



**ASIAN INFLUENCES IN
ALEXINA LOUIE'S PIANO
MUSIC**

Alexina Louie is one of Canada's most recognized composers, whose own unique compositional style is influenced by her Asian heritage and Western upbringing. Louie is prolific in the genre of Contemporary music, writing music that requires knowledge of extended techniques, and explores atonal and polytonal tonalities, and a variety of notational styles. Born in China Town, Vancouver,¹ the young pianist started with a music education similar to that of any North American child. She considered herself a regular piano student without any particular affiliation for contemporary music or music from her cultural heritage. This paper explores Louie's journey to find her unique compositional style which fuses eastern and western influences to create an individualized stream of contemporary music. By looking at Oriental instruments and eastern philosophy, the pianist will gain a better understanding of how to perform Louie's Asian-Canadian music.

Louie was born July 30, 1949 in China Town, Vancouver, B.C. to second generation Chinese immigrants.² Her family owned and ran a business that imported and exported Chinese food. Louie describes her childhood home as similar to other North American homes and recalls old American Classics like Gershwin playing on the record player, rather than music from her Oriental background.³ Louie studied Music History at the University of British Columbia,⁴ and was attracted to composition classes with Cortland Hultberg. Hultberg proved pivotal in her career as a musician and she went on to study a Master's in Composition under Pauline Oliveros at the University of San Diego.⁵ At UCSD Louie joined the Women's Only Ensemble where performed contemporary compositions with electronic additions – something entirely new at the

¹ "Alexina Louie: Biography," *CMC Online*, last modified 2002, Accessed April 10, 2018 <https://www.musiccentre.ca/node/37256/biography>.

² Ibid.

³ Louie, Alexina, interview by Olivia Adams. London, Ontario, (11 21, 2017).

⁴ "Alexina Louie: Biography," *CMC Online*, last modified 2002, Accessed April 10, 2018 <https://www.musiccentre.ca/node/37256/biography>.

⁵ Diane Bégay, "Contemporary music in Canada: Alexina Louie," (DMA diss., University of Ottawa, 1994), 18.

time. Oliveros called the music “Sonic Meditations,”⁶ and this ensemble introduced Louie to the “wild side of music.”⁷ Experiences such as this guided Louie in the direction of Contemporary repertoire.

Several years after Louie completed her master’s, she went through a career altering identity crisis, as she struggled to find her unique voice as a composer. Wanting her music to be a statement of herself, she studied Contemporary music as well as the compositional style of Bach, Mozart, and Mahler⁸, but it was the encouragement of friend, Peter Salemi, who encouraged her to return to her roots and explore her Asian heritage. Her first memory of Chinese music was at the celebration of Chinese New Year as a child. She speaks fondly of her experience and her childhood excitement around the celebration.

“I was born in China Town and Chinese New Year was something that my dad took me too. It was a very small, and local and personal celebration. It was held 2 or 3 blocks down Pender Street and we would follow the Lion Dancers and drummers down the street. My father’s family business was an importing and exporting Chinese food. We would have an offering on a bamboo pole. Some meat and lettuce leaves tied around a box of money for the community. The lion dancers would come by and do a special dance. This was my first memory of Asian music affecting me. It comes from an initial experience.”⁹

“It was close to me. I was thrilled with the drumming and the clanging of the Chinese cymbals, and the firecrackers. I always found it moving. I never knew why then, but now it’s obvious that it’s because I’m Chinese that it strikes a chord within me.”¹⁰

Peter played the Japanese instruments the hichiriki and the shō and encouraged Louie to explore the instruments. Louie was taken with the unique sounds and timbres they produced, and she began to study Asian instruments with Tsun-Tuen Lui.¹¹ Louie continued to explore Korean,

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Martin Knelman, “Composer brings her tiger home to China,” *Toronto Star*, October 9, 2013.

⁹ Louie, Alexina, interview by Olivia Adams. London, Ontario, (11 21, 2017).

