

# PIANO MAGAZINE

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# PIANO MUSIC BY COMPOSERS FROM ASIA: A History of Self-Discovery

by Lisa Yui

My discovery of piano music by Asian composers began during the pandemic. In the midst of the global health crisis, the Black Lives Matter movement shook the world, leaving an indelible mark in social change. Its influence rippled into the arts, providing momentum for pianists to look beyond the Western canon. Even to the casual concertgoer, it is obvious that the number of Asian pianists has soared over the past few decades. China alone currently has an estimated forty to fifty million people studying the piano. Yet, while music schools, competitions, and concert halls abound with Asian pianists interpreting works of Western composers, only a handful of Asian composers are represented in concert programs.

Fortunately, a few major pianists have championed their works. Peter Serkin had a long-standing association with the music of TAKEMITSU Toru<sup>1</sup> (1930–96, Japan), and Lang Lang has recorded the music of TAN Dun (b. 1957, China) and other folk-inspired works of early Chinese composers. But these are exceptions. The music of Arno BABADJANIAN (1921–83, Armenia), Emanuel MELIK-ASLANIAN (1915–2003, Iran), and Ahmet Adnan SAYGUN (1907–91, Turkey) are venerated in their home countries, but their works are

rarely heard elsewhere in the world. Even music schools in Asia generally ignore the compositions of their compatriots. Nam Hoang Nguyen, a pianist and researcher of Vietnamese piano music, recalls: “My professor at the Vietnam Academy of Music (VNAM) prepared a collection of Vietnamese works for undergraduate and lower-level study, but most students only played the same set of pieces over and over. I myself only knew a limited number of Vietnamese works while studying at VNAM.”<sup>2</sup>

Considering the disproportion between the number of piano students from Asia enrolled in Western music schools and the infrequency with which their countries’ composers are presented in concerts, it seemed timely to create a course that studied this music. This idea culminated in the launch of *Piano Music by Composers in Asia*, a class I taught in September of 2022 at Manhattan School of Music. I especially wanted this class to explore beyond China, Japan, and Korea, as composers from East Asia have slightly more worldwide recognition than those from the rest of the continent. But what was initially intended to be a straightforward piano literature course eventually developed into something more complex.

Delivery  
of concert piano,  
Nagpur, India, 1923  
- Helena Morstyn



Being an Asian composer writing Western classical music comes with certain historical legacies. For over a century, the West has appointed itself as the arbiter of global music. A google search of “the greatest composer in (insert name of an Asian country)” will most likely come up with those who wrote in the Western classical style. “Japan” would turn up SAKAMOTO Ryuichi or TAKEMITSU Tōru; “China,” TAN Dun or CHEN Yi; “Turkey,” Ahmet Adnan SAYGUN or Fazil SAY. This suggests that “great music” has largely come to equate “Western Music” not Japanese *gagaku*, Chinese *guoyue*, or Ottoman Turkish music. Furthermore, national anthems are written using Western tuning. In fact, some of the anthems of Asian countries were composed or orchestrated by Western composers. The original version of *Kimigayo*, the national anthem of Japan, was written by John William Fenton, an Irish military band leader. A new melody was later composed by a team of Japanese composers, which was then harmonized in the Western style by the German musician Franz Eckert.

Colonialism is a recurring theme when studying the history of the piano in Asia. The instrument settled into Asian lands primarily through the

occupation of Western nations. Being a symbol of oppression as well as of cultural advancement, it was viewed with both distrust and admiration. Some countries attempted to integrate the foreign with the familiar: in Iran, the piano was re-tuned to allow the use of various modes (*dastgah*) of traditional Persian art music. Morteza MAHJUBI (1900–1965, Iran) frequently played the piano with two fingers, like mallets. In recordings he treats the instrument like a *santur*, a Persian dulcimer. Likewise, when the piano was first introduced to the Burmese royal court in the late-nineteenth century, it was tuned to the scale of the *pattala*, the local xylophone. Eventually, *sandaya*, a completely unique style of piano composition and performance, emerged. The *sandaya* uses rapid, florid lines around a steady beat with no obvious melody or chords, as one would expect in traditional Western piano technique.

