Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

Celestial Bodies:

Three Themes on Chinese Folk Stories

A Thesis in Music

by

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Abstract

Celestial Bodies is informed by Eastern and Western musical traditions and the composers who bridge these traditions. Bright Sheng is one such composer with a history of integrating Western and Eastern musical aesthetics.

Each myth selected for Celestial Bodies engages with the concept of the Heavens and the sky. As I read many iterations of these myths, I uncovered unexpected deviations in the folk stories that revealed different personalities and motivations in the mythic subjects.

In composing Celestial Bodies, I examined certain interpretations of Eastern music that Western composers had authored. Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was a focal point of this research. Debussy was influenced by Javanese Gamelan, and this exoticism is evidenced in his piano composition, Voiles. In studying Debussy's piano composition Voiles, a theme of using non-Western scales, such as the whole-tone scale emerges.

The American experimentalist composers Henry Cowell and George Crumb pioneered the use of extended techniques for piano. Henry Cowell used extended technique to convey Irish myths in his compositions, and George Crumb has used extended techniques and set folk songs in his piano music in fascinating ways.

The research I conducted in creating Celestial Bodies informed the composition and overall resulting sound. The information in this document is necessary context in an informed listening of my compositions. It will also supply readers with the motivations behind my compositional choices.

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Introduction

Celestial Bodies is the musical result of an inquiry into how Eastern and Western composers create music with roots in both Eastern and Western musical traditions. In researching for Celestial Bodies, the relationships between Eastern and Western musical traditions were significant. Chinese composers who have married traditional Chinese music with Western instrumentation hold relevance to my work. Thus, I investigated the music of Bright Sheng. Bright Sheng is a Chinese-born composer who has resided in the United States, and is concerned with combining Eastern musical concepts with Western instrumentation.

The selection of the mythic subjects for each piece was based in the overarching theme of the Heavens, with each myth engaging with the sky and its divine inhabitants. The three myths selected as the subject for the pieces were more complex than originally assumed. There are unexpected variations of these myths, which revealed contrasting personalities of different mythic characters and dissimilar underlying motives.

During the writing process, I engaged with Western composers' interpretations of Eastern music. The primary focus was on the music of Claude Debussy (1862-1918), who became interested in Javanese Gamelan when he first encountered it in 1889. This is most apparent in his piano composition, Voiles (1910). Examining the scores of Voiles influenced my work and use of non-Western scales, such as the pentatonic, and piano range.

The scores of the American experimentalist composers Henry Cowell and George Crumb were also examined. Through the use of extended techniques, which are non-traditional approaches to playing instruments, these composers produced unfamiliar and non-traditional

sounds from the piano. Cowell was concerned with relaying Irish mythology through his piano music, and Crumb has incorporated folk tunes into his pieces in compelling, atypical ways, such as having a pianist whistle the folk tune into the piano.

Celestial Bodies is not only a collection of compositions that display Eastern and Western musical aesthetics. It is an informed study of Eastern and Western composers and how they address their creation of music that brings together Eastern and Western ideas. The information in this document is necessary context in an informed listening of my compositions. It will also supply readers with the motivations behind my compositional choices. Further, it will display how my research impacted the composition of Celestial Bodies.

Eastern Influences

Since Celestial Bodies combines Eastern and Western aesthetics, I will discuss my choice of quoted folk tune in "9/10" as well as Bright Sheng's Seven Tunes Heard in China, which likewise bridges Eastern and Western musical aesthetics. This section is titled "Eastern Influence" as the music and composer that are discussed are of Chinese origins.

In "9/10," the Kangding Love Song is quoted. The Kangding Love Song is a folk melody originating from Sichuan province. This folk song is quite popular and has been disseminated internationally. I first encountered it as a chorister in 2011-2015. The text of the piece contains themes of moonlight, the sky, and love, which are well suited to the thematic content of the rest of my pieces. Below is a translated text of the love song:

"High upon the mountainside

Floats a cloud so white

There lies peaceful Kangding town

Bathed in silver moonlight

Moonlight shines bright

Over Kangding town,

Lovely maid with a smile so sweet

Li the woodcutter's daughter

Zheng the blacksmith's eldest son

Came through moonlight to court her

Moonlight shines bright

Over Kangding town.

He fell in love with her smile so sweet

And her pleasing ways,

She could cook and she could sew

Care for him all of his days,

Moonlight shines bright

Over Kangding town.

