

Isang Yun: *Pezzo Fantastico* (1988)

Note contributed by Jodi Tan and Estene Cheong, BMus1, Composition

Born in 1917, Isang Yun is a Korean-born German composer who sought to express a distinctly Asian sensibility within contemporary Western music. Yun produced a considerable number of instrumental compositions and more than 100 works. He aimed to develop compositions influenced by traditional Korean music and East Asian performance practices within a European instrumental and compositional world. He became one of the most prominent avant-garde composers in the world with a distinctive musical language that synthesized Far Eastern Asian philosophy, especially Chinese Taoism, with Western techniques and Korean traditional instrumental idioms.

After receiving the Seoul City Culture Award in 1955, he was able to study in Paris and Berlin from 1956 to 1959. In Berlin he studied with former Schönberg student Josef Rufer, learning how to compose “with twelve tones related only to one another”. From Germany, Yun was able to establish contact with and was a part of the international avant-garde.

Yun spent much of his adult life outside South Korea, living and teaching in Germany. He was abducted once in Berlin by secret agents from South Korea and spent a few years in prison. Protests from governments and artists from around the world convinced the South Korean government to release him and allow him to return to Germany. Yun’s main concerns in later life were of a humanistic nature. His music often contained a political message for the South Korean government, with a strong desire for peace around the world. He dedicated

himself to the cultural and political harmony of both North and South Korea.

Yun meticulously indicates in his scores the course of every individual tone centre like the articulation of a word. Naming this technique *Hauptton* (German for main tone), he treats each long-sustained note as having a life on its own, flexible within itself, containing beats, shading, dynamic nuances, and ornamentations. This approach shares essential characteristics with East Asian musical tradition. This treatment of a tone was new in the history of Western music and created certain difficulties in the execution of his imaginatively delicate, yet in no way merely playfully demanding ornamental music.

Yun took a great interest in the western flute, having grown up listening to many traditional Korean instruments that sound similar. *Pezzo*

*FantasiOSO* was one of the many works conceived from his fascination with this instrument. Written for his granddaughter, Li-Na Chen, who played the violin and Elisa Cozzini, a flautist, the work was premiered on 10 July 1988 as part of a flute workshop in Chiusi, Italy. The work, nonetheless, has an open instrumentation of 2 instruments and optional bass. Trills serve as one of the main melodic ideas. The two main instruments interweave with each other, while the bass instrument is mostly independent, acting as a support for the other two instruments.

The form is like a rondo (A B A1 B1 A2 B2 C). The first section is quiet with gradually swells and crescendos in the middle before decrescendoing towards the end, returning to quiet dynamics again. In addition to the dynamic swells, there is an increase in pitch range with more movement in the notes as well

as an increase in textural density as the piece progresses.

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György Kurtág: *12 Microludes* (1977)

Note contributed by Lin Ssu-Ting, BMus2,  
Composition

Born on 19 February 1926, György Kurtág is a Romanian-born Hungarian composer and pianist. He was an academic teacher of piano at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music from 1967, later also of chamber music, and taught until 1993.

In 1940, Kurtág studied piano with Magda Kardos and composition from Max Eisikovits, at Temesvár. After moving to Budapest in 1946, Kurtág officially became a Hungarian citizen in 1948, enrolling in the Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music, where he met his wife, as

well as composer György Ligeti, who became a close friend. He studied piano with Pál Kadosa, composition with Sándor Veress and Ferenc Farkas, chamber music with Leó Weiner, and theory with Lajos Bárdos, and graduated in piano and chamber music in 1951 before receiving his degree in composition in 1955. He was an outstanding student, winning the Erkl prize in 1954 and 1956. Among his early works was a Korean Cantata which expressed solidarity with the North Koreans in the Korean War against the USA, but he reached the age of 33 before he was willing to give any of his works opus numbers.

From the early 1950s until the mid-1950s, the Stalinist regime in Hungary banned numerous works by Bela Bartók, Arnold Schoenberg, and Igor Stravinsky. To escape this creative straitjacket György Kurtág moved to Paris in 1957 to study music with Olivier Messiaen,

Darius Milhaud, and Max Deutsch. He also had consultations with the Hungarian art psychologist Marianne Stein, and it was her advice that would prove most influential on his future development. While in Paris he wrote his first String Quartet, designating it 'opus 1' to mark a decisive break from his compositions to date, and dedicated it to his therapist Stein. He returned to Budapest in 1958, stopping for a few days in Cologne where he first heard recordings of Stockhausen's *Gruppen* and Ligeti's recent electronic music. This experience would also prove important in formulating his new compositional voice.

In 1971, he had his second appointment in the west. This time it was a one-year stay in West Berlin as grantee of the DAAD scholarship. His reputation began to gain more ground. He officially retired from the Academy in 1986. During his time his pupils included the

renowned pianists András Schiff and Zoltán Kocsis. In 1987 he became a member of the Bayerische Akademie der Schönen Künste, Munich, as well as a member of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Today, Kurtág is highly sought after as a composer as well as a teacher.