The astonishingly rapid pace with which Western music developed in Asian countries was often due to a strategic push by the ruling government. In 1871, following a long period of isolation from the West, the Japanese government of the Meiji Emperor headed by Prince Iwakura Tomomi sent

an embassy of nearly one hundred officials and students to the United States and Europe. Their experiences provided a bold impetus to lead modernization initiatives in Japan, including a new education system that advocated Western music, especially with regards to the piano. In China, reformers in the late-nineteenth century sought to replicate the greater military and economic might of foreign nations. The movement was summed up in the slogan, “Chinese essence, Western means.” Musicians took part in this cultural movement, and Western music, especially religious and military songs, were introduced in China. Years later, the social realism advocated by Mao Zedong’s cultural officials urged the composition of numerous works celebrating revolutionary heroes and rural festivals. The *Yellow River Piano Concerto* (1970), based on the cantata by XIAN Xinghai (1905–1945, China), is one popular product from this period. When the Republic of Turkey was declared in 1923 following the nearly 600-year rule of the Ottoman Empire, President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established a new secular republic based on Western models and traditions. The Turkish Five, composers who pioneered Western classical music in Turkey, worked to create neo-nationalist works in the name of progress.

My class included the Caucasus region dividing Asia and Europe. Composers from the republics that were part of the Soviet Union, such as Aram KHACHATURIAN (1903–78, Armenia) and Kara KARAIEV (1918–82, Azerbaijan), both Moscow Conservatory alumni, synthesized the musical styles of their Soviet contemporaries and mentors, while still maintaining the

traditions of the musical language of Eastern folk culture. Asian nations that were part of the Eastern bloc sent young pianists to Russia to study and invited Soviet teachers to lead the next generation of musicians and educators.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, many musicians from the Eastern bloc held posts at Chinese conservatories. At the Shanghai Conservatory, DING Shande (1911–1995, China) studied piano with Boris Zakharov, a Russian pianist who was one of the school’s first faculty members. Ding’s many charming works for young pianists, such as the *Four Little Preludes and Fugues* Op. 29 (1988), are evocative of Shostakovich and Kabalevsky. The Soviet Union was one of the first countries

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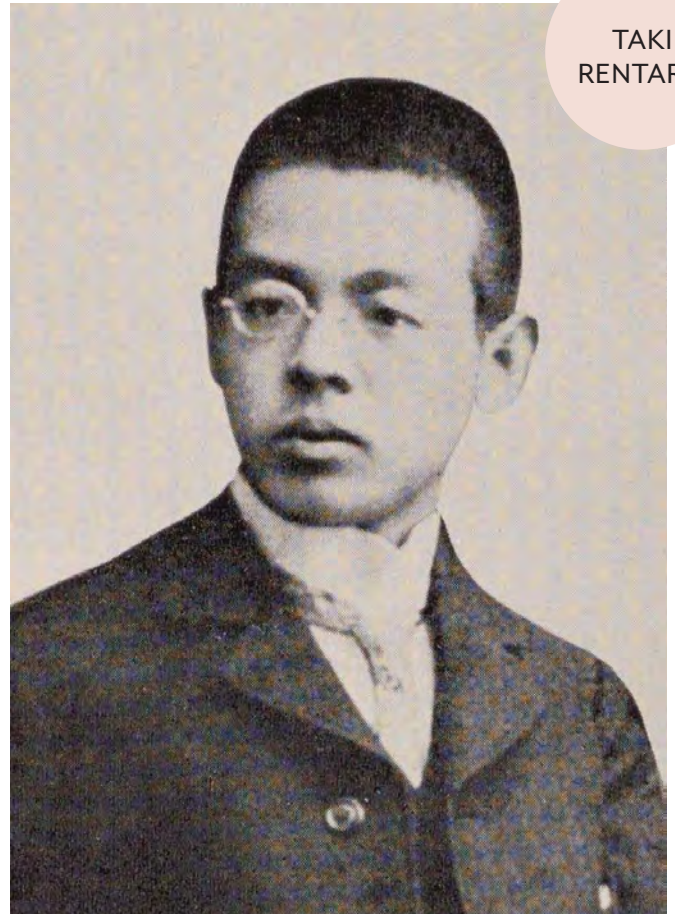
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TAKI  
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to recognize and formally establish diplomatic relations with North Vietnam. Russian influences frequently appear in works by Vietnamese composers, such as the brilliantly relentless *Sonata Polyphonique* (1978) by ĐẶNG Hữu Phúc (b. 1953, Vietnam) or the evocative *Theme and Variations* (1977) by ĐỖ Hồng Quân (b. 1956, Vietnam). These pieces are infused with motoric rhythm and bitonality, creating effects that are at times reminiscent of Stravinsky, Prokofiev, or Shostakovich.