Lovely maidens of the world

I cannot but love you

Gentlemen of the world

They cannot but woo you" (Liu 2013).

The rhythm was modified and embellished to use as a theme to represent the archer. These changes were informed by Stephen Jones' Folk Music of China (Jones 1998). In this text, Jones discusses certain meters and rhythms commonly found in Chinese folk music. The

Kangding Love song was rewritten in the liushui meter (presto, 1/4), which is meant to evoke "flowing water" (Jones 1998, 124) and is considered as "one beat, no eyes." The concept of the beats and eyes refers to the notation of Chinese folk scores, which contain circles to denote the main beat, and dots for the subsequent, less important pulses. The rhythm was also modified to have more commonality with rhythms originating from Shanxi.

Bright Sheng's Seven Tunes Heard in China is an informative study in combining traditional Chinese musical ideas and theory with Western instrumentation. Sheng "was a great admirer of Bela Bartok due to his ability to combine folk music with western forms, instruments, and genres" (Kang 2016, 1). In composing this piece, Sheng contended with the challenge of translating the idiosyncrasies of the erhu, a Chinese string instrument, for cello. For example, glissandos, which are uninterrupted slides between two notes, are characteristic of the erhu and considered "expressive devices" (Kang 11). In their dissertation on Seven Tunes Heard in China, Kang discusses three types of glissandos. These glissandos are classed by the different intervals they cover. Such glissandos are essential mannerisms and occur much more frequently in Chinese music than they do in Western music. Sheng chose to write for cello in Seven Tunes Heard in China, as it can mimic the glissandos and further idiosyncrasies in Chinese music. I chose to emulate the pipa through a section of pizzicato in "9/10."

Myths

The pieces are named after the dates of festivals relevant to the myths. The first piece, "15/8," commemorates the mythic figure, Chang'e. Its name refers to the date on which the Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋节) occurs. This Festival is a celebration of the harvest and the

moon. In contemporary celebrations, participants eat round, bean paste filled mooncakes, and light red lanterns. Chang'e, the moon goddess, is heavily associated with this festival, and her husband, Hou Yi, is similarly associated with it.

The title of "9/10" is unlike the titles of the other pieces, as the numbers do not refer to the date of a festival. Rather, it alludes to a mythic feat accomplished by the figure it observes. Hou Yi, a mythic archer, shot nine of ten sun-laden ravens to prevent Earth from burning.

The final piece, "7/7," is named for the date on which the Qixi (七夕) Festival is celebrated. It falls on the seventh day of the seventh month according to the lunar calendar. This festival celebrates the Cowherd and Weaver girl myth, and is known to Americans as an equivalent to Valentine's Day.

Two of the myths featured have a linear narrative arc. The archer, Hou Yi, had performed this heroic act before he had married Chang'e, the goddess of the moon. In the score and in performance, this order has been inverted. Sonorously, the most "challenging" sounds, which are heard in Hou Yi's piece, are placed between two pieces with sounds the listeners would be more familiar with. In addition, "15/8" comes before "7/7" because of its quality of harmonic stasis. "7/7," though ending on an augmented chord, giving the conclusion a questionable quality, provides a more satisfactory resolution than "15/8" would.

The first myth and correlated piece in the program is that of Chang'e, and how she became the goddess of the moon. After Hou Yi shot the nine suns, he became a King and married Chang'e, a girl from a local village. On his way to meet a friend one day, he encountered the "Queen Mother of the West." This deity awarded him with an elixir of immortality that would cause his ascension to heaven and give him a saintly status.

As he wished to not be parted from his wife, Hou Yi decided against drinking the potion. Instead, he gave Chang'e the elixir for safe-keeping. A jealous apprentice happened to see this exchange and wanted the elixir for himself. He confronted Chang'e when Hou Yi was away, and tried to steal the elixir from her. With no other options available to her, she swallowed the elixir.

Immediately after drinking the elixir, she rose from the earth and ascended towards the Heavens. As she was apprehensive in leaving her husband, she landed on the nearest celestial body to Earth: the moon. Hou Yi returned and learned of what had happened to Chang'e, and as he sorrowfully observed the bright harvest moon, he saw Chang'e upon it. When other villagers learned of Chang'e's story, they began to burn incense and prayed to Chang'e, the moon goddess, for safety and luck. In alternative versions of the myth, Chang'e stole the elixir from Hou Yi, rather than a jealous apprentice.

