

Tracing Cultural Legacies and Traditional Sensibilities in the “Futuristic Folk Music” of Chinary Ung

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Abstract

The process of navigating deeply held cultural values when composing a new piece can be transformative. Over the past several decades, Cambodian-American composer Chinary Ung has created a diverse array of cross-cultural works, and he continues to expand and deepen his international role as a leading Asian composer and educator. In this paper, I discuss Ung’s approach to composing, which enables him to be inspired by Cambodian traditional music and culture while continuing to practice Western composition. I also examine what Ung calls his “futuristic folk music”—new sounds sourced in the architecture, philosophy, and traditional music of Cambodia. In closing, I will discuss how the concept of “futuristic folk music” can be deployed to encourage composers and musicians of any culture to engage actively in a creative process that incorporates their living traditions, cultures, and art forms.

Keywords: Chinary Ung; futuristic folk song; Cambodian traditional music

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Introduction

As in other musical cultures, the traditional music of Asia has long sustained itself through oral tradition, whereby a student studies closely with a particular teacher to master techniques and gain knowledge. In this process, the act of imitation is paramount, with the consistent interplay between the student and teacher often having a profound influence on the student's musical approaches, ideas, and philosophies. At the end of the apprenticeship, however, the student must adapt this knowledge to create his or her own musical voice.

I first met Cambodian American composer Chinary Ung in 1998 at the International Festival-Institute at Round Top in Texas, where he had selected me to be one of five participants in the 1st Young Composers Symposium. The following year, I entered the Ph.D. program in composition at the University of California, San Diego, where I had the privilege of studying with him for several years. At UCSD, Ung expanded my awareness of and deepened my appreciation for Asian traditional music, culture, art, and philosophy, which allowed me to explore my cultural heritage and spirituality while continuing to practice Western composition.

During composition lessons, Ung often mentioned that a master composer must possess not only great technique and knowledge of craft, but also wonderful imaginative powers. He offered an example of how he utilized compositional techniques inspired by his dreams, such as the “broken line,”² which reflects the irregular rests and rhythms of natural human speech in the context of a melodic line, as well as his three cross-cultural techniques: “essence,” “co-existence,” and “fusion.”³

²In “A Journey from Inner Voices to Outer Voices,” Ung recalls creating his “broken line” compositional technique while composing *Tall Wind* (1970) for soprano and chamber ensemble: “I was perplexed at how to approach the line by e. e. cummings ‘a wind has blown the rain away.’ After a long struggle, I happened to imagine a child who was sitting in a corner, softly crying with a slightly tremulous voice. I imagined the child’s utterances would be broken up with pauses” (2015: 39).

³Ung has projected “essence” through the abstract representation of traditional Cambodian instruments in a Western compositional language. If two musical elements do not blend, like oil and water, he suggests “co-existence” by layering the elements in a kind of counterpoint to one another, letting them interlock without losing their separate identities. “Fusion” comes from the idea of blending things together to form a single, distinct entity. In this case, the whole is not just the sum of its parts, but rather becomes something new.

One day, Ung introduced me to the concept of “opposite logics,” a term he used to describe the process of being open to others and to mastering the logic of first attending to others. It took me a while to understand what he really meant. Some years later, I realized that Ung’s “opposite logics” related to the idea of compassion in Buddhism, which he often brought up to explain his pieces. This is but one example of where his guidance brought me to a new realization of something intangible far more valuable to my work than the things we value in the material world.

Another day, he encouraged me to take a closer look at my own surroundings to comprehend “imperfection” as part of nature—what he referred to as “perfected imperfection.” He advised me not to take a straight path as a composer but to enjoy every detour and stop once in a while to appreciate beautiful flowers on the street. He directed me to look up at a formation of birds in the sky, pointing out how a few birds were always following late. For every lesson, Ung assigned me this kind of enlightening homework, encouraging me to observe how nature exists in variety and irregularity—often different from its perfect appearance at first sight.

My most memorable story from my time with Dr. Ung involved the “chopstick moment” from an old Japanese movie. A samurai master is eating a bowl of rice, when he sees a fly buzzing around. A few seconds later, he reaches out his hand and effortlessly catches the fly in his chopsticks. It is in these “chopstick moments,” Professor Ung explained, that we are open: the mind, physics, and spiritual and physical awareness come together to create the potential for something extraordinary to happen. The moment is a dialogue with the universe.

I deeply appreciate Ung’s sharing with me his sincere and insightful words, his wisdom, and his many extraordinary stories. These still feed my spirit and enrich me every day.

