that for post-war Japanese composers, the discussions and debates incited by Cage's music led them to reevaluate the relationship between Japanese and Western musical forms (Galliano 2002, 222-223). Toshi Ichianagi studied with Cage in the 50's and is often credited for the degree of notoriety that Cage achieved in Japan in the 60's (ibid., 222), while Toru Takemitsu stated that although he had once felt an aversion to traditional Japanese culture, as many Japanese did in the post-war period, "it was largely through my contact with John Cage that I came to recognize the value of my own tradition" (Takemitsu 1989, 199). There is no doubt that Cage's influence was extensive, and that his interest in Zen Buddhism directly inspired many other composers to create works inspired by Eastern spirituality, both in America and abroad.

The danger of placing too much emphasis on John Cage as the primary model for Asian composers producing intercultural works is that the phenomenon Corbett addresses goes far beyond Cage's influence. As Carol Oja points out in her chapter "Spirituality and American Dissonance" in *Making Music Modern*, Cage was not the first Western composer to explicitly incorporate Eastern spirituality into their aesthetic philosophy (Oja 2000). Oja traces the influence of Eastern spirituality in the works of Henry Cowell, Carl Ruggles, and Ruth Crawford as early the 1920s through their common acquaintance with

Dane Rudhyar. Rudhyar presents an almost eerie foreshadowing of the New Age sensibilities of the counterculture era, and bears much in common with later figures like John Cage. “Spiritual rather than rational, intuitive rather than logical, he challenged the dominance of European cultural values, promoting instead a trans-Asian mix of religious philosophies and musical practices” (Ibid., 98). In other words Asia, and Asian spirituality in particular, was seen by Rudhyar as the antithesis of everything unsatisfactory about Western rationality. This contrast is particularly pointed, and perhaps surprising, because after World War II American academics and composers have tended to contextualize the dissonance of pre-World War II composers in para-scientific terms (ibid., 99). Rudhyar is mostly forgotten in musical circles today, largely because he retreated from composition during the Great Depression to become an authority on astrology, but historical neglect of his influence may also be indebted to the fact that his poetic, spiritual approach does not fit neatly into existing narratives about the para-scientific inclinations of early twentieth century American experimental composition (ibid., 99).

Rudhyar was a Theosophist, which Oja notes informed nearly everything he wrote (Oja 2000, 101). The Theosophical society is often considered a predecessor to the New Age movement of the counterculture era, as both tended to treat Asia as the collective site of a spirituality lost in Western culture, as well as the home of the fantastical and occult. This approach to Asia and spirituality was also the basis of Rudhyar's philosophy regarding dissonance and tone, which he expounded in many articles and periodicals in a metaphorical, poetic style: “In fact, the prime sound – the only one we consider now –

will appear then as a radiating center of the dynamic tonal energy, as a Sun surrounded by the double series of planets, the over- and under-tones” (ibid., 131).

Like Cage, Rudhyar's artistic inclinations toward Asia were abstract rather than strictly musical, and like the Theosophists as well as the Beat Zennists of later years, he did not discriminate between different locations or religious traditions in Asia: “Asian cultures, as fused and transmitted through theosophy, were central to Rudhyar's ideology, at the same time as he was not inclined to provide information either about specific Asian musical techniques that captured his attention or even which cultures he was discussing” (Oja 2000, 106). Rudhyar's similarities to Cage are too many to dismiss, and his documented influence on other important members of the early twentieth century avant-garde like Cowell, Russel, and Crawford makes it clear that Eastern spirituality was an influential force in experimental composition decades before Cage was widely celebrated for it.