As Vietnam was controlled by France for over six decades, earlier Vietnamese music displayed influences of Impressionism. Both “Au Fil de l’onde,” the eighteenth piece from the set *Viet Nam: Album Pour Piano* (1954) by Louise NGUYỄN Văn Ty (1915–2007, Vietnam), and Prelude No. 2 (n.d.) by NGUYỄN Đình Lượng (1945–2005, Vietnam), resemble the limpid style of early Debussy. As Philippines was part of the Spanish Empire for three hundred years, it is not surprising that so many compositions by Filipinos are imbued with a Spanish flavor. This is exemplified by a composition by Julio NAKPIL (1867–1960, Philippines), a general during the Philippine Revolution against Spain. His *Recuerdos de Cápiz* (“Memories of Capiz,” 1891) is a scintillating *habanera*.

In its historical infancy, piano pieces by composers from Asia were often emulations of the Austro-German tradition. The first piano music introduced in the East was primarily by Czerny, Beyer, Clementi, Beethoven, Schubert, or Mendelssohn, with a smattering of Chopin. *Minuet* (1900) and *Grudge* (1903) by TAKI Rentaro (1879–1903, Japan) are the first published solo piano works by a Japanese composer, but their compositional style is completely inspired from European salon music. Gradually, in an effort to discover their musical identities, Asian composers searched for ways to reconcile the distinctions between Eastern and Western aesthetics, creating a confluence of the two. On the simplest level, that meant sprinkling elements of local music and dance into the works. A large body of early piano pieces from China are of this style, using pentatonic scales, folk melodies, and dance rhythms



framed within Western forms and techniques. In the Philippines, Francisco SANTIAGO (1889–1947) composed *Souvenir de Filipinas* (1920), weaving *Lulay*, a popular Filipino folk song, into a Lisztian fantasy, and the prolific Lucrecia KASILAG (1917–2008) used the popular love song, *Walay Angay*, for her *Theme and Variations* (1950).

As cultural integration deepened, music by Asian composers reached a new level of maturity, stretching beyond the superficial use of folk melodies and pentatonic scales. The Chinese-American composer, scholar, and teacher, CHOU Wen-Chung (1923–2019), stated:

“A composition based on the adoption of Western concepts, techniques, and styles but embellished with Asian effects and color, even when composed by a Chinese or Asian, remains a product of emulation. Because such music is not a crystallization of cultural interaction, it is incapable of asserting itself as intercultural contemporary music. . .

To truly point to the future the work will have to reveal the intrinsic values of both worlds. And it will have to demonstrate a degree of synthesis in ideas, skills, and expression. Only then can we arrive at an ideal stage—one that every sincere artist or composer should aspire to.”<sup>3</sup>



CHOU  
WEN-  
CHUNG

Chou was undoubtedly one of the seminal figures who bridged artists between the East and West. He founded the Center for US-China Arts Exchange in 1978, which became a major channel of cultural diplomacy. An influential teacher, he nurtured the “First Wave” of Eastern composers. These included Chinari UNG (b. 1942, Cambodia), ZHOU Long (b. 1953, China), Chen YI (b. 1953, China), TAN Dun (b. 1957, China), Bright SHENG (b. 1955, China), and GE Gan-ru (b. 1954, China). Chou’s *The Willows are New* (1957), based on Wang Wei’s poem *Yang Kuan*, treats the piano as a metamorphosis of the *qin*, a Chinese zither. The minor ninths resounding in the left hand create an effect similar to the overtones of the *qin*, and the rhythmic gestures of the righthand seem to suggest the contemplative yet spontaneous brush strokes of Asian calligraphy.

The integral figures who brought composers in the East back to their own culture were often Western artists. The American composer John Cage (1912–1992), who applied the concepts of Zen Buddhism and the *I Ching* in his compositions, reminded Asian composers of the profound beauty in their approach to time and space. His visit to Japan in 1962 created a sensation that became known as “Cage Shock.” Takemitsu Toru, whose interest in Japanese music and culture was sparked by Cage, said: “Maybe it can be said that I am rather a gardener, not a composer. I don’t like to construct sounds as great architecture the way Beethoven did. My music is different. I set up a place where sounds meet each other.” Takemitsu’s *Rain Tree Sketch I* (1982) and II (1992), or *Uninterrupted Rests* (1952), are not focused on harmonic progression or destination, but rather, on the resonance of a single note and the space and time experienced between them.

