

Chou Wen-chung's Sonic Palette: Counterpoint in the *Eternal Pine* series

Shyhji Pan-Chew

In the realm where tradition converges with modernity and East meets West, Chou Wen-chung emerges as a creative luminary. Far from being a departure from the past, Chou's exploration of world music stems from a profound mastery of global cultures, resulting in fresh concepts and approaches. His unique perspective, which transcends strict dichotomies of Eastern and Western traditions, forms the basis for understanding and distinguishing the essence of his music.

In explaining his variable modes theory, Chou emphasizes its role in facilitating the exchange of theoretical ideas between China and other countries. He envisions a convergence point for future music through the possibilities of *yin-yang* interactions. "I have been advocating my variable modes theory for many years to promote the exchange of theoretical ideas between China and other countries, envisioning a convergence point for future music through the possibilities of *yin-yang* interactions."¹

Awarded the title of "Music Calligrapher" by Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt in the early 1960s, Chou has dedicated himself to exploring new ways of representing sonic and calligraphic lines. Each of his works introduces new ideas, with the interplay of *yin-yang* becoming a central focus of his lifelong creative endeavors.

Contrary to popular belief, Chou asserts, "The primary characteristic of Western music is its concept of counterpoint. But, where my perspective differs from the mainstream is in recognizing the profound resonance of counterpoint within Chinese culture. Like the delicate strokes of ink on rice paper, the harmonious balance of *yin-yang* duality, the ancient wisdom of the hexagrams of the *I-Ching*'s, the graceful undulations of the calligrapher's brush, the thoughtful arrangement of space, and the subtle disparities amidst the scenery of ink wash paintings - all are imbued with the sPirit of counterpoint. Thus, my creations, imbued with the ethos of counterpoint, strive to transcend the boundaries of

Western tradition, and echo the symphony of universal harmony. "²

Through his decades-long exploration of counterpoint, he draws parallels between the linearity of Chinese calligraphic ink drawing, *yin-yang* duality, and various principles of calligraphy with the essence of Western counterpoint, emphasizing a co-transcendence in his variable modes theory. Chou has redefined the boundaries of musical expression, and left an indelible mark on the landscape of contemporary music.

In Western literature, two outstanding discussions of calligraphy in relation to music stand out: Yayoi Uno Everett's "Calligraphy and Musical Gestures in the Late Works of Chou Wen-chung," and the author's "Music Calligrapher." Both articles provide insightful analyses of Chou's music from the aesthetic standpoint of *yin-yang* duality, a fundamental framework for understanding his music in conjunction with calligraphy.

While Everett's article explores various calligraphic techniques as a foundation for Chou's music, and the author's article seeks to uncover the unique connections of counterpoint within Chou's musical compositions. Both essays offer valuable insights into Chou's work, by examining it through the lens of *yin-yang* duality from an aesthetic perspective. The discussion of Chou's music highlights the incorporation of *yin-yang* duality in continual transformation, particularly in its intricate relationship with calligraphy.

The exploration of counterpoint in Chou's *Eternal Pine* series³ is inspired by a basic calligraphic stroke known as 'unity of coherence.'⁴ Chou's music progresses in a continuous process, embodying the tension of *yin* and *yang*, that is a fundamental characteristic of his musical aesthetic.

The principle of unity of coherence, known as "open-close," represents the central structural unit in

² Chou Wen-chung, *Creating Music and Chinese Culture, Confluence: Collected Essays of Chou Wen-chung*, 2006, p. 233.
³ The *Eternal Pine* series contain *Eternal Pine* for Gayageum and Korean ensemble (2007); *Eternal Pine* for Gayageum solo with changgo accompaniment (2008); *Ode to Eternal Pine* (2009); *Sizhu Eternal Pine* for Six Traditional Chinese Instruments (2011-12); and *Sizhu Eternal Pine* for Dizi, Pipa and Percussions (2013).
⁴ Chang, Chung-yuan. "Creativity and Taoism." *A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry*. p.9.

¹ Chou Wen-chung, Liang Lei ed., *Creating Music and Chinese Culture, Confluence: Collected Essays of Chou Wen-chung*, 2006, p.232.

Chinese calligraphy and painting. It signifies the development and completion of a stroke with “open” denoting expansion and progression, and “close” denoting gathering and closure. This principle, with its inherent *yin-yang* opposition and dualistic relationship, extends to diametrical contrasts in time, space, and texture, including speed, rhythm, time-space direction; density, and texture. Strokes can be classified as principle or connecting strokes based on their function. This essay explores how these characteristics are reflected in calligraphic structure. It emphasizes the importance of completing the work in a single stroke while simultaneously considering time-space direction. This parallels the intricate formal unity found in Chou's music.