The other pitfall of identifying Cage as a primary model for intercultural composition is the fact that, as discussed in the previous chapter, popular interest in Asian religious traditions was relatively pervasive in American popular culture from the 1950's onward. To assign responsibility for such a practice to any single artist is almost inevitably reductive. While Cage's influence is substantial as Takemitsu and Ichiyanagi's cases attest, it is also important to remember that popular and artistic interest in Asian religious traditions during this time period was not limited to experimental classical music, and that John Cage was not the only artist to embrace this kind of approach. Western popular interest in Asian religious traditions was at a zenith during the mid-twentieth century, and claims that art and Asian spirituality had a close relationship were

myriad. Cage was only a single, if exceptional example. However, Corbett is correct that the use of Asian religious thought to inspire compositions as John Cage did, rather than the adoption of musical devices to inspire compositions, has become a ubiquitous tool for composers seeking to bridge East and West in their works. Contemporaries who were suspicious of Cage's model were nevertheless immersed in an artistic and popular culture which broadcast the same assumptions about the relationships between Asia, art, and spirituality. One could disapprove of Cage entirely while reaffirming rather than challenging the role of spirituality in Asian-influenced art.

Chou Wen-Chung, for example, criticized Cage's engagement with Zen as too American in his 1971 paper "Asian Concepts and Twentieth-Century Western Composers." Citing Cage's question in the Foreword of *Silence*, "what nowadays, America mid-twentieth century, is Zen?" Chou offered this retort: "in Zen philosophy this question does not arise since in *wu* there is neither time nor space. What clearly are mid-twentieth-century American are Cage's own ideas" (Chou 1971, 225). Chou does grant that Cage's "neo-exoticism" may at least generate good discussions by functioning as a kind of *kung an* (or in Japanese, koan), "a seemingly senseless and enigmatic dialogue or story that is used to bring about Zen enlightenment by blocking the mind" (ibid.). Most of us are familiar with koans, whether or not we know them by that name: "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" "If a tree falls in the forest and no one's around, does it make a sound?"

The assertion that a religious doctrine exists outside of time and space is a dangerous tactic. As discussed in the first chapter, the Zen Buddhism that Cage and other counterculture artists were encountering was not a timeless, unchanging tradition, but the

product of a modernizing and nationalizing Japan. Emphasizing the absolute, timeless nature of religious truth runs the risk of diverting attention away from the social, economic, and political particularities of religious institutions. In that vein, it is particularly interesting to note that the function of the koan described by Chou is at least as “mid-twentieth-century American” as anything Cage wrote or said. Robert Sharf has pointed out that traditionally, koans functioned as a form of elaborate scriptural exegesis, and that the interpretation cited by Chou is an historically inaccurate invention of religious popularizers and reformers like John Cage's mentor Daisetsu Suzuki (Sharf 1995, 108). Ten years later, in a 1981 speech given at the Asian Composers Conference and Festival, Chou suggested ten points regarding the development of an “Asian esthetic theory for music.” The tenth point was “Emphasis on spiritual cultivation” (Chou 1981). Whether they agreed on matters of interpretation or not, the Zen Buddhism that Chou and Cage were both writing about was already Westernized, and for both of them, spirituality continued to be a special quality of Asian cultures, one with a special role to play in the arts.

Inherently Spiritual

This dynamic continues to be ubiquitous in contemporary music today. Minimalist composer Philip Glass, a practicing Buddhist who initially encountered Buddhism through John Cage's book *Silence*, denied in a 1991 interview with the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* that Buddhism had any substantial impact on his music (Tweed 1999, 347-349). Interestingly, when the interviewer asked Glass about a

transcendent element in his 1979 opera about Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, Glass' first response is that the music does not sound Indian, evidencing how musical borrowing and religious or conceptual influence are often treated as two sides of the same coin. Glass went on to explain the transcendent element as a reflection of his entry into middle age, a quality often visible in the works of artists generally, citing Beethoven and Shostokovich as examples, rather than one particular to Eastern music or spirituality (ibid., 349). In 2010, Glass appeared on panel to discuss the role of contemplation and meditation in the creative process (FIAF, 2010). The entire premise of such a panel rests on the assumption that Asian spirituality, namely contemplation and meditation, must be linked to the creative process at all. Furthermore one must ask why Glass appears on panels like this if Glass himself has denied that his spirituality informs his compositional process directly. In other words, why would we be curious about the private religious beliefs of a composer unless we assumed that it informed their work somehow? Perhaps some might believe that Glass was simply being coy in 1991, and that Buddhism really does determine his practice, but regardless, both the panel and the interview in and of themselves evidence a widely held assumption that Buddhism is inherently related to creative practice on a deep, perhaps subconscious level.

