

Contemporary arts research as devotional performance: music and the dance of Tony Yap.

Tim Humphrey and Madeleine Flynn

Tony Yap is a leading Australian contemporary dance performer who grew up in Malaysia. From mid-2002 he has collaborated with designer/dramaturg Michael Pearce and Musicians/Composers Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey in an Arts Research project, funded by Arts Victoria, investigating the Taoist trance tradition of his childhood in Malaysia. The resulting translation from a traditional religious practice into contemporary performance has allowed a unique 'devotional' form to emerge. The paper will report on the relationship that has emerged between the dancer and the musicians during the process. This relationship showed itself during performances as a shifting pattern that phased between convergence, parallelism and independence. The relationship formalised into patterns of cross-modal dissonance and consonance between the dancer and the musicians. Two techniques were prominent in the process. The first technique – firstly, the distillation of sound objects within a framework that merged music with visual design, and secondly, the technique of 'dynamic immersion'. The first technique combined the 'traditional' aesthetic of elemental sound instruments with a contemporary 'western' performance setting. The second technique was realised through the acute and dynamic tuning of the acoustic space. The limited realisation of dynamic immersion created a surface of sound that was flexible and responsive to the dancers' actions. The immersive environment not only responded to the dancer but also acted on him.

Key Words: Trance. Performance. Devotional Performance. Dance Research. Immersive Sound.

Background

Tony Yap is an Australian dancer, director, choreographer and visual artist who grew up in Malaysia. He began his performance career as a visual artist and extended into physical theatre where he has trained, choreographed and devised new material for over a decade. Tony was one of the principle performers with *IRAA Theatre*. Since establishing *Mixed Company* in 1993 he has made a commitment to the exploration and creation of an individual dance theatre language that is informed by psycho-physical research into dance forms and other forms of cultural enactment from the Asian region.

Recently, Tony's involvement has included "How could you even begin to understand?", created and performed with Yumi Umiumare, winning a Green Room Award in 2000, and performed in Melbourne, Brisbane, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur. He choreographed and performed in Duong Le Quy's "Whispers from the secret world". He co-directed "In-compatibility for the 2003 Melbourne International Arts Festival.

Our collaboration with Tony began with our work on creating music for the outdoor installation "Rice Paddies" for MIFA in 2001. This extended performance/installation event involved several hours performance for dancers and musicians every day for three weeks, during which time we developed a mutual awareness of repertoire and impulse. In the future we are continuing our collaborative work with Tony, developing a pre-recorded score for "BB04" ("Beyond Butoh 2004") at *Dancehouse* in September 2004, a creative development for an installation for the Victorian Arts Centre, and a joint project with "Rivergrass" Dance Theatre in Kuala Lumpur in January 2005.

The Ether project as a devotional form: "trance-migration"

We began working together for his "Ether" project in 2002. As an overall framework for the project, Tony had identified a process and repertoire of "trance-migration". "Trance-migration", or sometimes "trans-migration" is the deliberately ambiguous term adopted by Tony for the process of developing a repertoire for contemporary solo dance performance based specifically on the *sen-siao* ("spirit cloud") trance tradition as practised in his childhood home of Melaka, where the local temple was actually located in the front rooms of his family home.

I would like to investigate and research these Shamanistic practices that have inspired and influenced my dance. My aim is to capture the grammar of these shamanistic practices that through reflection and practice, will lead to the creation of a new choreographic work that would add to and diversify the theatrical and dance languages people perform here. I do not aim to simply imitate or even translate: my

aim is to transpose a language out of its original Malaysian religious context and put it into a 'post-modern' and Australian context.¹

Tony travelled to his home state of Melaka in November 2002 and viewed several *sen-siao* rites in different temples over a period of weeks, immersing himself in contemporary enactments and absorbing the imagery and sound world as well as recalling the repertoires of movement associated with this particular trance practice:

As a child I saw the practice of Shamanistic trance as natural. I was brought up in rural Malaysia, an idyllic fishing village with the front of the house facing the sea. This part of the house was a temple. Two or three times a week, mediums would go into trance as spirits of various deities would possess the mediums. They provided remedies to the villages' problems - physical, emotional, spiritual and even material woes. These mediums display very particular patterns in their dance, each to a different deity.

