

# *A rear view means a clear view*

*A short retrospective, in three parts,  
of 21st-century music in the West*

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The three articles in this series are also available in Mandarin, Arabic, Hindi and Spanish.

## ***Part 1***

### ***Two musical establishments and the Great Change***

*Why bother about music from the Old West?*

It is in one sense understandable that so much has been written about the economic collapse of the Old West and so little about its cultural ramifications. “After all”, the argument goes, “it is from *economic* history that we must learn, if we value our own welfare” (Gong 2084: 14). It is of course useful to see the economy, in the broadest sense of the term, at the basis of social life, but it is also naïve to believe that communities are not also deeply affected by culture. Indeed, recent research (e.g. Wong 2093; Lu 2102) has demonstrated that cultural conditioning through mechanisms of commercial propaganda and commodity fetishism was a significant factor behind the political collapse of the Old West which, from an *economic* viewpoint, was more than able to provide for the needs of its own citizens, as well as for most of the planet’s population. That it failed to do so, the same authors conclude, was due to the system’s “chronic conceptual gulf between material and spiritual values, between art and science, between morals and business”, and to its “inability to realise that what cannot be counted counts just as much as what can” (Lu 2102: 143).

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1. [Editor’s note] Da Feili is Professor of Anglo-North-American Music Traditions at the University of Guangzhou. His parents were both 10 years old when they moved with their respective parents to China (his father from Toronto, his mother from Vancouver) in the mid 2020s. His grandparents were not the only Canadians to notice, in the early years of the last century, that an increasing number of goods were “Made in China”. No-one expected the manufacturing base of the North American economy to collapse so swiftly, but thanks to the Old West’s economic system that sought to maximise company profits by exploiting what was then cheap labour in nations like ours, and thanks to a series of expensive wars waged by the USA in attempts to control access to raw materials essential to that nation’s unecological way of life, his grandparents opted to abandon the sinking ship and emigrate to the land of their forefathers.

In China we now have a standard of living superior to that of the Old West in the late 20th century. Multi-sensory displays and virtual-reality headsets are as natural a part of life as tin cans, cars, commercial TV, plastic bags and fax machines once were in the West.<sup>2</sup> We may not suffer from the same conceptual schizophrenia as the Old West, but we too have established cultural patterns which influence, and are influenced by, an economy that has developed dramatically over the last century. This situation of quantifiable material welfare demands that we examine more closely the relationship between culture and economy on our own doorstep if we wish to preserve what we cherish in economic as well as in cultural terms. Such examination is in its turn only possible if we are prepared to learn from *cultural* as well as from economic history.

It is no easy task for a second-generation *returner* (回流者) with cultural baggage from the Old West to conduct Foreign Music research within the *stayer* (中國人) establishment.<sup>3</sup> Many prominent anthropologists and ethnomusicologists still patronisingly dismiss natives of the 20th and early 21st-century West as exotic mental dinosaurs duped by decadent consumerist propaganda, all beaten into superstitious submission by the inquisitors of corporate “management”.<sup>4</sup> The repulsion expressed by these scholars is certainly more than understandable<sup>5</sup> but it is also misleading because popular support for the IACF<sup>6</sup> was as great among the masses of unemployed and over-stressed in the Old West as it was among the oppressed workers, peasants and students of Latin America or Jiangxi province. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that mass opposition to corporate capitalism in the West, and the subsequent alliance, under the aegis of the IACF, of those forces with similar movements elsewhere, was what saved many Western nations from falling into the sort of famine and misery that had dogged the majority of the planet’s population (what used to be called “the third world”) during the 20th century. The fact that Western nations have, in decades since the Great Change, been able to develop useful digital technology from the early part of the century for democratic ends can teach us some important lessons about how we should manage our own lives, now that we have surpassed the Old West in terms of living standard, now that we can help its inhabitants recuperate some of their manufacturing base, thanks to the relatively cheap labour they provide.

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2. *Commercial TV*: television channels whose programming was financed and regularly interrupted by commercial propaganda (“advertising”, see Kong 2094 and Lu 2102). *Fax machine*: slow analogue-digital-analogue apparatus used for transferring hard-copy over the telephone network (Zhou 2077). For a general history of unecological packaging, see Mendes (2101).
  3. *Returners* (*Huilu zhe* literally means “one who returns”), i.e. descendants of those who constituted the ‘diaspora’ and who emigrated to China during the 21st century. *Stayers*: returner jargon (in English) for *Zhongguo ren* (=Chinese people), i.e. descendants of those who never left China. See also footnote 1
  4. See, for example, Patel (2064), Ogawa (2065), Wong (2093) and Chavez (2072).
  5. One need only think of the cultural climate under what El Hadj (2044: 14, ff.) termed “the three Bs of Beelzebub” — Bush (George II, illegally elected and belligerent US President), Blair (UK Prime Minister with mandate to do the opposite of what he in fact did) and Berlusconi (Italian Prime Minister and media capitalist with criminal record).
  6. The International Anti-Corporate Front (IACF) gained official United Nations status in 2042.