In the writing of "15/8," Chang'e's ascension to the moon is depicted instead of the conflict that caused her to rise to the moon. Similar to "7/7," "15/8" has an upward trajectory. The ascending motion expresses Chang'e's ascension to the moon after she drinks the potion of immortality. Within the first three measures, the lowest note of the piece is sounded, an E1. The piece revolves around the varied repetition of the theme that occurs in the pickup to m 34 in the right hand. I start the piece with a collection of pitches consisting of A, C, D, E, and G. As the piece continues, I add F, and, eventually, B. Where "7/7" is characterised by a distinct melodic theme, "15/8" is characterised by harmonic stasis. A wash of sound and color is constant, with the pedal melting the sounds together over rather long periods of time. As the piece progresses, the texture becomes thicker.

The storytelling in this piece is that of the ascension. I was not concerned in expressing the theft of the potion, either by the archer Hou-Yi's apprentice, or by Chang'e herself. Rather, I was concerned with creating the ambience and atmosphere I imagine was experienced by Chang'e as she flew to the moon. It is the most static of the pieces, predominantly staying in the same sonoric location, despite traveling several octaves.

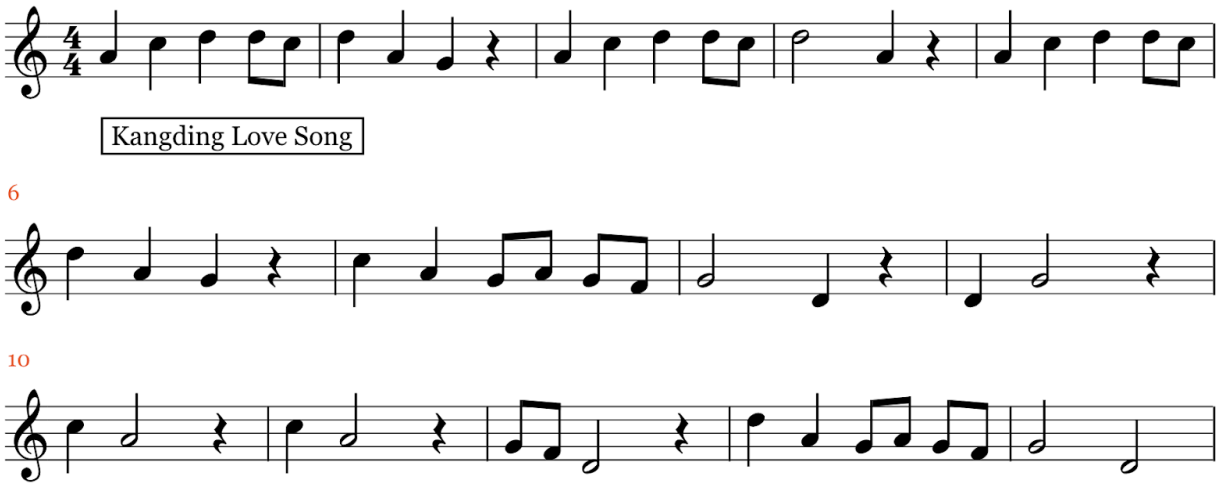
Due to the age of the Chinese myths, there have been a variety of conflicted retellings of each given tale. For example, Hou Yi, the mythic archer, is depicted as both a hero and a despot in different versions of his Epic. The Huainan zi, an ancient Chinese text written some time before 139 BC, describes his heroic acts and frames him as a champion sent from Emperor Yao to the people. However, in the Chu ci, written in the Zhou dynasty, Hou Yi is characterised as a traitor who overthrew the Xia dynasty and brought "grief to the entire nation" (Masako 2). During this project, I contended with choosing between different retellings of the same mythological figures, as well as with the different names these figures have been assigned within different regions of China.

Hou Yi (后羿), also known by Shen Yi, or Yi, is a character in Chinese mythology known by many names and by contrasting characterizations. Scholars, like Wang Yi, have proposed that there were two separate men who went by the same name with differing personas. The Hou Yi described by the Huainan zi is the mythic archer who performed Herculean tasks for Emperor Yao, and the tyrannical Hou Yi (from the You qiong tribe) from the Chu ci assumed the name of the famed hero. Further, it has been insinuated in the text Shuo Wen that Hou Yi is not a name, but a title designated for archers.

Other scholars, like Mori Masako, argue for the "one Hou Yi" theory; that Hou Yi was both a hero and villain, a human and divine. After discovering these contesting stories and theories, I concluded that my Hou Yi piece would focus on one specific heroic feat, rather than concerning myself with writing music to reflect Hou Yi's multiple identities and characteristics.

