

Research Grant – Spring 2014

Faculty member: John O. Robison

Unit: School of Music

Project/Proposal Title: Wang Xilin, Human Suffering, and Composition in Twenty-First Century China

Abstract:

This project is devoted to the works of Chinese composer Wang Xilin. An outspoken critic of the Communist government, Wang was imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, with no opportunity to develop his mature musical style until he was fifty years old, after the Chinese government relaxed its censorship of Western music during the 1980s. Since he has rarely been allowed to leave China, his music is virtually unknown in Europe and North America. As an intercultural composer who integrates modern Western trends with indigenous Chinese musical styles, his music is incredibly innovative, symbolizing conflicts between oppressed people and their oppressors.

Proposal:

Wang Xilin's story is a compelling one that shows his own personal struggles, as an ordinary person of modest means, against oppressive ruling powers: Coming from a poor family background, Wang could not study the music that he wanted to due to government restrictions, was imprisoned for fourteen years during the Cultural Revolution, and could not find his truly distinctive voice as a composer until he was more than half a century old, after the Chinese government allowed people to have exposure to European music written after 1900. One of the few senior Chinese composers to embrace these progressive European styles, Wang also draws inspiration from the Chinese traditional music that he has researched. The driving force behind Wang's music can be summarized by a statement that he made to this applicant during our interview in Beijing (November 10, 2012): "I want to express the suffering of contemporary people, and the evil of modern China."

A central theme in Wang's music is the struggles between oppressed people and those who dominate them, and this research will focus on compositions exemplifying this theme. In his *Symphony no. 8*, the orchestra (representing the oppressors) and the Chinese instruments (symbolizing the unfortunate commoners) contrast with one another in terms of pitch content, melodic material, and rhythms; in addition, passages where the dissonant orchestral parts dominate the sheng, pipa, and guzheng soloists suggest the authoritarian government emerging victorious. Similarly, the research and analysis for Wang's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* will reveal how the conflict between piano and orchestra represents the anguish of an entire generation tormented by the Cultural Revolution. This is manifested through the orchestra's role as the oppressive ruling power and the pianist's role as the defeated individual (movement one), rhythmically free piano solos suggesting an individual who is seeking freedom from government authority (movement two), and the beautiful melody that emerges at the conclusion of the concerto, where after a dramatic climax, Wang suggests that there will be more hope for humanity in the future (movement three).

The goals of this applicant are to reveal the characteristics of Wang's recent compositions through this viewpoint of oppressed vs. oppressor, and to discuss his music from the standpoint of which traits are Chinese or European. While the field of Chinese mainland composers represents a new field of investigation, this project has the full support of one of Wang's best friends (musicologist Yang Hon-Lun, who is encouraging this applicant to continue the research that she

is too busy to pursue). Wang is 77 years old, and future interviews in Beijing need to be conducted soon, while the composer is in good health; musical scores must be examined in his presence in order to clarify the intercultural aspects, and the underlying social/political implications, of his compositions. Through the generation and dissemination of new knowledge, this study of Wang Xilin, a composer who has been mistreated by his government and is relatively unknown outside of China, will have global impact.