This series of short articles presents no manifesto as to how we should proceed at home. It does, however, sketch a small but important part of one facet of 21st-century history that would, in the light of current cultural debate, be foolish to ignore: music in the Old West. This article, the first of the series, focuses on two interrelated aspects of the historical dynamic between musical institutions and changing political realities: conceptual dichotomies in Western music education and the virtual loss of a World-Heritage music tradition.

### ***‘Art’ and ‘popular’***

We are all aware of the ways in which Western traditions have influenced our own music in terms of instrument technology, tonal systems, amplification, recording techniques, etc. While we have been lucky enough to enrich Chinese traditions with those from abroad, Westerners were still, at the turn of the previous century, lumbered with an internal dichotomy between what, on the one hand, they called “classical” or “art” music and, on the other, “popular” music. With hindsight this dualism may seem ridiculous but for many Westerners the split between “art” and “popular” music remained an institutionalised reality well into the 21st century.

Even though Western composers and musicians had for a long time been mixing the two, and even though the practical and theoretical study of the “popular” had made some inroads into established academies, such reform was only tolerated as a minority appendage to the main business of mass producing “classical” piano broilers and jazz soloists. By 2010, however, corporate management demands on public spending had become so severe that institutions of music education and research, unable to directly service the needs of consumerist propaganda, were shut down one after the other. Interest in the historical music traditions of the European bourgeoisie was even lower than it had been in 2000: by 2025 the only courses to include the likes of Bach, Mozart and Bartók were those dedicated to multimedia composition. By 2030, music departments and conservatories were virtually emptied of what, thirty years previously, had been the mainstay of their repertoire.

The same factors of mass unemployment and political dissatisfaction which had been the motor behind establishing the IACF in 2030 also influenced questions of musical identity. Opposition to crass capitalism understandably included opposition to its impositions on musical life and young musicians started to rediscover the European “art” music tradition, identifying its managerially motivated oppression with their own alienation. Alternative venues called “recital clubs” sprang up like mushrooms and various intellectual movements formed around these activities, the best known being the Extensionalists, with their famous slogan “It’s not worth waiting for if you don’t have to wait for it”.<sup>7</sup>

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7. *Extensionalism*: philosophical current and political movement in the early 21st-century West whose main aim was to reclaim, in opposition to the intentionality of commercial propaganda, delayed gratification as a human right (*Oxford Palmtop Dictionary*, 2088).

One thing the Extensionalists did not have to wait for very long was the reintroduction of the European “art” music tradition in the few colleges of music still in existence in the 2030s. However, its real incorporation was a slow process. For example, it took over 15 years for Liverpool University’s Institute of Classical Music to progress from its underfunded status as “necessary evil appendage” to becoming an accepted part of the music section of the School of Media in 2045. Clearly, the established music staff, including a famed Hendrix expert, a professor of computer games music and a senior lecturer in jingle writing, all of whom had families to feed and mortgages to pay, felt threatened by the new member of staff who found herself having to cover everything, practical and theoretical, from Pérotin to Parmerud, from Zarlino to Zappa and from the rebec to *The Ring*. Such attitudes and such inequality of subject area were far from uncommon in the West between 2030 and 2050. Nevertheless, “art” music had by 2055 once again become an integral part of most music colleges.

Many music experts feared that the new “art” music syllabus would, thanks to its oppositional credibility, oust the established “popular” programmes from the academy. Fortunately, despite the demands of vociferous radical extremists, the popular-music baby was not thrown out with the corporate-commercial bath water. Most music colleges opted for something resembling our own Integrated Triangle principle: one third Home-Historical, one third Home-Modern, one third Foreign. Several factors, all emanating from the Great Change, lay behind the triumph of moderation in this reform: [i] increasing internationalist awareness among the Western population at large, thanks not least to the work of the IACF and that of its nationally affiliated governments, secured a place for the music of non-Western cultures in the curriculum and promoted a relativist-comparative attitude towards different musics; [ii] with the disaster, still in living memory, of classical babies thrown out with elitist-formalist bath water, the majority of musicians had no wish to experience what so easily could have become a vindictive return to the mid-20th-century status quo when only a very small part of the Home-Historical side of the Triangle monopolised the entire curriculum; [iii] the new People’s Governments, which gradually replaced the old corporate lap-dogs in nation after nation (from Italy in 2031 to the USA in 2079), by redistributing the wealth of the richest 5% and by outlawing the stock market, were able to channel funds into education and research, measures which relieved pressure on those who feared for their jobs under the old pseudo-managerial regime. This process of reconstruction was, however, not without its problems.