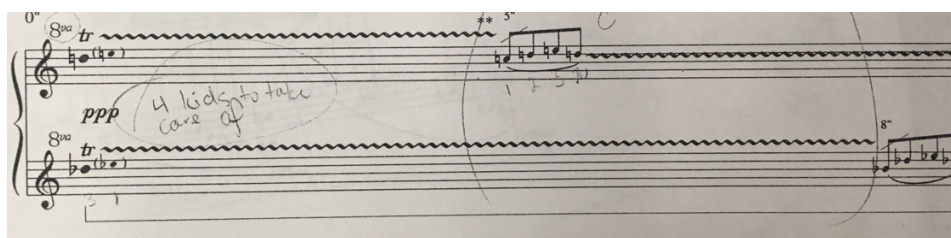
¹⁰ Peter Robb, “Alexina Louie’s musical journey; The Chinese-Canadian composer found her voice by returning to her roots,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, September 21, 2013.

¹¹ Bégay, 30.

Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, and North Indian raga music, and Javanese gamelan music while in California.¹² She later noted that “California opened my ears, introduced me to oriental music and, in doing so, helped me to find my own voice. If I hadn’t gone there I probably wouldn’t have become a composer.”¹³ Louie also studied eastern philosophy of *Yin-yang*, Zen theories, and Asian art, and they began to influence her compositions.

Through her studies with Tsun-Tuen Lui, her understanding of the unique timbres increased, and the characteristics of these instruments began to make their way into her piano compositions.

The hichiriki is a double-reed instrument originating in Japan. The instrument resembles that of the oboe, with holes for the fingers in the front and back.¹⁴ It is made of bamboo and is popular in court music or *gagaku*¹⁵ in Japan. The timbre of the instrument is high-pitched and reedy. It does not operate on the western system of pitches and utilizes pitch-bending and quarter-tones and half-tones. An example of this in Louie’s piano music is in the opening of *I leap through the sky with stars* where the adding of pitches to the trills is similar to the idea of pitch-bending on the hichiriki.



Alexina Louie, "I leap through the sky with stars," *I leap through the sky with stars* (Toronto: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1991), 1.

The shō is a form of Japanese flute that is found in ancient court music. It is a mellow sounding chordal instrument that can play more than ten pitches at the same time¹⁶. The notation

¹² Bégay, 25.

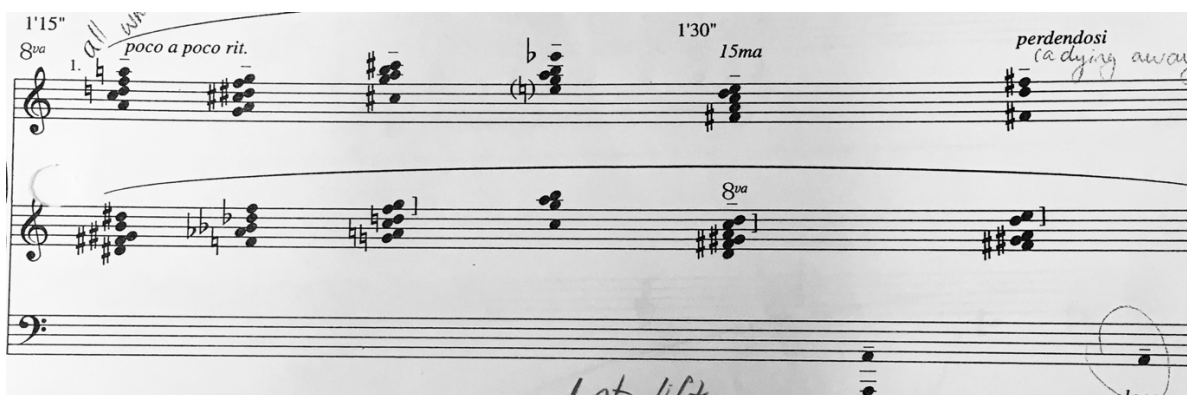
¹³ Bégay, 35.