To an extent this assumption can be attributed to the eclectic spirituality of the counterculture era. Through the philosophical assertions of religious popularizers like Suzuki and Coomaraswamy who equated Eastern spirituality with Western Romantic conceptions about the artist, and the vast corpus of works that have emerged since the mid-twentieth century dedicated to expressing and reaffirming that relationship, we have inherited a closely tangled web of associations between art, Asia, and spirituality.

Spirituality has been aestheticized so frequently that its proximity to Asia and art is now often implied invisibly and automatically, not just in the works themselves, but in the critical reception and marketing that surrounds them. For example, Corbett points out that the liner booklet to Tan Dun's 1992 composition *Circle with Four Trios* includes a statement from John Cage describing Tan Dun's music as the “voice of nature” so lacking in the West, fitting Tan Dun's work “snugly into the 'Wisdom of the East' variety of Orientalist discourse” (Corbett 2000, 179). East/West compositions continue to be used to frame the spiritual deficiencies of modern Western society in such ways, while Glass's case shows us how the role of spirituality in artistic practice is now often assumed automatically. However, intercultural works bridging East and West continue to be haunted by the specter of the spiritual in other ways as well.

A 2008 conference was held at the University of Sydney, Australia entitled *Music of the Spirit: Asian-Pacific Musical Identity*. An accompanying compilation of papers given at the conference has been published under the same name (Atherton, 2008). Like Glass' panel, the premise of the conference should raise some eyebrows from the start. A common Asian-Pacific musical identity is assumed, and the common quality of that identity is allegedly spirituality. However, what is most interesting about the papers given at this conference is the extent to which spirituality is *not* discussed. All the papers deal with examples where Eastern and Western cultures are brought into some kind of musical dialogue, but many of them make no mention of spirituality at all, or it is limited to a brief cursory remark. The bulk of the material instead consists of straightforward musical analysis outlining the interactions of different musical concepts, devices, and traditions. The inclusion of so many papers that do not directly engage with the idea of

spirituality suggests the same assumption evidenced in the conference's title, that works engaging with East and West are automatically spiritual in some way; music in the Asian-Pacific region is *already* a “music of the spirit.” In this context, East/West intercultural works are suggested to be inherently more spiritual than their only-Western counterparts.

A similar contemporary example is The Lotusflower New Music Project, an organization “devoted to the production and performance of works by composers who embrace multiculturalism in their music” (Lotusflower, 2017). Again, what is most telling is what is *not* included. The lotus flower is one of the most recognizable symbols of Buddhism, all five members of the group listed on the website are either from North America or East Asia, and the website itself is decorated with images of East Asian art. Musical multi-culturalism in this case leans disproportionately on an East/West model, and the namesake of the organization invokes Buddhism as an emblem of diversity in contemporary music. A Buddhist symbol is placed at the helm of a group that is committed to something as broad as musical multi-culturalism. This raises two issues: first, Buddhist communities are implicitly “Othered,” as a solitary Buddhist symbol is being embraced to imply multiple cultural influences. The lotus flower symbol only makes sense as a symbol of diversity if it is understood as being contrasted by an implied, non-Buddhist normalcy. To put it another way: are we meant to assume that if a work engages with Buddhism, it is already multi-cultural? Secondly, we again have a scenario in which intercultural art is treated as a synonym for engagement with Asian religious traditions. Nothing on the site says anything about religion or spirituality, but the group is named after a Buddhist symbol. Asian culture and Asian spirituality are treated as interchangeable, just as they were in the 2008 conference “Music of the Spirit.”