When first written, "9/10" was more literal than it has become. The act of Hou Yi shooting the ravens was executed through ascending glissandos representing the arrows, and through patterns of sporadic descending notes representing the falling ravens. Glissandos are idiomatic of Chinese instruments like the erhu, but when translated on the piano, they had a different resulting sound than the particular Chinese glissandos one hears in erhu music. The original and literal interpretation did not successfully emulate a Chinese glissando, so those measures were removed and a symbolic approach using the Kangding Love Song was employed.

In "9/10", the Kangding Love Song folk tune represents Hou Yi, which I have transposed in Example One. The Kangding folk song appears in a more fragmented state in mm. 10-16, 20-23, 25-28, and 30-34. It occurs more fully in mm. 35-48. The ascending lines that are first heard in mm. 1-6 in the left hand represent the ravens. The two themes of the love song melody and the raven melody are introduced before m 16. In m. 21, these two ideas become fused together. The combination of the two contrasting subjects is meant to evoke the atmosphere of Hou Yi fighting against the ravens. The Kangding Love Song is ultimately louder and more layered than the raven's theme is. The piece ends on a second inversion of the D7 chord, allowing for a non-conclusive ending. This reflects the multi-faceted and controversial nature of Hou Yi.



Example One. Kangding Love Song (Source: Yundi 2012)

The last melody in "9/10" is that of the love song, which is an assertion that Hou Yi was victorious in his battle (mm. 35-48). Within these measures, the pianist plucks the melody of the Kangding Love Song on the internal strings of the piano. The quality of the plucked strings creates an unfamiliar timbre to Western ears and emulates a similar sound to that of a pipa, a lute-like Chinese string instrument. In this section, an extended technique called stopping is utilized. Stopping involves the pianist placing their finger on the string of the piano note while they simultaneously play the same pitch on the keyboard. This creates an otherworldly and mysterious timbre, an uncertainty that reflects the uncertainty of Hou Yi's heroic status. In performance, Professor Iskowitz and I used two books to stop the piano strings rather than using his fingers. In doing this, we created a more consistent timbre and pitch, and made the piece more playable.

The myth of the Cowherd and the Weaver girl, begins with the cowherd, Niulang (牛郎), who discovered seven fairy sisters bathing. He stole their clothing and waited to see what they would do. The sisters sent the youngest, Zhinu (织女), to find their clothing. As Niulang saw

Zhinu naked, she was obligated to accept his wish to marry her. They were a happy couple and had two children.

Zhinu's mother, the Goddess of Heaven, disapproved of the union between her divine daughter and the mortal cowherd. The Goddess forced Zhinu to return to heaven. Niulang was bewildered at the disappearance of his wife when his ox began to speak to him. The ox said that if Niulang killed him and wore its hide, he would be able to go to heaven and search for Zhinu.

Niulang killed the ox, wore its hide, and took his two children with him to search for Zhinu. The Goddess, displeased by Niulang once again, took her hairpin and scratched a river (the Milky Way) between Zhinu (Vega) and Niulang (Altair) in the sky. Niulang took care of the children on his side of the river, watching Zhinu weave at her loom from across the Milky Way. Every year, on the seventh day of the seventh month, all of the magpies in the world take pity on them and form a bridge across the Milky Way to reunite the family. This date is commemorated by the Qixi Festival.

"7/7" is tied to the myth of the Cowherd and the Weaver girl. This myth is expressed in the piece by a gradually ascension as an expression of the magpie bridge. In the first iteration of the theme, in measure one, the melody is given in fourths. In the narrative of Celestial Bodies, these fourths represent the couple. As the melody continues, it is mostly expressed monophonically. The monophony is the expression of Weaver girl's solitude. The fourths, which occur following the first measure are her recollection of the Cowherd.

The magpies begin to collaborate around the notion of reconnecting the couple in mm. 26-42. The Weaver girl's joy in being reunited with the Cowherd is expressed in mm. 43-55. When the theme recurs in m. 56, it signifies the reunion between the couple. The octaves and

fourths added to the theme are to indicate that the melody line is no longer in isolation. The lower 8th notes that are found in this section are meant to contrast the higher notes and show how the piece has progressed from a lower place into a higher place, both physically and in the myth. The final three measures, mm. 64-66, contain an augmented sound, which allows the piece to end in an ambiguous manner. This ambiguity lends itself to the narrative, as the couple must be separated after the Qixi Festival for another year.

