

***Guqin* improvisation; John Thompson**

Preface to a video presentation for the New York *Qin* Society, June 2021

Sorry I missed last week's meeting (about composing for *guqin*).... Yesterday I was able to watch the video, though not see the texted comments. Now, before playing my own video, I'd like to add a few comments. In fact I enjoyed all the music very much, but my comments here will mostly have to do with using Western attitudes and terminology in non-Western contexts.

First, with regard to pitch, there was much discussion of "what notes to choose" in a way that to me implied using "notes" in the sense of "absolute pitches". *Qin* music prior to its codification in modern Chinese conservatories had no absolute pitch that we know of. You tuned your *qin* based on a variety of factors including the size and quality of the *qin*, whether you preferred a brighter or more mellow sound, the tuning of your teacher or friends or maybe a flute player, and so forth. Otherwise it was all about relative pitch and the relationship of the notes to each other. These relationships fell mostly within the traditional Chinese pentatonic scale, *do re mi sol la*, in other words, no sharps or flats.

Related to this, most people when they say things like, Western music doesn't have this or that but Chinese music does, are limiting Western music to classical Western music of the common practice period, i.e., the classical tradition from about 1600 to 1900.

One reason for widening the discussion beyond the common practice period of Western music is that in early Western music such matters as "absolute pitch" and "composing" music were very different.

As for composing music, "composing" is a very tricky word. Peiyou quoted a dictionary definition for "composition" ("The arrangement of artistic parts so as to form a unified whole"), but what is meant here by "arrangement" and "unified"? Is the arrangement conscious? If you are criticizing a piece as "not unified" are you saying it is not a composition?

More particularly here, that dictionary definition does not deal with the **aim** or **process** involved in the composition. For example, one can see in the history of Western written music, a pretty consistent trend from early music, that seems to have been created largely in outline, with performers intended

to fill in the slack, to music that one might say is super-composed, where the aim seems to be to leave as little freedom as possible to the performer.

Now, if a modern composer is deliberately leaving things open to the performers, this might more interestingly be compared with early music practice rather than with the super composed music of the common practice period. For that matter, even in popular music there is often much left to the performer.

Further regarding composition, on my website I have a page where I discuss two approaches to what in Chinese is called "*zuo*" or "make" music. One approach I call "composing", the other "creating". When I see, in old *qin* melody introductions, that Jiang Kui, or Mao Minzhong or someone else "*zuo*"d the melody, I generally translate "*zuo*" as "create" rather than "compose" and I certainly avoid saying someone "wrote" the music. The music does not start with the tablature. It is difficult to say how it was for songs, but the instrumental melodies come from talented *qin* players who would have been guided by what could be written in tablature but probably did not actually think a lot about tablature as part of the creative process.

However, we in fact know very little about the creative process leading up to these pieces. It has always been my understanding that whoever originated the pieces just worked out the melodies by playing – perhaps influenced by something they had heard, perhaps by a melody going through their own head, perhaps by other experiences or emotions – and then that person developed the melody over time until eventually they or more likely someone else, such as a student, transcribed what the master had been playing. Later people revised these creations and these were in turn also written down.

Perhaps ironically, the process of *dapu* – reconstructing these melodies – might seem in many ways more like the classical idea of composing than does the original creation of the melody. The "unified whole" in the definition of "composition" is quite likely an instinctive sense of unity, while the *dapu* process includes a conscious search for such structures as one can find.

This is why I would encourage someone who is seeking to create new music growing out of the *qin* tradition first to study and analyze differing versions of as many old reconstructed melodies as one can, then to do *dapu* oneself.

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Before I play my *guqin* blues melody "Olden Ways" I'll say a few words explaining how I decided to put *guqin* music into blue structures. There are two aspects of this – a personal fondness for blues music, and a belief that blues music structures can provide an interesting model for structuring new *guqin* melodies, particularly improvised ones.

My focus on *guqin* has been almost exclusively melodies copied into Ming dynasty tablature. Of the almost 300 melodies I have reconstructed from these sources, I think I can say that often when I reconstructed one I was dealing with music that probably had not been heard for over 500 years.

But it is not that I only like old music. In fact, what I really like is new music, but to me "new music" means "music I have not heard before". So every *guqin* melody I reconstruct from tablature is, for me, new music.