¹⁴ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "hichiriki," accessed April 2, 2018 <https://www.britannica.com/art/hichiriki>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

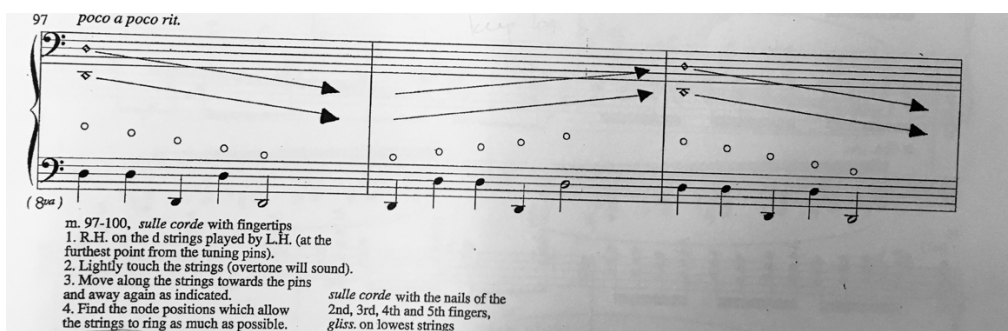
¹⁶ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "shō," accessed April 2, 2018 <https://www.britannica.com/art/sho>.

of the shō appears as chordal clusters which Louie utilizes in compositions such as *O Moon* and in the coda of *I leap through the sky with stars*.



Alexina Louie, "I leap through the sky with stars," *I leap through the sky with stars* (Toronto: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1991), 12.

Louie also looked at string instruments and utilized their techniques to recreate their timbres on the piano. The zheng, is a plucked string instrument of Chinese origin.¹⁷ It is comparable to the harp or psaltery. The instrument has a curved top, a flat bottom, and silk strings stretched across the body of the instrument.¹⁸ The instrument is played by plucking, and the pitches are altered by pressing on the strings to hear the overtones. This technique is utilized in the last page of Louie's *Memories in an Ancient Garden* where the pianist is instructed to press on the open D strings, while sliding the hand up the strings in order to give off different overtones.

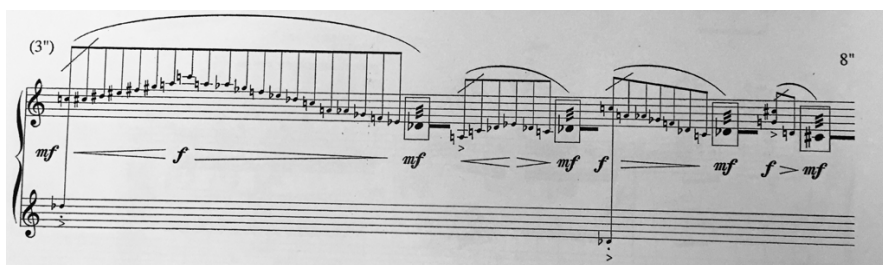


Alexina Louie, "Scenes From A Jade Terrace," (Toronto, Ontario: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1996), 23.

¹⁷Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. "zheng," accessed April 2, 2018 <https://www.britannica.com/art/zheng>.

¹⁸Ibid.

The ch'in is a Chinese string instrument with seven strings. The instrument board indicates frets with pearls, and the strings of the instrument vary in thickness. This instrument also carries symbolic meaning. There are two sound holes in the back of the instrument, the largest one, the "dragon pond"¹⁹ and the smaller one, the "phoenix pool."²⁰ In addition, each ch'in is given a unique name which is inscribed on the back of the instrument.²¹ The notation in ch'in music indicates pitches without rhythmic value. The music is intended to be "peaceful and harmonious without stress or excitement."²² Chi'n music focuses on specific note treatment over melody. An piano example is in the *senza misura* of *Warrior* from *Scenes in a Jade Terrace*. This section is free-flowing with no particular melodic direction and obsesses over the treatment of the d-flat/c-sharp.



Alexina Louie, "Scenes From A Jade Terrace," (Toronto, Ontario: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1996), 6.

According the traditional chi'in music "the emphasis is on the single tones and their natural virtue or power by which these tones are what they are. Thus, music is sound, and sound is "living matter."²³ The music of the chi'in is for spiritual worship and not entertainment of an audience.²⁴ Louie describes the above section as one of introspection where the musician is to

¹⁹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "chi'in," accessed April 2, 2018 <https://www.britannica.com/art/qin-musical-instrument>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "chi'in," accessed April 2, 2018 <https://www.britannica.com/art/qin-musical-instrument>.

²² Bégay, 127.

²³ Bégay, 128.