Western Influences

This section will address Western musicians concerned with exoticism and Eastern sounds alongside piano compositions which have been influential in the process of composing Celestial Bodies. Claude Debussy's exoticism and the impact of Javanese gamelan on his compositions post-1889 have been compelling during composition. The piano music of George Crumb and Henry Cowell, two contemporary American experimentalist composers, has likewise been influential on Celestial Bodies.

Studying the piano music of Debussy was influential writing Celestial Bodies, as his compositions exploit the full range of the piano to create specific colors, moods, and punctuations. The intricacies of writing multiple parts within the span of one hand was similarly compelling. The scores of his first and second book of preludes reveal detailed expression text and a multitude of dynamics. His thorough descriptions in the expression text acted as a guide in writing expression text in Celestial Bodies. Debussy is also an example of how Eastern music has been interpreted by the West, with the notable concepts being western interpretations of the pentatonic and whole-note scales.

Debussy's first book of preludes, which contains twelve preludes including Voiles, was published in 1910. The prelude titles are written at the end of each piece, preceded by a set of ellipses, which were intentionally ambiguous. The significance of Voiles has to do with the whole-note scale that Debussy uses liberally throughout the piece. He only departs from the whole-tone harmony to use the pentatonic scale, in mm. 42-47. His use of the whole-tone and pentatonic scales demonstrates the influence of Eastern music in Debussy's work. In 1889, Debussy encountered Javanese Gamelan during the Universal Exposition. The most blatant examples of the influence of Gamelan on his writing are in Pagodes, Fantaisie for piano and orchestra, and in the suite Pour le piano.

The two warring themes that appear in "9/10" are connected with the dynamic between the whole-tone and pentatonic harmonies in Voiles. The raven's theme contains both diminished and augmented triads and melodies, which contrasts Hou Yi's pentatonic theme. This is most apparent in mm. 28-30. In the left hand of mm. 28-29, there are diminished sounds, which change into augmented sounds in m. 30, where the right hand stops playing diminished sounds in favor of Hou Yi's pentatonic theme.

In "15/8," the use of the range of the piano as a means of creating different colors was influenced by the piano music of Debussy. Debussy employs a large range of the piano in Voiles. In m. 43, the right hand strikes Db7, in the highest range of the piano. The piece is constantly punctuated with a Bb1, in the lower range of the piano. I similarly punctuated "15/8" and "7/7" with notes in the lower range of the piano. In both instances, the low tones occur in the final sections of the pieces, with a C1 being the lowest note in mm. 56-63 in "7/7," and a D2 in mm. 39-42. The low notes give a sense of height to each of the pieces, as they contrast with the

predominant melody being in a much higher range. As the pieces travel from a low range to a higher range, these small moments of punctuation allow for a reminder of where the piece started and has progressed to.

The piano compositions of the American experimentalist composers George Crumb, and Henry Cowell are a significant example of extended techniques. In examining the scores to Crumb's Makrokosmos I, and Cowell's Aeolian Harp (1923) and Tides of Manaunaun (1917), one can decipher how these composers contended with extended techniques for piano, and how they notated these techniques.

Makrokosmos I is a collection of twelve piano pieces relating to the Zodiac, composed by George Crumb. Crumb's scores are so compelling because they are intricately hand written as to accommodate extended techniques. Before writing Celestial Bodies, I listened to and read through the entirety of the Makrokosmos I score. The sixth piece, Night-Spell I [Sagittarius], includes instructions for the pianist to whistle into the piano. Towards the end of the piece, the pianist is instructed to whistle a folk tune, "Will There Be Any Stars In My Crown." This provided an interesting and unique example of how to incorporate a folk tune into piano music. The most effective way to integrate the Kangding Love Song was to have it represent Hou Yi, both on the keys and inside of the piano, rather than to have the pianist whistle it. However, this whistling method was one which was considered and experimented with for "9/10."

An example of an extended technique is the tone cluster. A tone cluster is an amalgamation of many notes in close proximity that a pianist will play by striking the keyboard with their forearm or palm. A quintessential example of tone clusters can be heard in Cowell's Tides of Manaunaun. Tides of Manaunaun is a piece of program music about a creation myth.