### ***Bach and the World Ecumenical Cooperative (WEC)***

Long before the establishment of People’s Governments in the West, Christianity was in crisis. Unlike ancient ecclesiastical schisms, which ostensibly emanated from disagreement about how many beings God comprised or whether Christ’s mother was technically a virgin, the early 21st-century arguments culminating in the Split of Split were fiercely ethical.<sup>8</sup> Most churches, already separated from the state, had seen their congregations dwindle into insignificance over the pre-

vious half-century or more, mostly due to an unwillingness on the part of established clerics to actively address the issues of social injustice that so deeply affected the popular majority. After the Russian Mafia’s ruthless takeover of Orthodox Church real estate in the Balkans and the Vatican Bank’s “Alms for Arms” scandal,<sup>9</sup> confidence in established Christianity reached an all-time low. New sects, such as The Church of Camillo Torres and the Revolutionary Martyrs, provided new hope for many believers who, in the Old West’s oppressive climate of petty greed and disdain for life on earth, found the established church’s acquiescence unpalatably hypocritical. The Split of Split went right down the middle of most established churches and the World Ecumenical Cooperative (WEC) was formed six months later, drawing the majority of the faithful into its fold. Many leading WEC figures were also IACF activists in popular insurrections against the old order.

The Split of Split had profound effects on music for Christian rituals. Initially, most *Kapellmeister* stayed on in the old established churches because they could not imagine, acoustically or architecturally, the works of Byrd or Bach performed in the bars, barns, lobbies, restaurants and school halls where the WEC had to congregate. However, as ancient cathedrals and churches emptied, and as its prominent clergy turned into the torturers that led the notorious “Freedom Inquisitions” in league with the Freedom-of-Enterprise Police, church musicians fled in their droves to the WEC. What, then, was the fate of old religious music in the West?<sup>10</sup>

Faced with the task of putting on Tallis’ *Spem in alium* at a WEC cultural evening in a Lancaster primary school hall on the 1st May 2044, four years before England saw its first People’s Government, Carla Marks, then a young conductor-composer with experience from virtual-reality game audio production, put together a 64-channel radio-controlled console to which she connected not only the singers’ 40 lapel mikes but also 10 ambient mikes, sending the signals through a preprogrammed Kings-College-Cambridge mixing algorithm and its matching chapel reverb template to a three-dimensional set of 24 inflatable speakers. She also designed a similar setup for pedal-board synth to reproduce, in the minutest detail, the sound of both the organ and the acoustic properties, with or without a congregation, of Leipzig’s *Thomaskirche* in Bach’s day. Although such technical innovations undeniably revolutionised the portability of specific live music environments, they also contributed to the problems musicians in the West now have

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8. It was in 2019 at the Synod of Split (Croatia) that authorities of the established churches (Catholic, Coptic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, etc.) summoned its priests, clerics and lay representatives in a vain effort to maintain their “Historical authority over God’s work on Earth”.
  9. In league with the Patriarchs of Sofia and Sarajevo, the Papadopoulos-Vostretsov gang worked out of Belgrade and Athens between 2006 and 2034. “Alms for Arms” involved Lent pledges being diverted into Lockheed and Honeywell shares in 2017 (editor’s note).
  10. There are many examples of well-meaning but vain attempts to salvage the ancient church music traditions, the most notorious being the 2031 rendition of Palestrina’s *Missa Papae Marcelli* one hour before closing time in the Esselunga supermarket at Gallarate (Italy).

to face since the WEC has had access to the ancient cathedrals and churches. The main difficulty is that choristers have in general lost the ability to sing in live cathedral acoustics without the support of close miking and monitors. The problem is compounded by the fact that only a few *Kapellmeister* are still alive who have experience of dealing with the wash of live reverb and signal return delay without digital preroll. Consequently, it is touch and go as to whether the ancient practice of music for ritual performance in large Christian temples will survive, despite its recently declared status as a United Nations World Heritage Music Tradition.

*In the next article, Da Feili discusses the demise of the music and advertising industries, the breakdown of copyright legislation and the re-emergence of live music. In Part 3 he examines the fall of the US Empire in the light of increasing popularity for electro-salsa and contrapuntal heterophony as expressions of post-Great-Change subjectivity.*

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*Back to the "real" world...*

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Philip Tagg (Montreal, 2004)