However, calligraphy is not only about structural study, but also about aesthetic appreciation. The concept of “open-close” is central in this regard, inviting discerning viewers to discover profound insights in the intricate interplay of strokes. Each stroke in Chinese calligraphy, whether the smallest unit or part of a larger composition, embodies a duality of expansion and contraction, reflecting the continual transformation inherent in the time-space dimensions of calligraphic expression. This duality is expressed through the opening and closing of strokes, which serve as a canvas for the expression of aesthetic sensibilities. It illustrates the dynamic relationship between form and expression in Chinese calligraphy.

In the field of music, Chou's compositions embody vitality through the harmonious interweaving of musical elements. The rhythmic flow, turns, direction, viscosity and density of brushstrokes are reflected in the musical ideas, that expand and contract to form a cohesive unit. Just as a brush stroke expands and contracts to form a unit, a musical idea expands and contracts to form a unit of musical entity in Chou's compositions. The alignment between calligraphic structure and musical expression is vividly illustrated in Chou's skillful application of the principles of “open-close” to his compositions. This convergence results in a symphony of movement and rhythm that reflects the fluidity of the brushstrokes.

Chou explores expansion and contraction across multiple dimensions, from individual instruments to the multiple layers of musical material. Through contrasts in timbre, velocity, rhythm, and density, Chou creates intricate musical narratives that mirror the nuanced expression found in calligraphic

strokes. The interplay of time-space arrangements, transitions between primary and secondary musical material, and other elements enriches this complexity, and underscores the complexity of Chou's compositional approach.

Chou's *Eternal Pine* Series exemplifies his integration of calligraphic principles into his music. He skillfully translates fundamental aspects of Chinese calligraphy to create a deeply personal and idiosyncratic musical oeuvre. Chou's compositions are elevated to a higher artistic level through the continual transformation of the *yin-yang* duality, resulting in a harmonious resonant convergence of the beauty both forms. This principle is the foundation for Chou's work. Due to the limited scope of this article, our discussion will focus on specific works to illuminate the concepts of calligraphy and *yin-yang* duality

In the following analysis, we will examine the opening passage (mm. 4-6) of the *Sizhu Eternal Pine* for Dizi, Pipa and Percussion by Chou. The passage consists of three distinct musical entities, similar to three strokes in calligraphy, each representing a musical entity within a variable mode.⁵ The first segment (m.4) begins with the Dizi and ends with the nan Bangzi (Example 1), echoing the principles of expansion and contraction reminiscent of calligraphic strokes. The melody introduced by the solo Dizi in bar 4 embodies these principles, characterized by pronounced dynamics, articulations, and vibratos that reflect the opening and closing of a musical entity. Significantly, two types of commas are used in the music: one to link musical entities and another within a musical entity. The latter symbolizes the rise and fall of ink, which is particularly evident at the culmination of the second note within the initial stroke in bar 4.

In bar 5, there is a significant shift in various aspects of the second musical entity, including register, dynamics, articulation, and vibrato. The interval expands from, F to a higher G, reflecting the broadening of emotional expression. The volume gradually increases from Piano to mezzo-forte. Notably, Chou introduces an accent on the high G note, emphasizing the abrupt expansion of register.

⁵ A variable consists of the superimposition of two trigrams to form a hexagram. Each trigram comprises three segments, which constitute the basic structural unit in Chou's variable modes theory. For those interested in Chou's modal theory, the author recommends the works of the following authors: Chun-Ming Kenneth Kwan's articles on “Chou Wen-chung's Modal System: The Basics,” and Eric Lai's book on the *Music of Chou Wen-chung*.”

Conversely, the concluding E note in the second musical entity is marked with an accent. It serves the function of transforming the stroke from bar 5 to bar 6. Each note within this entity is played with a distinctive vibrato, further enriching the expressive depth of the composition.

Continuing the exploration, the third musical entity undergoes a partial transmutation of the second, further illustrating the evolving interplay of expansion and contraction. The nan Bangzi takes over to conclude this musical segment, with each instrument's entry marked by distinct dynamics, that enrich the overall texture. Chou's skill in orchestrating transformation through changes in register, dynamics, articulation, and timbre is underscored by the seamless transition between musical entities, emphasizing the integral role of sonority in his compositions.