Trance-dance and rituals are seen as magico-religious rites surrounding the phenomenon of spirit-mediumship, where spirit-mediums mediate between gods and the audience. The practice of the spirit-medium cult is particular to the Chinese in the region of South East Asia. Strands of Chinese traditional elements, such as those obtained from Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, as well as other local Malay religious elements are woven and interwoven to result in what could be described as a 'hybrid' religious practice. This form of spirit-medium practice we see here is called the 'spirit Cloud' (*sen-siao*) and dates back to the Hsuan-ho reign (119-26 AD) of Northern Sung dynasty.²

[illustration]

The *sen-siao* practice differs from many other religious rituals, which may have a character of reverence and solemnity in their enactment. In *sen-siao*, the sounds and sights of a modern functioning society surround and inhabit the observance space. Thus, in "trans-migrating" aspects of his childhood culture into contemporary performance, Tony was less interested in creating a solemn or "reverential" enactment, but rather, reflecting an of the trance rite, and the attendant emergence of deitic characters in performance, as "ordinary" and "natural". The "devotional" aspect is really to be found in Tony Yap's attitude to his past and his desire to incorporate these aspects of his past into the centre of his contemporary performance practice.

Relationship between dancer and musician

The composers initially considered Tony Yap's choreo-musical aesthetic as exemplified by his musical choices for previous performance works. Yap's choices of pre-recorded music had been made consciously outside of any 'western' or 'eastern' framework. Instead, they have appealed directly to his personal experience in creating performance – he considers the character of his musical choices as fundamentally important for the development of his psycho-physical impulses. As the project developed, the composers' awareness of the requisite character of the musical evocations for the emergence of the deities in Tony's performance grew. These musical evocations were, however, not any kind of "cue". There is a great desire from each of us to protect the process that leads to the emergence of the "deities" in performance – a process that cannot be "cued" or "phrased" in a conventional choreographic sense. This feature of the performance leads to a kind of aleatoric exposition whereby musical identities unfold in a dynamically shifting relationship to the unfolding of Tony's performance. This feature has led to some commentators mistakenly assuming that the music for the performances is somehow freely improvised. We know that certain compositional entities will occur, and sometimes the occurrences are choices made in cognisance of the formal shape of the piece.

The relationship of the musical texture with the dancer was sometimes convergent, sometimes independent from, and sometimes occurred in parallel. In terms of musical analogue with movement, there was a shifting pattern of "consonance" and "dissonance" measured by the degree of activity within each modality of movement or sound. An example of a "dissonant" moment could be the frenzied activity of an emergent deity, with abrupt and irregular movement phrases counter posed with a steady and hypnotic texture. A favourite outcome was an explosive movement complex followed by an almost total cessation of movement. Only then would an "explosive" musical moment occur.

In the creation of the music that accompanied Tony's performance, two techniques emerged as part of the constraining framework for the musical textures. These techniques were firstly, the "distillation of sound instruments" and secondly, the technique of "dynamic immersion".

Distillation of sound instruments

In the process of selecting acoustic and digital sources for the performance, a process of elimination (or distillation) occurred as choices became limited to those that accorded with the symbolic order of the performance. Certain visual/sonic icons became associated with the cultural frame of Tony's performances. The choices as listed in the table reflect both "Western" and "Eastern" iconic status. The grand piano is a western musical icon. The hanging wooden xylophone is a reference to the "wooden fish" (*mu yu*), a gong made of wood that within some Daoist traditions symbolises the transition between states of consciousness³

Table of Sound Instruments

| Sound Instrument | Possible Pitches | Amplification | Iconic origins |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Stone and Wood "xylophone" | A set of 12 pitches, microtonal | Ambient | Eastern? |
| Grand Piano | Equal tempered | Ambient | Western |
| "Augmented" Trombone | Variable and microtonal | Coupled | East/West |
| Fireworks | Indetermined | Ambient | Eastern? |
| Glass sheet | Eb | Contact Microphone | East/West |
| Harmonica | Equal tempered | Ambient | Western? |
| Aluminium tubular bells | Random | Ambient | East/West |
| Live sampled voice | Variable and microtonal | Ambient | n.a |
| Active reverberation | n.a | n.a | East/West |
| Dancers body | n.a. | Ambient | n.a |

The elemental materials, such as wood, stone and glass collected for the research phase allowed the integration of the sonic and visual design. Using contact microphones and speakers, the visual design can also be a sonic design where surfaces act as bi-directional transducers of sound. These iconic elements also contribute to the second technique that emerged from the development process, which was the creation of the acoustic space.

Dynamic Immersion

This term refers to the creation of an immersive sonic environment that responds to, anticipates and provokes different internal states and deities from the dancer. This environment, inhabited by musical textures as well as the utterances and body sounds of the dancer, acts as an uncontrollable "demon" that may alternatively support or subvert the dancer, or independently assist in the creation of the performance. It is conceived as a 'vessel' that surrounds and responds to the dancer's range of expressions.