²⁴ Esther Yu-Hui Chu, "On the Musical Silk Route: Piano Music of Alexina Louie" (Research Essay, Univeristy of Alberta, 1987), 16.

look inwardly and become a poet and an artist.²⁵ There is a certain level of spiritual connection in order to become a “warrior” as the title of the piece suggests. Chi’ in music is played to connect Heaven and humanity in order to “achieve an intimate level of discourse between God and man.”²⁶

The gong is a percussion instrument that is found in many Asian countries, most notably in China, Japan, the Philippines, and Indonesia.²⁷ The instrument is pitched or unpitched and gives off a loud, resonate sound stemming from vibrations in the centre of the instrument.²⁸ In Eastern religions gongs are used to mark sections of chant or ceremony. In *Warrior* a resonant bass octave acts as a gong to mark off sections of the piece. The gong-like octave opens the piece, and then later on marks off the change of key.



Alexina Louie, "Scenes From A Jade Terrace," (Toronto, Ontario: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1996), 1.

A very resonant bass note also opens and marks off the introspective middle section of the piece that emulates chant or meditative song.



Alexina Louie, "Scenes From A Jade Terrace," (Toronto, Ontario: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1996), 7.

²⁵ Louie, Alexina, interview by Olivia Adams. London, Ontario, (11 21, 2017).

²⁶ Bégay, 128.

²⁷ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “gong,” accessed April 3, 2018 <https://www.britannica.com/art/gong-musical-instrument>.

²⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “gong,” accessed April 3, 2018 <https://www.britannica.com/art/gong-musical-instrument>.

Finally, the gong-octave returns to complete the piece and usher in the second movement.



Alexina Louie, "Scenes From A Jade Terrace," (Toronto, Ontario: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1996), 7.

The Javanese gamelan is a type of instrumental ensemble that is found in the Indonesian islands that is comprised of percussion instruments, string instruments, wooden flutes, and on occasion, vocalists. The instruments that make up each individual gamelan are considered a set and are tuned to each other.²⁹ Gamelan music is built in layers with a core melody as its foundation. The melody is then altered by minimalist principles such as shifting accents or altered pitches. An example of this in Louie's music is in measure 16-33 in *I leap through the sky with stars*, where the core melody remains the same with slight pitch alterations taking place throughout.



Alexina Louie, "I leap through the sky with stars," *I leap through the sky with stars* (Toronto: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1991), 4.

The idea of a constant melody with shifting accents is also represented in *Changes from Music for Piano*.



Alexina Louie, "Music for Piano," (Toronto: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1982), 7.

²⁹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Gamelan," accessed April 3, 2018 <https://www.britannica.com/art/gamelan>.

The understanding of these various instruments, their functions, timbres, and cultural context gives the pianist direct insight into how to play Louie's piano music, as well as a view into the composer's perspective. The knowledge of the instruments influences the artists interpretation and allows them to be effective in evoking the east-west style associated with Louie's music.

As Louie discovered the eastern side of her heritage, she read eastern philosophy, Asian folklore, and explored the ideas balance and meditation. One of the philosophies, found in the music of Louie is that of the *Yin-yang*. This idea stems from ancient Chinese philosophy³⁰ dealing with the juxtaposition of light and dark, heaven and earth. *Yin* represents earth, femininity, darkness, passivity, and absorption. It represented in even numbers, valleys and streams, the tiger, the color orange, and a broken line.³¹ *Yang* represents heaven, maleness, light, activity, and penetration. It is represented in odd numbers, mountains, the dragon, the color azure, and an unbroken line.³² The philosophy of the *Yin-yang* is represented in Louie's music in multiple ways. One of which is when she composes for one hand on black keys and one on white. Throughout large sections of *Warrior*, the left-hand plays on the black keys and the right hand on white. Since the *yin* is associated with darkness and earth, the left-hand plays the black keys, lower on the piano, and the right-hand takes the role of *yang*, associated with light and heaven and plays in the upper register.



Alexina Louie, "Scenes From A Jade Terrace," (Toronto, Ontario: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1996), 5.

³⁰ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Yinyang: Eastern Philosophy," accessed April 2, 2018
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/yinyang>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

This same idea of *Yin-yang* can be applied to a section of *The Enchanted Bells*.

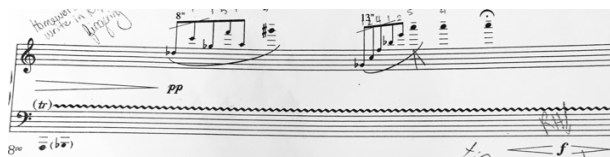


Alexina Louie, "Music for Piano," (Toronto: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1982), 2.