What Glass, the lotusflower new music project, and the 2008 “Music of the Spirit” conference all point to is this: the powerful associations between artistry, Asian cultures, and spirituality are so ubiquitous we often fail to notice them. Yet we've seen, the relationships between each are historically specific and conceptually problematic. Suzuki's Zen cannot exist independently of the nationalizing, militarizing Japan of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the “New Buddhism” movement; counterculture era “spirituality” cannot exist independently of the religious reformers who, like Suzuki, were ultimately responding to encounters with Western imperialism, molding existing negative Orientalist tropes into positive qualities; intercultural works, conferences, papers, and performances today cannot exist independently of the past sixty years of artistic works that affirm the relationship between spirituality and artistry initially suggested by those reformers. No intercultural work exists independently of the long history of colonialism and imperialism that birthed the categories we use to make sense of “East and West” in the first place.

Looking Forward

What is perhaps at least partially redeeming about the fantastical exoticism of the video game *Nioh*, or the long-running *Dynasty Warriors* series, or even Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* movies, is that they would never be mistaken for reality. Their exoticism is transparent and excessive, often bordering on satire. The cultural representations still being reproduced in contemporary music on the other hand are worrisome precisely because of their apparent earnestness, and especially because of their

proximity to the academic institution. In the United States in particular, contemporary music has extremely close ties to institutions of higher education. When works reproduce images of an essentialized, spiritual Asia, they do so with a degree of authority derived from their relationship to academia. Video games like *Nioh*, although there are certainly exceptions, are not automatically assumed to be intellectual, authoritative, accurate, or even culturally sensitive. Experimental classical music on the other hand almost always has ties to academic institutional authority, meaning that works are taken seriously as intellectually grounded productions. This is not to argue that cultural stereotyping in mass entertainment media is less dangerous than in high art, but merely to establish they are subjected to a different set of expectations and criteria which affects their reception as well as their impact.

Carrett and King have argued in *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* that New Age spirituality has been co-opted by corporate culture since the 80's to propagate an ideology of conformist, complacent consumerism and efficient labor. I am not so bold as to argue that pieces of intercultural contemporary music are fueling the fires of neoliberalism outright, but Carrett and King's book does point to the dangers of tacitly accepting vaguely celebratory invocations of spirituality without skepticism. "Marketing 'the spiritual' allows companies and their consumers to pay lip-service to the 'exotic', rich and historically significant religions of the world at the same time as distancing themselves from any engagement with the worldviews and forms of life that they represent. Religion is rebranded as 'spirituality' in order to support the ideology of capitalism" (Carrett 2005, 17). It is debatable whether contemporary music has sufficient commodity value to be directly implicated in this particular critique, but the proximity to

academic institutions raises similar objections. The close relationship between contemporary classical music and the university imbues compositions with a degree of academic authority, whether invited or not. This is arguably even more problematic than the blatant commodification of goods like Samsara perfume or Zen deodorant, as representations of Eastern spirituality in contemporary music are more likely to be assumed to be culturally sensitive, accurate, and intellectually sound.

In the winter of 2017, I conducted five interviews with active composers all in their mid-twenties to early thirties, each of whom expressed anxiety over this very subject. My questions at the time had been solely about their attitudes toward the roles and representations of Eastern spirituality in Western art music, but each interviewee responded to these questions with answers that were framed in primarily economic terms. These composers were each, in one form or another, suspicious of intercultural labels and practices for many of the same reasons that Carett and King are critical of the post-80's relationship between capitalism and spirituality: the demand for goods that are marketed as spiritual have an established consumer base seeking the validation of familiar themes and values, but economically speaking those goods actually support ideologies and institutions that are often perversely antithetical to those values. In other words, compositions that engage with East/West themes do so within a long and thus relatively safe lineage, stretching from the early twentieth century to the present, and appear to celebrate what are utterly unobjectionable values: understanding, diversity, sympathy, worldliness, inclusivity, etc. – but for the composers whom I interviewed, any morally laudable aspects of such works had become secondary to the economic and professional profit gained by the composer responsible for the work. An individual composer's private

benefit from the systems that support intercultural endeavors subverts the virtues associated with intercultural themes, and the “intercultural” label becomes a conceptually hollow gesture toward securing upward professional mobility. As one Chinese interviewee succinctly put it to me, young Chinese composers today often look at Tan Dun's career and simply think, “here is the road to money.”