The mythic Irish god of the sea, Manaunaun, is evoked through Cowell's use of tone clusters to create a mood of chaos. In the right hand of the pianist, Cowell wrote a waltz-like Irish folk tune. In the left, he wrote the clusters. The myth can be heard through the melody, which like the ocean, has a quality of ebbing and flowing. Manaunaun is also apparent in the gradually expanding range of the tone clusters. The ebbing and flowing can also be observed in the dynamics, which grow throughout the piece. Starting as a pianissimo in m. 1, it increases to mezzo-piano in m. 7, then to forte in m. 12, fortissimo in m. 18, fortississimo in m. 22 and finally culminating in m. 24 with a powerful fortississsissimo. After m. 24, the dynamic quickly dies down into a pianississimo within the span of the last eleven measures.

"9/10" was originally written with clusters instead of chords. However, this passage was ultimately discarded and replaced with sparser chords. In ridding the piece of tone clusters, the application of different extended techniques for piano became more necessary. The extended techniques that appear in "9/10" were pioneered by the same composers. In mm. 35-40 of "9/10," pizzicato occurs on the piano strings. In the score of Aeolian Harp, Henry Cowell indicates the plucking of the internal strings of the piano by marking the score with pizzicato. Likewise, Crumb indicates plucking the same way in Makrokosmos I. Pizzicato is a musical technique that is more often applied to string instruments, likewise indicating a plucked section.

"9/10" is the piece that is most connected to the American experimentalist approach. Throughout the process of writing the piece, I attempted to write using many of these extended techniques. I did many experiments both inside of the piano and on the keys, writing around 80 measures of music which were discarded.

Writing Process, Conclusion

In Fall 2017, I took my first Composition course at Drew University with Dr. Weston. For the final project in the class, I decided to draw inspiration from my Chinese heritage. I chose to recreate the myth of the Cowherd and the Weaver girl musically.

Margaret Leng Tan, a distinguished Singaporean pianist, played what would become "7/7" after a lecture about George Crumb, John Cage, and Henry Cowell at the Steinway Hall in New York. Being Singaporean, she recognized the myth instantly. Her awareness of the myth, alongside her enthusiasm towards the piece, inspired me to portray more Chinese myths through music.

For Celestial Bodies, the writing process began at the piano. I would play, improvise, and record what I played. This is how I established chord progressions and melodic ideas. I notated what I heard back on the recording and brought it into my weekly meeting with Dr. Weston. During our meetings, he gave me suggestions on piano writing and how to improve what I had created.

Eventually, the improvisation moved away from the keyboard and inside of the piano. I would depress the sostenuto pedal and use my nails to pluck and slide across the strings. I would even sing into the piano with the pedal depressed, which created some very interesting colors.

During the Fall 2018 semester, I wrote an immense amount of music that didn't make it into the finalized version of Celestial Bodies. Starting in December 2018, I deleted most of "15/8" and "9/10" and began to rewrite them. Although my research of extended technique was

exciting, I began to dislike what I had written. The extended techniques I was using, including the tone clusters, sounded ill-suited to my pieces and did not serve the narratives well.

In the Spring 2019 semester, I returned with two pieces that were unrecognizable from their original versions. In 15/8, I had salvaged ten measures of music, pickup to mm. 34-43, which became the foundation of the piece as it is now. In "9/10," I reconstructed the "shooting" section using the Kangding Love Song with much success. Upon hearing the pieces, Dr. Weston remarked that my voice was coming through in these new pieces more-so than in their original versions, and I agreed.

Different models of pianos have different harps on the inside. This can cause problems with writing with extended technique, as some of the writing for a certain model may not translate well in a different piano. After I wrote mm. 35-48, I consulted the piano in the Concert Hall. What I had written was not easily accessible on the harp of the Concert Hall piano, and I had to modify what I had written in accordance with the accessible strings.

After I had edited the pieces further, I met with Professor Iskowitz, who had agreed to play the pieces, for more edits. He first played through 7/7, and we discussed its pace and tempo. In our next meeting, he played "15/8", which is much faster. He brought to my attention that the sixteenth note figures containing fourths, like that of m. 31, were very difficult to play at the speed that I had written. After this meeting, I edited the fourths out of some of the sixteenth note figures. I completed the pieces and created a cover page inscribed with my Chinese name as it appears on my chop. A chop is a personal name seal that can be likened to a signature.

Celestial Bodies is the culmination of my education as a undergraduate music major. This project has combined my coursework in composition, music research and history. The

compositions were directly influenced by research into influential composers of the 20th and 21st centuries of both Eastern and Western traditions.

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