The *Microludes*, op. 13 were written as a tribute to Kurtág's friend Mihály András on the occasion of his 60th birthday. András was a composer and conductor and was involved in performances of many of Kurtág's earlier works. The Op. 13 pieces do not contain such an overt reference to his friend's music. The term "microlude" is an invention of Kurtág's; literally translated from the Latin roots of the term it means "little game". Kurtág anchors the 12 *Microludes* by basing each consecutive movement on one of the notes of the scale; each movement is based on the next note in an ascending chromatic sequence as the piece



progresses. There is an obvious reference to Webern's Bagatelles, op.9 but one also hears folk elements of the Bartók quartets. Each microlude is extremely brief, and the set explores an extremely diverse set of characters.

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Dai Fujikura: *Three Miniatures* (2012)

Note contributed by Chua Zi Tao and Ng Xin Ci, BMus2, Composition

Dai Fujikura (b. 1977) is a Japanese composer currently based in the UK. He initially planned to pursue a career in film music, but after exposure to works by renowned composers such as Pierre Boulez and György Ligeti during his studies at Trinity College of Music, he took off toward to a new paradigm in which he incorporates vivid imagery from film into his contemporary works. He won the Serocki International Composers Competition in his second year of studies because of his unique

approach. Fujikura also gradually embraced music from his Japanese heritage after exposure to Japanese traditional music upon a visit to Darmstadt. Works such as *Okeanos Breeze* contained a mix of both western and eastern instruments and aesthetics.

Fujikura has received many international co-commissions from leading festivals, including the Salzburg Festival, Lucerne Festival, and BBC Proms. He has also been the composer-in-residence of the Nagoya Philharmonic Orchestra since 2014. His renowned first opera, *Solaris*, was co-commissioned by the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Opéra de Lausanne and the Opéra de Lille, and was premiered in Paris in 2015. He was also a recipient of the Silver Lion Award from the Venice Biennale.

*Three Miniatures* for two pianos is influenced by Fujikura's observations of his daughter's growth

from the day she was born to six months old. Each of the miniatures describes different stages of her growth. Interestingly, Fujikura allocates at most two notes to be played by one hand at any time throughout the piece, yet the fleeting quality of the work and its complex rhythms create a sophisticated performance challenge for the pianists.

The first miniature expresses the state of sleep of a 2-day-old baby and consists of sustained chords and rapid staccato gestures to project the small sudden movements of a sleeping baby. One pianist plays chords that are allowed to fully resonate, while the other plays rapid, chordal staccato materials without the pedal. These two materials are juxtaposed throughout the piece.

The second miniature expresses the activeness of a baby at 6 months old, the way the composer's daughter's "arms and legs and facial expressions

– often making sudden movements.” The piece starts with the two pianos playing in unity but splitting off into two individual voices co-existing with one another. These voices are disjunct, with many intervallic leaps and jumping from one register to another. Unpredictability is enhanced by erratic distribution of accents.

In the third miniature, the composer envisions what his daughter would be like in a year. The music paints a scene of his daughter running around playfully in his home. The music consists of motivic cells with alternating dyads in contrary motion, getting faster and louder. The voices then eventually layer on top of one another creating the perception of music coming in different directions.

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Harrison Birtwistle: *Carmen Arcadiae  
Mechanicae Perpetuum* (1977/78)

Note contributed by Chong Heng Li and Toh Yan Ee, BMus3, Composition

Sir Harrison Birtwistle (born 15 July 1934) is a British composer whose musical journey began at the age of 7 when his mother bought him a clarinet to encourage his interest in music. He continued his studies at the Royal Manchester College of Music, majoring in clarinet and composition.

Birtwistle's works have attained international acclaim. He has received commissions from leading performance organisations, and his music has been played in major festivals, including the BBC Proms, Salzburg Festival, Glyndebourne, Holland Festival, and many more. His music has been conducted by Pierre Boulez, Daniel Barenboim, Elgar Howarth, amongst many other renowned conductors.

Among his multitude of works, he is best known for his orchestral work *The Triumph of Time* (1972) and his operas *The Mask of Orpheus* (1986), *Gawain* (1991), and *The Minotaur* (2008). However, his ensemble works – amongst them *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum* included on tonight's programme – are also frequently performed by the world's leading new music groups.

*Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum* ('The Perpetual Song of Mechanical Arcady') is a single-movement work for 14 players written for the London Sinfonietta and premiered in 1978 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall with Birtwistle himself conducting.

As with his other compositions, visual art inspired the creation of this piece, particularly the abstract works of Swiss-German artist Paul Klee and Dutch painter Piet Mondrian which focused on geometrical shapes and layers. Like

cubist art, which was constructed with the aim of presenting different versions or perspectives of an object simultaneously, Birtwistle sought to create this piece using distinct, clear-cut musical material - these materials were ordered through the categorisation of various levels of register (high, medium, or low), dynamics (loud or quiet) and rhythm (sustained or rhythmic).

Birtwistle pieced the components of the work like a frieze - a wide horizontal section of sculpted or painted decoration with visual elements which are repeated and varied throughout. The piece consists of “six different machines or songs, musics”, which are repeated and varied, referencing each other. As Birtwistle describes his, the music in this piece is “redefining itself constantly”.