When dark and light are working together, it is called *qi*,³³ and when *qi* is in operation, it "conceives *Yin-yang* as a dynamic and natural form of flowing energy."³⁴

The idea of *Yin-yang* is displayed through animal representation in her pieces. Bringing the Tiger Down the mountain is a composition for cello and piano and is one of the first to be written in Louie's new compositional style. The Tiger represents *yin*, and fittingly was composed for a female cellist.³⁵ A piece that represents *yang* is Dragon Bells, involving keyboard and electronics.

Thirdly, the *Yin-yang* philosophy is represented through dramatic contrasts within the same piece, spanning a short amount of time. An example of this is in the cadenza-like middle section of *I leap through the sky with stars*, where the thunderous *fff*'s are contrasted with delicate upper figures.



Alexina Louie, "I leap through the sky with stars," *I leap through the sky with stars* (Toronto: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1991), 7.

³³ Wang, Robin R. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "Yin-yang" Loyola Marymount University, U.S.A., Accessed April 8, 2018 <http://www.iep.utm.edu/yinyang/#H1>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Knelman, 2013.

This idea is also evident in *Memories in an Ancient Garden* when a roaring section disintegrates into a minimalistic line in seconds.



Alexina Louie, "Scenes From A Jade Terrace," (Toronto, Ontario: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1996), 21.

One commentator notes “when these two extreme registers are sounded simultaneously, a blended sonic effect built upon the contrasts results in a new unification. This unification is congruent with the ideal of perfection that results from the concept of balancing yin and yang.”³⁶

Another eastern ideology that Louie explored was that of Zen. Zen is defined as “A Japanese school of Mahayana Buddhism emphasizing the value of meditation and intuition rather than ritual worship or study of scriptures.”³⁷ The idea of Zen is strongly associated with that of Zen gardens where each person can seek their own path within the garden. These ideas are represented in *Scenes from a Jade Terrace*. *Warrior* contains an introspective section where the artist is challenged to become a poet, encouraging them to look internally for the answer.³⁸ This *senza misura* section sounds unique in the hands of individual artists, as they focus inward for the correct timing and timbres. Zen is also represented in the second movement, *Memories in an Ancient Garden*. Louie allows the musician freedom to play different parts of the strings of the piano to create the soundscape they desire. Just as in a Zen garden, each artist must follow their

³⁶ Chu, 36.

³⁷ *Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. “zen,” accessed April 3, 2018 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/zen>.

³⁸ Louie, Alexina, interview by Olivia Adams. London, Ontario, (11 21, 2017).

individual path to find the truest interpretation of this piece. Louie's philosophy on music is very much one of "Zen," preferring that each pianist trust their intuition rather than her interpretations. Once it is out of the hands of the composer, it is the job of the artist to make the music speak. She states, "It doesn't mean it's (the music) all literal. It's about how you feel and how you express what you feel. We are all human and we all experience the same feeling. And an artist can express them for others and bring them into your world."³⁹ Her desire for the music is to allow students to create their own world with the boundaries she gives.⁴⁰

Louie's connection to Asian instruments and traditions is a personal one. Her curiosity in Asian influences was sparked when she made a family pilgrimage back to her grandparent's homeland, but ultimately the synthesis of her style came from within. The beginnings of Louie's style were formed by philosophy, instrumental study, poetry, and meditation, and after she found her voice she searched out her family history and saw it come full circle. Her family name in Chinese is *gugin* or "rain on the field," meaning "thunder."⁴¹ Through this discovery, she felt the circle was complete⁴² and her compositional style embodied her family name. Louie's compositional identity ultimately stems from her understanding of her personal identity. Through reaching for her Asian heritage she created her own unique voice in a fusion of east and west. There is no one who composes music in the style Louie created. Her music adds a unique voice to Contemporary idioms and specifically to the diversity of Canadian music. She writes, "I'm Oriental and I'm a woman, and both of those things are part of my writing. I'm not an Oriental woman artist, though. I'm an artist who uses what she has."⁴³

³⁹ Louie, Alexina, interview by Olivia Adams. London, Ontario, (11 21, 2017).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Robb, 2013.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Knelman, 1987.

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