The abstract or conceptual approach exemplified by figures like Dane Rudhyar and John Cage, in which the “spirit of the East” is incorporated into a work rather than a particular musical system or similarly concrete material, further complicates this picture. Because spirituality encompasses such a broad, ambiguous constellation of meanings, it could be assigned responsibility for the generation of nearly anything. We can see this especially clearly in the earlier comparison of Fluxus' works informed by “Eastern philosophy” and their Japanese contemporaries the Gutai group, who were employing many of the same aesthetic devices to disavow those very cultural institutions Fluxus placed front and center. It was not and is not necessary to include anything literally Asian in origin in a piece that celebrates and therefore represents Asia, so long as it is influenced by the spirit of it. This ambiguity makes it easy to cater to institutions that support intercultural works by reproducing the positive but nevertheless reductive cultural representations of post-1950's artists. As Carrett and King point out regarding the market for spirituality generally, “spirituality can be mixed with anything since, as a positive but largely vacuous cultural trope, it manages to imbue any product with a wholesome and life-affirming quality” (Carrett 2005, 46). The same can be said of intercultural compositions that claim to express the influence of Eastern spirituality.

When my interviews did turn to specific composers and works that engaged with Asian religious traditions, the similarities and divergences between responses demonstrated what kinds of standards intercultural works are often held to, and the problems therein. All three non-Asian composers told me that music incorporating Asian cultural elements was subject to very different levels and kinds of scrutiny depending on whether or not the composer was Asian, although none of the five interviewees demonstrated any such bias when I asked for their views on specific composers. Both Asian interviewees could also recount multiple specific occasions where their ethnicity had led others to make assumptions about Asian elements in their work: in one case, the composer was asked to write a piece for traditional Chinese instruments, despite not having any familiarity with them.

Perhaps most importantly, everyone whom I interviewed emphasized the importance of serious, deep study of the materials being represented in an intercultural work, yet nobody agreed on what that meant. Three composers brought up Giacinto Scelsi, but for entirely different reasons: one considered him to be a committed enthusiast of Asian cultures and an artistic inspiration, while another considered his works to be somewhat problematic and appropriative; the third interviewee considered him to have been a shameless peddler of exotic appeal in the name of personal profit. Composers John Cage and Lei Liang were also mentioned by the majority of the interviewees and were subject to a similarly wide range of evaluations. Debates over authenticity and appropriation in this manner are among the most ubiquitous tools used to evaluate the success and value of intercultural works, but such debates are by nature highly subjective and never conclusive.

I suggest that the role that these debates play in modern contemporary music circles is not dissimilar to what Alan Watts described over fifty years ago when we wrote about and critiqued “Square Zen.” Both “Square Zen” and these contemporary debates revolve around the question of when and how an individual is able to bring a non-Western tradition into a Western context in a way that is both ethical and accurate. In this sense, the growing pains of Buddhism in the United States, such as the widespread reforms of traditional Buddhist institutional authority prompted by the sexual and financial scandals of the 1980s, offers us a warning against becoming fixated on an authenticity that always remains ephemeral. For example, focusing on whether a composer like Tazul Tajuddin is a *genuine* example of East-West fusion distracts us from scrutinizing what exactly is being framed through the use of the labels “East” and “West” in the first place. Asking whether a work represents East and/or West accurately and ethically is not the same as asking what those labels mean, and why they have come to mean such things in modern works of art.

These claims regarding the relationship between art, Asia, and spirituality are not limited to the creator of the work, as we have already seen. They are claims that audiences, musicologists, critics, and various arts-related institutions including conferences, grants, and so on, are equally capable of and responsible for producing. Groups like the Lotusflower Project or the Music of the Spirit Conference provide professional opportunities for composers, performers, and musicologists; panels like the FIFA conference that Philip Glass appeared on lend implicit legitimacy to various myths regarding art, spirituality, and the East via their entire premise. While the effectiveness or legitimacy of intercultural musical works are often discussed in terms of the composer's

decisions, we would do well to pay equal attention to how intercultural aesthetics are defined or sustained systemically.

