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Become Ocean

Presentation at the MEA Conference 2007

Unfortunately, Dr. Hakenberg was unable to join us here in Shanghai. He has asked me to introduce his piece in his stead. As a musician, and as a director, I have worked very closely with Dr. Hakenberg over the past 10 years. On that basis, I will do my best to answer any questions you may have after the performance.

Traditional music from China has been and keeps on offering inspiration to Western composers and their audiences. ***Become Ocean***, the composition for 3 Chinese *guzheng* by German-American composer Stefan Hakenberg, is dedicated to Lou Harrison, a composer who encountered Chinese culture at a young age initially in his native San Francisco where the Chinese community was already established in the 19th Century. Harrison later studied Chinese music extensively in China. His work and person are often mentioned in the writings of such Chinese musicians as Liang Zaiping in Taiwan who was impressed by Harrison's compositions, which bear witness to his deep love of Chinese sounds and musical languages. Through his dedication Stefan Hakenberg points at the interpretation of one culture's music from outside, by composers initially educated and bred in a different culture – an aspect of particular interest to Hakenberg as documented by a number of his compositions of the last 10 years.

Become Ocean is a manifestation of the musical and cultural inspirations that a composer, with roots originally in German and American culture, has enjoyed through his personal encounter with Chinese traditional music. Global access to world artistic expressions is quickly making Chinese music an integral part of the aesthetic experience and inspirational repertoire for many international composers with varying results many of which musicologists have something to say about. In return Chinese ensembles and musicians, and audiences as well, have found it interesting to find their culture reflected through the inspiration it has given to foreign composers. A number of recent commissions by Chinese ensembles to foreign composers speaks of this circumstance.

Become Ocean was written in 2003 for my teacher, the great *guzheng* virtuoso and Shanghai native Wang Changyuan and her Wang Chanyuan *Guzheng* Art Ensemble of New York City. Hakenberg was inspired by many recordings of Wang laoshi of traditional Chinese themes like ***Fisherman's Song at***

Dusk, Lofty Mountains Running Water, Skirts of Rainbow Dance, and Little Cloud Festival. In writing for and working directly with Wang laoshi in presentations of Hakenberg's *Three Zithers and a Pair of Scissors* written for my ensemble IIZ+: an ensemble of guzheng, koto, kayagum, and changgu (a piece I will present tomorrow in my own presentation) Hakenberg spent time studying guzheng techniques closely. Many of the techniques like tremolos, glissandos, bent notes, or the very characteristic combination of the last two, have found their way into the score of *Become Ocean*. Wang Changyuan's version of Lofty Mountains Running Water --the Running Water part in particular come to mind.

Another aspect of the composer's appreciation for the original sound of traditional zheng music is his acceptance and employment of traditional tunings. The three guzheng in *Become Ocean* are each tuned to one of the traditional tunings: G, D, and C respectively. In this way, the composition can access a larger number of pitch classes while at the same time taking advantage of the resonant, bigger zheng sound created by the many resonating strings on each of the zithers at once and between them. However, one aspect of the tuning in *Become Ocean* differs from the traditional. The lowest string of the zheng in C is not the traditional D but a C -- making the highest string not a d3 but c3. It is like a D tuning transposed down to C. Other features of the composition are the distribution of melodic material between different zheng particularly in the first, slower part of the piece as well as canonic imitation of motifs.

In his program notes Hakenberg writes that the composition depicts a large landscape overview from rainy high mountains to the forming of a creek, a river, meeting further rivers, and finally flowing into the ocean. It is a snap shot transcending the full course of life from fickle beginnings through a boisterous plenty, a raging fast autumn, to the flowing into the endless ocean. One might be reminded of large Chinese landscape paintings, another one of the inspirations Hakenberg found in his study of Chinese culture.

Since I am presenting this piece instead of Dr. Hakenberg, and since he has now given the work to the world, please allow me to offer my own interpretation. In listening to the midi version of the piece as it was being created and because of its title, I was reminded of Zhuangzi's story of Autumn Floods (Qiu 1 yü 3), a text I was required to translate into English many years ago, which thus it stayed with me. Please allow me to quote Zhuangzi, then, to put you in the mood:

It was the time of the autumn floods. Every stream poured into the river, which swelled in its turbid course. the banks receded so far from one another that it was impossible when looking across the river to tell a cow from a horse. Then the river laughed for joy that all the beauty of the earth was gathered to itself, flowing downstream it journeyed east, until it reached the ocean. There, looking eastward and seeing to limit to the waves, River's face dropped. As it gazed over the expanse, the river sighed and said to Ocean, "A vulgar proverb says that he who has heard but part of the truth thinks no one equal to himself. I am such a one."

Ocean replied, "You cannot speak of Ocean to a frog living in a well, you cannot speak of ice to a summer insect; you cannot speak of the unvarying way to a pedagogue. But now that you have emerged from your narrow sphere and have seen the great ocean, you know your own insignificance, and I can speak to you of great principles.

May we all Become Ocean as we listen to this piece