1. Blending Spiral Concepts with Musical Languages

As I learned during my time as his student, Ung’s use of metaphor conveys his inner spirituality, which arises out of his practice of Buddhism to inform and guide his compositional process and techniques. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write, “Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral

practices, and spiritual awareness” (2003: 193). Since 1987, Ung has composed a series of *Spiral* pieces, which reflect his belief in the Buddhist idea of transmigration.

On a large scale, his compositional techniques, inspired by the spiral concept, create circular motions throughout the piece. For example, we can subdivide his musical language into more than a dozen musical ideas ranging in size from small musical units, such as a dotted note, to larger musical ideas, such as the expressive and lyrical phrase of the violoncello.

Example 1a: Subdivided Musical Languages of *Spiral I*

- a) *Tutti* (mm.1)
- b) Use of octave (mm.1)
- c) Dotted rhythm (mm.1)
- d) Pitch ornamentations including various *appoggiaturas* (mm.4 in violoncello and piano parts)
- e) Sliding *portamento* and *glissando* by violoncello (mm.4)
- f) Timbre elaborations of each instrument, like the violoncello's *sul pontecello*, Bartok *pizzicato*, the dampened and tapped sounds from inside the piano, harmonics by vibraphone, etc. (mm. 5 in percussion part)
- g) Harmonics, including double harmonics (mm.5 in violoncello part)
- h) Expressive and lyrical passage by violoncello (mm.7)
- i) Pitch-inflections (including quarter-tones) by violoncello (mm.10)
- j) *Tremolo* (mm.13 in cello part)
- k) *Arpeggio* figure (mm.15 in piano part)
- l) Chords (including open chord based on D as a tonal center), double-stops by violoncello (mm.17)
- m) Repeated note figure (mm.26 in cello and piano parts)
- n) Broken lines (mm.28)

Examples 1b and 1c illustrate some ways in which Ung blends or juxtaposes musical ideas among the three instruments. Throughout *Spiral I*, Ung recalls each of the musical ideas over and over; by combining or juxtaposing them, he consciously creates the sound of the spiral musical language.

Example 1b: Blending and juxtaposing musical ideas, *Spiral I*⁴

Example 1c: Blending and juxtaposing musical ideas, *Spiral I*

Spiral I also reflects characteristics of Khmer traditional music. Example 1d, from the *Khmer Changkeh Reav*, outlines the pentatonic scale of G-A-B-D-E-G, with rhythmic elaborations, creating a heterophonic texture.⁵ Example 1e is an excerpt from *Spiral I*, wherein the pentatonic scale A-C#-D#-E-G#-A (including two pitch displacements of D# to D and E to F#) is used to create the heterophonic texture of the traditional music.

⁴Examples 1b, 1c, and 1e are taken from Chinary Ung's *Spiral I* for violoncello, piano, and percussion (1987).

⁵In *Khmer Changkeh Reav*, a singing piece played by the mohori ensemble, melodic variations based on one principal melody are simultaneously played by the *roneat ek*, *kong tauch*, and *kong thom* (low-pitched circular frame gongs), creating a heterophonic texture.

Example 1d: Musical excerpt from the Cambodian Khmer Music *Khmer Changkeh Reav*⁶



Example 1e: mm 18 to 21 from *Spiral I*



In *Spiral I*, Chinary Ung also applies the idea of circularity to his rhythmic treatment, going beyond duple rhythmic relationships to include triplet, quintuplet, and other rhythmic relationships to create smoother rhythmic transitions as part of the heterophonic texture. In this way, Ung is able to maintain a semblance of traditional Asian heterophony, while creating a realization that is technically and culturally suited to the Western manner of performance practice.

⁶Example 1d is taken from Sam & Campbell's *Silent Temples, Songful Hearts: Traditional Music of Cambodia* (1991: 93).

2. Intermingling Vocalizations

Since composing *Grand Alāp* for (amplified) cello and percussion in 1996, Ung has placed various vocalizations by instrumentalist(s) at the heart of his compositions; these are not only spiritual and musical extensions of each instrument, but they also bring a sense of “oneness” to the music. In *Grand Alāp*, Ung asks the performers to whistle and simultaneously intone spoken sounds while they are playing their instruments, forming syllables and words from the Khmer language, as well as from Sanskrit and Pali.

The use of vocalizations is common to various Asian musical traditions. In general, there are two types. The first is “melodic vocalization,” where the voice of the instrumentalist and the music constantly interact with each other, intermingling, blending, and often contrasting. In the other, “percussive vocalization,” musicians communicate with each other by shouting random words or phrases; this functions doubly as a cue and as a dramatic enhancement complementing the musical narrative.