It is in this context that musical pedagogy becomes a critical issue, a point that one of my interviewees made especially clear. This interviewee had grown up studying composition in China, and when I met her, was drawing frequently on Confucianism, and later the court music of the Tang dynasty, in their compositions. The music she writes today, however, does not deal with any historically Chinese materials. She sees herself as having moved past a phase that many Chinese composers go through.

Growing up as a music student in China, she told me that there was (and perhaps still is) a strong sense of nationalistic enthusiasm for compositions that successfully broadcast Chinese identity, which is why “we worship him (Tan Dun) like a god.” However, she also told me that the Chinese cultural traditions that are often drawn on in such compositions are not taught in schools, and that students in China are also not likely to discuss their work as Chinese, but as American, European, or Russian in style. When those students travel abroad however, a switch often occurs, as it did for this particular composer. Experiencing culture shock in an American or European university as a young adult, the easiest way to establish who one is in relationship to one’s surroundings is often to harken back home. “I am a American/European/Russian style composer” becomes, in this new context, “I am a Chinese composer.” This “switch” may primarily be a reflection of one's heightened sense of awareness of one's own nationality in an unfamiliar setting, but the way in which that plays out – in this composer's case, by researching Confucianism and Tang Dynasty court music *after* coming to the United States – is modeled after existing compositional engagements with Chinese cultural

identity, bringing us back to figures like Tan Dun, Chou Wen-Chung, and Lei Liang.

This kind of broad scope is worth keeping in mind when hearing, seeing, writing, performing, and critiquing intercultural music. In February 2017, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra held a concert to celebrate both the Chinese New Year and Canada's 150th anniversary. The concert consisted of works that included both Chinese and Canadian elements, including a new commission. This commissioned piece was inspired by Taoism, a point made clear by its title, "Rejuvenation: A Taoist Journey." Canadian composer Vincent Ho described the work thusly: "My aim as a composer was to express the essence of Taoism in musical form,' Ho said. 'Music of this kind is not intended for entertainment purposes nor does it court popularity. It is to guide listeners in reaching spiritual wholeness and connect with Taoist principles'" (Crawford, 2017). The work includes textual elements from the *I Ching* as well as modern Taoist poetry, aiming to cultivate a kind of spiritual experience for the audience, as Ho himself put it. At first glance, it is easy to focus on the composer's decisions to produce a musical depiction of a definitively spiritual East, but it is important to recognize the role of artistic institutions and history as well. Taoism is taken as the subject because the connections between art, Asia, and spirituality have already become familiar and relatively safe themes to modern audiences over the past fifty years, and the event itself cultivates reproductions of those themes by creating a venue specifically for works that embody both Eastern and Western elements. Focusing solely on Vincent Ho's decision to write an intercultural work about Taoism risks neglecting the role of the orchestra, which incentivizes it with their commission, as well as the target audience, which in turn has incentivized the orchestra through ticket sales.

The fact that the economic incentives fueling East/West works was suspicious to all five of my interviewees suggests much about the future of interculturalism in contemporary music. On the one hand, financial and professional motives are certainly a healthy vantage point to question the role of Eastern spirituality in both modern and prior works, especially given the relationship between spirituality and capitalism that blossomed in the 1980's. On the other hand, disavowing intercultural labels on the grounds that economic benefit renders such works appropriative or disingenuous does nothing on its own to unearth the complex historical interplay of religion, spirituality, aesthetics, and cultural representation embodied by those works over the past two hundred years. Shallow interculturalism may diminish without us questioning the legacy of those works: the supposed link between artistry and spirituality, the myth of a hyper-spiritual East, the entire concept of Eastern and Western worlds, and the notion that they can be sensibly contrasted in such dichotomous terms. These pervasive attitudes are myths with clear roots in Asian responses to European and American imperialism in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the social and political milieu of the counterculture era. Anxieties over profit and economic incentive may thus lead contemporary musicians to move away from problematic labels regarding interculturalism without actually shedding the specter of the spiritual in musical and artistic aesthetics.

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