

COMPOSERS AND PERFORMERS AS PARTNERS IN CREATIVITY



Bright Sheng

One of the foremost composers of our time, Bright Sheng is the Artistic Director of 'The Intimacy of Creativity', a project for composers and performers to work together and have creative dialogues on music and techniques, hosted by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. During the workshop, Sheng reflects on the 'improvements' to his *Piano Trio* and the partnership between composers and performers with distinguished guest composer Yehudi Wyner and Radio 4 presenter Jonathan Douglas.

J : Jonathan Douglas

B : Bright Sheng

Y : Yehudi Wyner

J : Even for the less tutored among us such as myself, that it was a very enlightening exploration. Bright Sheng, you composed the *Piano Trio* 20 years ago, and that it has stood the test of time means that it is able to sustain this kind of scrutiny.

B : It's nice to get a chance to tweak around these things because it can make the piece better. I am a slightly different composer from 20 years ago. But I think the music should kind of reflect that.

Y : Even if Bright makes no changes to the piece, all of us have learned a lot from the exploration in these nuances and changes.

Change, not necessarily improvements

J : Is there always room for improvement?

Y : Change anyway. There is no single authoritative manuscript of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* because every time Bach conveyed it to another student he made changes. Changes, not necessarily improvements, but, of course, we can't understand how he could make any changes because it seemed the word of God to begin with.

B : But for him, those are improvements. I remember when I have made changes, then when I realized what my original idea was, I just changed it back and I should stop doing that. For this piece, especially, I have played it and heard it many times. Many people play it but I am still able to tweak to make it sound better.

J : It's quite a fine line between interpretation and actually adjusting the substance of the composition, isn't it?

B : That's a great question. It is a true partnership between a performer and a composer, it's 50-50 collaboration: when the piece is finished, this is only 50%; the other 50% is the realization. We know we can slaughter a Beethoven piece easily with a bad performance. We can also make Beethoven sound glorious, and sometimes even save a bad piece.

J : This exercise was an obvious example of exploring a piece that was composed some time ago; there are some other pieces which are hot off the press, and that's perhaps a different kind of exercise.

B : It is harder for the composer the sooner the piece is finished—they are more attached to the piece because their mind is very much set to what they had as an original thought. For this piece, I don't remember much of what I originally thought, and I'm, in a way, detached from the

piece. Sometimes I need that. If there is a certain section of a piece I don't really like, I usually let it sit for a year or two, and then I will look at it again and revise so I will be a little bit more objective.

Music as a living thing

Y : It's curious that there are so many varieties: there are composers who write music and it's categorical what they want and think they want to begin with. I don't know any of us would consider changing a note in Milton Babbitt's music or in a piece by Pierre Boulez. But Boulez himself would think of changing things. Other composers come to the performance or situation with a rather vague idea of what they want. They have notated the best they could, and then they begin to refine ideas as they hear what they're getting. Stravinsky used to talk about the whole concrete experience of music: he actually needed to hear it, to be with it, to play it hands-on.

B : Sayings like these from Stravinsky demonstrate that, even great masters, constantly think of music as a living thing. Mahler wanted all his editions of symphonies to be republished every five years, and we also know that Mahler was insecure. He was guest conducting somewhere two weeks before the première of his fifth symphony, and he stole a rehearsal to read through it. Mahler was a very famous conductor for his time, and he had written four gigantic symphonies prior to that; you would think that he would think he knew what he was doing, but he was insecure and he heavily orchestrated, and thinned it out before the première. I think the majority of composers are like that, especially if they are performers,

and there is only a minority of composers for whom things are set in stone, even the dynamic balance changes. That baffles me but I guess that is a very different kind of mindset.

Y : Then you have composers with opinions about other composers! We all think of *La Mer* by Debussy as one of those iconic compositions which can bear no change. It's ravishing, breathtaking. Maurice Ravel was quoted to say the following: 'Yes, I think Claude Debussy is a great master, but I must say, *La Mer* is badly orchestrated, I have a project to completely orchestrate it.'

B : I would not want to hear Ravel's orchestration! (laughs)

- transcribed by Jacqueline Leung

The discussion with Bright Sheng and Yehudi Wyner was broadcast in *Artbeat* on 30 April 2011. Log on to RTHK's website at rthk.hk, click 'archive', select 'Radio 4', 'Artbeat', and the programme date '30 April 2011' for the full programme which includes also the rehearsal of Bright Sheng's Piano Trio.

由香港科技大學主辦的「創意間的親暱」，邀請了作曲家盛宗亮擔任藝術總監，讓受邀作曲家與演奏家一起排練、深入交流，激發靈感。席間，杜格尊以盛宗亮的三重奏為引，與盛宗亮和傑出作曲家懷納討論創意，也談及作曲家和演奏家的互動關係。

你可以登入香港電台網上廣播站(rthk.hk)，重溫4月30日於第四台播出的Artbeat (英語節目)，欣賞他們妙語如珠論創作；當中更包括盛宗亮的三重奏的排練過程。

THE INTIMACY OF CREATIVITY

盛宗亮與國際作曲家/演奏家聚會香港
The Bright Sheng Partnership:
Composers Meet Performers in Hong Kong

25.4 - 8.5.2011

世界首演音樂會
World Premiere Concerts
五月 May 1, 3:00pm (星期日 Sun)
五月 May 8, 3:00pm (星期日 Sun)

香港演藝學院音樂廳
Concert Hall,
The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts

預演音樂會
Preview Concerts
四月 April 30, 8:00pm
五月 May 7, 8:00pm

公開排練
Open Rehearsals
四月 April 25-29
五月 May 2-6

午餐講座
Lunchtime Lectures
五月 May 27, 12:30pm

Bright Sheng and Yehudi Wyner