Now, if I am accurate in my reconstruction one can argue that in fact the music I am playing is very old. So perhaps somewhat ironically, if my reconstructions are not accurate then you might say they are just my fantasies of old music, and the music is really new, not just new to me, but new new.

Why blues?

As for the Blues, one day perhaps 30 years ago a record producer who heard me play one of these old *guqin* melodies said that *guqin* music reminded him of old time Blues music, one string blues in particular. Many people have said *guqin* music is inherently sad, but here I think he was also referring to the modality of the music, to the way the notes are commonly bent, and also to the apparent simplicity of a music that may **seem** quite plain but that at its core can be very deep and moving. As for it being sad, I prefer to think of this *qin* music not as being sad, but as being so precious and real, and beautiful, that it brings tears to your eyes.

In the end the record producer I mentioned asked me to do some recordings for him of old *guqin* music reconstructions. We could not agree on terms, but that led not only to my beginning my own recording projects, but with my trying to make some new *guqin* melodies by putting old musical phrases and

motifs into a blues structure. If you search my website for "blues" you will find four such pieces, including the one I am now going to play, Old Time Blues. If you listen carefully you will hear that it has six sections and each of these sections consists of 24 bars – 12 double-bars of music that, perhaps loosely, follow the 12 bar blues structure.

(Video of Olden Ways)

I created this melody, Olden Ways, in a way that I hoped I could use to learn to do structured improvisation on the *guqin*. Improvisation is a common part of the blues tradition, and starting perhaps 30 years ago there has been a lot of discussion about the role of improvisation in *guqin* music. Improvisation is a word with many meanings but here I focus on structured improvisation.

Blues music also has melodic and rhythmic structures, most famously through the so-called "12-bar blues". Inspired by this, I decided that I would try to learn to improvise by creating melodies in 12-bar blues structures. For each blues piece I would create a number of 12-bar variations. If I could learn these melodies and their variations well enough, perhaps I could learn to mix them together in a way that could be considered as improvisation.

So for this melody, "Olden Ways", I took the *Shen Qi Mi Pu* melody *Gu Feng Cao*, which might be translated as Lament for Old Customs. The original version in *Shen Qi Mi Pu* was undivided but a later version divided it into seven sections. The blues version you just heard had six sections, each one consisting of one iteration of the 12 bar blues structure. The **first** of these six is a "core melody". The other five are connected to melodies from five of the original's seven sections. That they all have the same modal structure is shown as follows: each staff has two lines; the top line always repeats the core melody, the bottom has the new 12-bar phrase. This shows that with some small adjustments one should be able to play each section of Olden Ways together with any other section.

To give a better idea of how this can work, here now is a transcription of Old Time Blues Section 1. You may note some inconsistencies in titles: Old Time Blues is just another name for Olden Ways. In any case, Section 1 contains the core melody. The key is A minor, and the Roman numerals between the bass and treble clef staff lines show the basic modal structure: I indicates the tonal center is A; IV shows the tonal center has gone up a fourth to D, V that it has gone up to E. Listen.

Next is transcriptions from the other five sections of Old Time Blues and their corresponding sections from the old *Gu Feng Cao*. With Old Time Blues the core melody is shown on the top staff to emphasize that it can be played together with any of the other sections.

What you see now is the music at the beginning of Old Time Blues Section 2

Now you will see and hear the source of this in the opening of *Gu Feng Cao*:

Third, the beginning of Old Time Blues Section 3

Now its source in the opening of *Gu Feng Cao* Section 2

Fourth, the beginning of Old Time Blues Section 4

Now its source in the opening of *Gu Feng Cao* Section 3:

Fifth, the beginning of Old Time Blues Section 5

Now its source in the opening of *Gu Feng Cao* Section 5:

Sixth, the end of Old Time Blues Section 6.

Now its source at the end of *Gu Feng Cao* Section 7, also the last section.

The idea is that with the blues melody the sections can be repeated and, with more than one instrument, perhaps any one section can be played with any other. But for now that's it. There is a lot of further information about this on my website: just search the site for "new music" or "blues". But I will also be very happy to engage in conversations about any of the issues brought up here. Thank you for listening.