In his more recent works, such as *Oracle* (2004), scored for amplified flute, clarinet, violin, violoncello, and percussion, *Spiral X: In Memoriam* (2010), for amplified string quartet, *Spiral XI: Mother and Child* (2007), for amplified viola and voice (see Example 2), and *Singing Inside Aura* (2013), for singing violist and chamber orchestra, among others, Ung further explores more complex interplay among the instruments with his use of intoned spoken sounds in different languages, including Khmer, *Sanskrit*, *Pali*, and others, as well as his own imaginary words. In these pieces, he combines voices and instruments in various degrees to create new timbres and musical functions: a) chanting, b) instrument as vocal accompaniment, c) voice as instrumental accompaniment, d) voice as an element of the orchestration, e) vocalizations as a contrapuntal line among instruments and/or voices, f) vocalizations as part of the heterophony, g) vocalizations as a cue or to express musicians’ musical and spiritual transformation. In addition, he asks performers to whistle while playing different instrumental parts.

Example 2: The Score of *Spiral XI: Mother and Child*, for amplified viola/voice

University of ...

SPIRAL XI: mother and child
for amplified viola/voice

$\text{♩} = 86$

Voice

Viola

sul pont. *gliss.* *ord.* *gliss.* *pont.*

ffz *mp* *ffz* *mp* *mf* *ppp* *mp*

V.

ord. *poco sf* *p*

V.

ord. *vv* *3* *(poco)* *tr* *5* *v* *3* *p* *mf* *p* *mf* *pp* *f* *p* *mf*

V.

5 *gliss.* *gl.* *gliss.*

(mp) *p* *mf*

V.

6 *5* *gl.*

V.

5 *gl.*

V.

5 *mp* (flutter → SHOUT!)

V.

p *pp* *Tailed*

PRE NI BAWNG EU AY DO ME NAY NAW WAW AY YO DA I
KO NI SO RI NA MAY TA KSAT TRA BAWNG
EU TUK KA TEE POU KA TUM TOU KA TITA TUM (trrrrrrr) KUM KAY TAK

3. Nirmita Composers Institute

In 2013, Ung, with his wife Susan, co-founded the Nirmita Composers Institute to foster the next generation of both composers and musicians throughout the Greater Mekong region and elsewhere. In 2016, the Unga launched the Nirmita Composers Workshop in Siem Reap, Cambodia. The workshop had two spheres: one for young composers trained in Western music and another for Cambodian traditional musicians. They were co-presented by Cambodian Living Arts and the Nirmita Composers Workshop from July 16 to 29.

Figure 1. International Guest Musicians Rehearsing with a Cambodian Young Composer. Nirmita Composers Workshop.



During the Nirmita Composers Workshop in 2016, I saw how Ung guided both young composers and traditional musicians. Throughout the two workshops, he encouraged each composer and traditional musician to be in touch with his or her own cultural roots, while exploring new possibilities in their new compositions.

For example, Ung demonstrated how to create or reconstruct a new melody based on the Khmer musical tradition with new ornamentations and elaborations, instructing each musician to develop a short piece or a substantial sketch. His purpose was to give the musician a new musical space that was not too far from the person's musical training yet expressed something new and different from his or her own musical tradition. Ung understood that these particular elaborations would be idiomatic, not only because of the

particular instrument's characteristics and the inclinations of each performer, but by virtue of the direct stylistic lineage passed down by previous master teachers. Thus, each musician and his/her unique lineage played a role in the creation of the piece.

Figure 2. Workshop for Cambodian Traditional Musicians instructed by Chinary Ung. Nirmita Composers Workshop.



In a 2016 interview with Michelle Vachon for *The Cambodian Daily*, Ung talked about the reason for offering such a workshop for Cambodian traditional musicians: “Our ancestors composed pieces all the time,” he said. “That’s why we have these pieces in front of us to perform. . . . We would like to see if we could encourage living masters not only to teach as they have been doing, not only to perform the pieces of music as they also have been doing, but to compose new pieces according to tradition.”

In the workshop, the traditional musicians learned the value of developing strong relationships through the co-creative compositional process and inspired one another to reach outside of their comfort zones. After establishing a strong sense of mutual respect, they seemed to be more open to attempting something new and adventurous, as they all shared both a reverence for the tradition and an excitement for the new possibilities inherent within the tradition.