Composers from Western Asia frequently turned to the traditional modes and rhythmic systems from their culture. *La Nuit du destin* (*The Night of Destiny*, 1978) by Dia SUCCARI (1938–2010, Syria), alludes to *Laylat al-Qadr*, the night during Ramadan when the heavens sent down the Qur’an to the prophet Muhammad. The work captures the mystery and awe of that holy night, combining Western notation and rhythm with

the *maqam* and *iqā'*, the system of melodic modes and rhythm respectively, used in traditional Arabic music. The pianist is required to improvise in a style called *taqsim*, evoking the *santur* and the *ud*, Persian versions of the dulcimer and lute. In *Ten Etudes on "Aksak" Rhythms* Op. 38 (1964) and *Twelve Preludes on "Aksak" Rhythms* Op. 45 (1967), Ahmed Adnan SAYGUN (1907–1991, Turkey) uses the asymmetrical rhythmic system (such as 2 + 2 + 2 + 3) typical in the Middle East. Each etude or prelude uses a different combination of these unequal *aksak* beats.

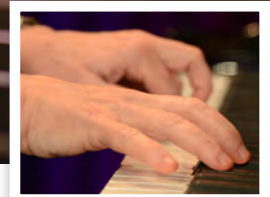
Many composers who set up the groundwork for their country's piano music culture experienced devastating hardships. One example was HE Luting (1903–1999, China), the composer of *Buffalo Boy's Flute* (1934), the top-prize winning piece of the first composition contest in China. During the Cultural Revolution, He was subjected to physical



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VARDAPET  
KOMITAS

abuse and interrogation on public television by anti-Western populists for his defense of Western music. Isang YUN (1917–95, S. Korea) was kidnapped in 1967 by the South Korean CIA from his home in Germany, in what became known as the East Berlin Incident. A few years earlier, Yun had accepted an invitation to visit North Korea (at the time illegal for South Koreans) to view the historical *Kangseo Gobun* frescoes. For this, Yun was convicted of treason and espionage. This resulted in imprisonment, torture, and a death sentence, before he was ultimately released. *Shao Yang Yin* (1966) is a twelve-tone work inspired by Taoist philosophy employing Yun's own *hauptton* technique, where notes embellish a single or few "main" notes in the style of traditional Korean music. Vardapet KOMITAS (1869–1935, Armenia), a pioneer of Armenian ethnomusicology and a fully ordained priest, was arrested and deported to a prison camp by the Ottoman government during the Armenian genocide (1915–16). He spent the last years of his life in a psychiatric hospital in France. His *Six Dances for Piano* (1906) and arrangements of urban songs are musical snapshots of Armenian folk life. The dedication of these artists to create music that was true to themselves and to their nation is quite simply heroic.



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LUCRECIA  
R. KASILAG

It became clear that *Piano Music by Composers from Asia* was not just about exposing young musicians to new music, but exploring the ever-evolving story of a region's collective self-discovery. Pioneering composers who began by emulating the musical language of the West were eventually compelled to return to their own culture and history for inspiration. In doing so, they shaped the piano to become their individual instrument of expression. Through the piano, composers from Asia rediscovered their culture, and by extension, themselves. As a result, they created music that was completely different from anything heard before, in the West or in the East. By studying—at times even resurrecting—these works, we preserve and celebrate the voices of nations whose music reverberates across language, politics, and continents. ■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Traditionally, family names come first in East Asia, the given name second. To avoid confusion, I list the names in this article in the order most commonly used and capitalize their surname.

<sup>2</sup>Hoang Nguyen, interview with the author, November 26, 2022.

<sup>3</sup>Shyhji Pan-Chew, ed. Chou Wen-chung Music Festival, Special Album (Taipei, Taiwan: Canada-Taiwan Music & Arts Exchange, 2004), 118.



Concert of  
European Music  
by Hashimoto  
Chikanobu  
(1889)



LISA YUI enjoys a multifaceted musical career as pianist, lecturer, educator, author, and musical director. Dr. Yui is on the faculties of Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard Extension, where she teaches courses on historical piano recordings and piano literature in Europe and Asia.