Moreover, the subsequent two musical entities (mm. 5-6) maintain this instrumental relationship while expanding the nucleus intervals to include a compound interval of a major second and a minor third. These fluctuations in intervallic expansion and contraction, accompanied by vibrato, accents, and dynamic shifts, contribute significantly to the continual transformation of the musical narrative. This culminates in a seamless transition of timbre to the Pipa in bar 7.

Example 1: Sizhu Eternal Pine for Dizi · Pipa and Percussions, mm. 4-6



Mountain mode: Eb F G A B D

Let us now examine two techniques that exemplify the way in which Chou has been translating the linear elegance of a calligraphic stroke into his music in his later years: (1) paired lines and (2) connecting strokes.

(1) Paired lines: A brushstroke traversing the time-space relationship forms a continual contrapuntal

interplay of expansion and contraction. As a result, a similar motion, formed by the edge of the both sides of the stroke, forms the contour of the double line, or paired lines. Examination of musical excerpts from *Eternal Pine* for Gayageum and Korean ensemble and *Ode to Eternal Pine* illustrates Chou's contrapuntal movement of paired lines in similar motion of parallel and non-parallel motion.⁶

1. In the *Eternal Pine for Gayageum and Korean ensemble* (mm. 43-47, Example 2), Chou creates a comprehensive design of paired lines that reveals a distinctive interplay within the ensemble relationships between instruments. Obviously, the Daegeum and Gayageum are configured as a unified group responsible for carrying the melody of the paired lines. The counterpoint of the principle structural tones of the paired lines, which move in parallel motion in each of the downbeats of bars 43-45, is a perfect fifth interval, while the contrapuntal motion of the melodic lines moves in parallel and non-parallel motion. In addition, the Piri and the Saenghwang form another group that contributes to sonority and timbre.

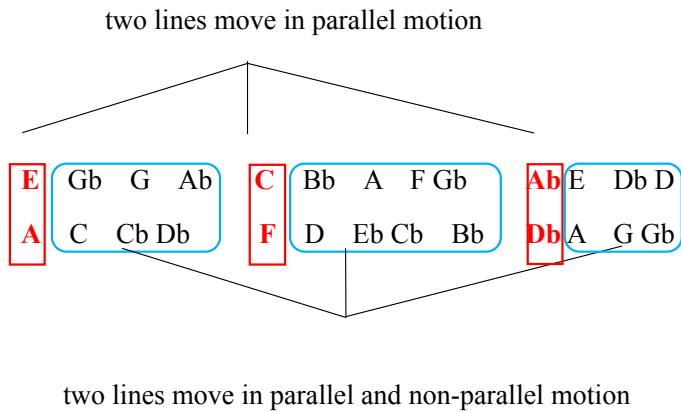
Example 2: *Eternal Pine for Gayageum and Korean ensemble* (mm. 43-37)



⁶ Parallel and non-parallel motion is a term used by Chou to describe the contrapuntal motion of the double lines movement in Chinese calligraphy, which he successfully transfers such concept to the contrapuntal motion in his music.



	m.43	m.44	m.45	
Daegeum line:	E-	C-	Ab	intervallic relation: perfect fifth
Gayageum line:	A-	F-	Db	



Additionally, the Gayageum and the Changgu establish yet another lev of relationship within the ensemble.

Chou views sonority-contributing instruments as akin to the use of ink in calligraphy, emphasizing their role in shaping the overall composition. The flow of ink through a coordination of rhythmic elements, density, viscosity, pressure, shading, direction, speed, turns, undulations, abrupt stops, and the force applied during brushwork converge to form a holistic entity of multidimensional layers that

echo the intricate dynamics present in calligraphic art. This analytical perspective allows for a nuanced understanding of how Chou strategically utilizes instrumental relationships and sonic elements to create a rich and layered musical entity in the *Eternal Pine* series.

2. In *Ode to Eternal Pine* (mm. 121-131, Example 3), Chou Wen-chung demonstrates his masterful integration of Chinese calligraphic principles with Western counterpoint, presenting a distinctive contrapuntal approach that distinguishes his work. The passage opens with a deliberate juxtaposition of attenuated textures (mm. 121-127) and denser textures (mm. 128-131), eloquently illustrating Chou's masterful manipulation of musical space.