The term "immersive environment" used here should be distinguished from other uses of the term, which generally refer to "virtual" environments that "immerse" a participant in a range of experiences. For the trance-migration project, the spectator, or audience is not directly immersed in the experience. The focus, or the body immersed, is that of the dancer. The design may be likened to that of a work created in 1974 by the vocalist Joan La Barbera and Alvin Lucier, which involved La Barbera modulating a signal emanating from a speaker system that surrounded her:

I was locating myself in the sonic center of the room by finding the place where the sound waves were bombarding me equally from all sides, and I could push them away from me by tuning my voice, adjusting the pitch to deflect the oscillator waves⁴

For the "Ether" performance, the immersive state was rather crudely evoked by "riding the gain" on the reverberation levels within a naturally reverberant performance space. The dancer's utterances and body movements were picked up on an Audio-technica ATM87R floor microphone. A live mix of ambient

acoustic sound instruments, and an acoustically-coupled trombone were broadcast through a three-channel “surround-sound” configuration.

As an experiment with technology, the sonic/musical means are stripped to the essential tasks of amplifying and evoking sensation and action. At any time, the technological means may be indistinguishable from evoked meaning and physical actions. The sound and music are heard as dynamic mediators between the internal and external worlds of the participant.

The composers sought to begin with the design of the sound and musical world as a loop that may be closed or opened. For example, the sounds of the dancer’s feet are fed back into the vibration of the surfaces that are then felt by the feet. The degrees of feedback and musical resonance are also mediated by the musicians who create a loop of ‘hyper-interactivity’ that is important for the creation of layers within the texture. These layers in turn are important in the semblance of meanings associated with Tony’s dance practice.

Two musical examples illustrate some of the detail of the music that was composed for Tony’s performance.

[Transcription One]

This transcription is taken from the beginning of a performance/showing given in December 2002 at the Rechabite Hall, Northcote. There are musical referents from the *sen-siao* tradition and their child musicians. For example, the recurring rhythmic cells have a relentless character, rather than featuring crescendo. A second example of reference to *sen-siao* would be the juxtapositions of rhythmic unisons. These rhythmic features perhaps also refer to Tony’s attachments to Western minimal traditions, for example, the music of Phillip Glass in performances of his earlier work “How can I even begin to understand”.

The pitch material from this segment consists of a series of interlocking tritones on the piano, woven with re-orderings of the pitches of the stone and wood “xylophone” which was created from stone mason’s offcuts and some wood. The stones themselves had a visual and cultural symbolism – perhaps evoking great age and also a sense of being “non-manufactured”.

The registers of the piano and “xylophone” were matched and restricted to a narrow band of pitches, which also afforded a contrast with the more widely dispersed registral setting of later sections.

The “lightness” of the texture was also intended to reflect the ‘everyday’ nature of the *sen-siao* enactment

[Transcription Two]

This transcription illustrates a different realisation process from the first. This music arises in relation to a particular deity that appears to be derived from Tony’s memories of his mother. In fuller realisations, the coupled trombone, the voice and the replaying of the sampled voice created a sustained “chorale” effect, juxtaposed with a spacious piano texture that allowed the foregrounding of the voice.

Tony was later to devote a considerable amount of time to investigating the voice, and the combination of song and language elements that arose in the deitic evocations. Some of these elements included:

- Interweavings of English and Malaysian speech
- Conversational-type responses between recorded speech, acoustically-coupled trombone and Tony’s foreground voice and body sounds
- Tony’s voice in general aligns itself with the sonic texture, independent of his physical gestures.

In general, the excerpts show the relationship between composition and improvisation in this particular context. The challenge in our work with Tony Yap has been to create compositions that have the flexibility to allow Tony to change and that will support his dynamic interpretation of unique performance moments. We are aware of the ‘cul-de-sacs’ that we will turn into in the course of a performance, and have a repertoire of micro-compositions to employ, but we don’t know when they will arise. The musical result is a mixture of impulse and aesthetic, and the imperative of where the dancer needs to go next. Our work with Tony has required an understanding of how music works for dance, including, for example, a knowledge of the physical limitations of the individual dancer, with its attendant considerations of the

sustainability of “builds”, and the phrasing of repose and stress. These dancer periodicities are not aligned with the actual periodicity of the music – rather a relationship and a proportion is suggested by them.

¹ Tony Yap, “Acquittal for Stage One – ‘Ether’ project”. Personal Collection, 2003.

² *Ibid.*

³ “The Wooden Fish”, *Doaist Culture and Information Centre*, <http://www.eng.taoism.org.hk/religious-activities&rituals/rituals/pg4-6-10-11.asp>, 14 July 2004.

⁴ La Barbera, Joan, “Voice is the Original Instrument”, *Contemporary Music Review*, 2002, *Vol 21, No. 1*, 35—48.