4. Cambodia in Ung’s Future Compositions

In recent years, Chinary Ung has invoked the concept of “interconnectedness” to describe his music. In 2015, Ung was invited to deliver a keynote as one of two speakers for the opening of the Music and Performing Arts International Festival at Burapha University in Thailand, where I currently teach. Later he reformatted his keynote into an article titled “Cultural Fingerprints: An Evolving Curriculum in Contemporary Music Composition,” which was later published by the Music and Performing Arts Journal at Burapha University. In his article, Ung writes about a future work, the *Neak Pean* project, inspired by the ancient complex near Angkor Watt in Siem Reap, Cambodia: “One must strive for a balance between the acquisition of knowledge and skills from a confluence of culture while reaching inward to a deeper inner self.”

Figure 3. Neak Pean, Siem Reap, Cambodia.



Neak Pean is a kind of ancient hospital where the four main pools represent the elements of Water (North), Earth (East), Fire (South) and Wind (West). As Ung explains, “The term *Neak Pean* refers to the intertwining Nagas, or serpents, that surround the central island. . . . Bathing in the pools restored the individual’s balance, thereby healing disease.” For the *Neak Pean* project, he plans to collaborate with four *pinpeat* ensembles from different regions in Cambodia, which will be placed on the four pools. A mixed ensemble of winds, strings, and voices will be located in the center to represent the celestial realm as the fifth element. These ensembles will also be surrounded by pairs of barrel drums

(*skor thom*), which will be played by 12 young musicians at 12 stations organized in the same configuration as the Cambodian Zodiac. Ung describes the work as “a multimedia project that will involve a mixture of youth and expert performers,” with live sound processing, “each one aligned with one of the five ensembles” (2015: 15-16). The *Neak Pean* project will be a culturally specific and site-specific work deeply rooted in Cambodia, and yet it will carry a universal theme to explore the “interconnectedness” among ancient, traditional, and contemporary music, arts, and philosophies.

Conclusion: The Conceptual Scope of Ung’s Futuristic Folk Song

Throughout his career, Chinary Ung’s compositions have reflected the composer’s musical journey and spiritual exploration, as well as his special relationship with his Cambodian cultural heritage. In liner notes for the CD titled “Chinary Ung: Singing Inside Aura,” Dr. Adam Greene writes of Ung’s purpose in composing his recent

works:

Ung traveled to Cambodia in 2002, his first visit since 1968. The rapprochement that brought about his return allowed him to reengage with the people, places, and, more broadly, the culture that were the sources of his inspiration. Ung determined in the works that followed that his music should be oriented toward the Cambodian people who had suffered so much. If the music he had been writing was a way of bringing “the village into the concert hall,” then he would set about bringing the concert hall into the village. (2015: 14)

The *Neak Pean* project exemplifies the conceptual scope of Ung’s “futuristic folk song.” An imaginative and innovative piece based on Cambodian architecture, philosophy, and music, it will be a powerful vehicle for sharing his traditional values and spirituality with contemporary audiences as well as for carrying Cambodia’s cultural legacies and traditional sensibilities into the future.

The concept of the “futuristic folk song” applies not only to Ung’s music but encompasses his lifelong ambition to foster creative works from emerging composers, especially those from Cambodia and Southeast Asia. In 2016, Ung initiated the Micro-Commissioning Program in Cambodia, which has already commissioned more than a dozen new pieces from Cambodians with strong musical backgrounds who have shown outstanding potential to create a new work. Their pieces are on the way.

In the summer of 2017, Silpakorn University in Bangkok co-hosted the Nirmita Composer Workshop, where, for two weeks, selected young composers from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam were invited to take private lessons and composition seminars from a roster of international guest composers and musicians who composed and presented their new works. Some of the participants came back from the previous workshops, as Ung believes that young composers from Southeast Asia, especially Cambodian students, are really in need of longer mentorship. Also in 2017, Cambodian Living Arts co-presented the second edition of a creative workshop for Cambodian traditional musicians in Siem Reap, and they, too, gave presentations of their short pieces and sketches at the end. These two workshops can be expected to continue to generate more active creations from young Southeast Asian composers and inspire many more Khmer traditional musicians to take innovative approaches to their work.

It is very clear that Ung's knowledge and wisdom were inherited from his ancestors and will be passed down to many more generations. A living legacy, Ung's music and activities as a master composer and visionary educator continue to expand his artistic horizons and inspire many more people in Asia and beyond, manifesting his hope that one day everyone will join in and contribute to the enrichment of music and culture in various parts of the world.

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