Chou's contrapuntal dialogue between the Violin and Cello is a prime example of his innovative approach. The Violin, in the role of the main line, and the Cello, as the secondary line, engage in a nuanced interplay of intervals, with the octave serving as the focal point. The main line descends (B-A-G) over three octaves, while the secondary line (C#-E-D#-(D)) expands and contracts over six octaves (see Example 3a). This intricate layering, further reinforced by the piccolo in the upper register and the Bass Clarinet and Piano in the lower register, underscores Chou's meticulous attention to detail in blending Eastern and Western musical traditions.

This intricate layering of lines illustrates Chou's fusion of Chinese calligraphic principles with Western counterpoint. Just as calligraphy flows seamlessly across paper, the linear movements in this composition intertwine with grace and precision. Significantly, the solo Violin line consist of two distinct phrases: B B A A and A A G G, both formed by a descending major second sequence. In the first phrase, the Piccolo's highest note (E) forms a perfect fifth interval with the Violin's the B and A, respectively. In the second phrase, the highest note (D) of the Piccolo forms a perfect fifth interval with the A and G of the Violin. The overall trajectory of the solo Violin melody descends, intertwining with the timbral counterpoint lines formed by the Cello, Bass Clarinet, Piano, and Piccolo.

Furthermore, the division of the timbral counterpoint into two spatial groups enhances the composition's fluidity in time-space relationship, echoing the coordinated balance observed in calligraphy, where disparate strokes converge to form a unified whole.

The linear movements within this passage demonstrate a mastery akin to that the brushwork of a skilled calligrapher. Much like the rhythmic dance of a calligrapher's hand across the paper, the primary and secondary lines gracefully intertwine, reflecting the evolving interplay between music and visual artistry. The amalgamation of various elements is most strikingly illustrated in bars 128-131, where Chou's meticulous artistic skill, through carefully coordinated brushstrokes, boldly creates a swirling flow of ink through carefully coordinated brushstrokes, akin to cursive calligraphy within the context of the time-space relationship.

Example 3: *Ode to Eternal Pine* (mm. 121-131)

Example 3: *Ode to Eternal Pine* (mm. 121-131)

Profound Gorges
121 Largo, ma con moto (♩ = ca. 66)

Piccolo
Bass Clarinet
Violin
Violoncello
Piano
Percussion

Example 3a: mm.127-131 reduction

(2) Connecting strokes: The connecting stroke is a technique that links individual Brushstrokes. In Chou's work, the use of connecting strokes is a key factor in creating the musical closure or transition to the next stroke. When the duration of the connecting stroke is short, it functions much like a bridge in Western musical forms. On the other hand, if the duration is longer, it creates an independent transitional segment. The length of the connecting stroke is determined by considering the different emotional states before and after. In addition, when analyzing Chou's musical sonorities, it is essential to understand the seamless expression of brush and ink in calligraphy, including factors such as speed, time-space, rhythm, and changes of direction.

Just as the brushstroke, when skillfully executed, maintains a fluid connection from beginning to end, Chou uses connecting strokes in music to weave a seamless tapestry of melodic and rhythmic elements. In the *Eternal Pine* series, these connecting strokes manifest in the transitions of a section or between different musical entities, creating a sense of unity and progression.

1. *Sizhu Eternal Pine for Dizi · Pipa and Percussion* (mm. 7-9, Example 4) is an illustration of the use of connecting strokes (mm. 7-8). The function of bars 7-8 is to connect the first variable mode (ascending) to the second variable mode (descending). In this case, the connecting stroke extends at a relatively fast pace, and gradually slows down toward the end. The last note of bar 7 is held with a fermata, giving the impression that the calligrapher is considering how to proceed with the next stroke. Bar 8 then leads into the next phrase with a big leap and a slower tempo. In bar 7, the music attempts to expand the space downward, ending the ascending variable mode with a gradual decrease in intensity before moving on to the next phrase (m. 9, descending variable mode).

Example 4: *Sizhu Eternal Pine for Dizi, Pipa and Percussions* (mm. 4-12)

2. *Ode to Eternal Pine* (mm. 148-159, Example 5) is the second example of the use of connecting strokes (mm. 152-159). It occurs at the end of the *Profound Gorges* (mm. 148-151), where the emotions are relatively complex. The main purpose of the connecting strokes here is to connect the conclusion of the previous intense emotions and change the mood to a relatively

calm final section. Since this is the most complicated moment in the entire composition, both emotionally and in terms of musical structure, it takes a considerable amount of time to manage the transition between emotion and music. Chou uses three phrases (m. 152, mm. 153-54, mm. 155-159) to make this transition.⁷

At bar 152, the double line concludes gracefully with a solo Bass Clarinet, orchestrating a seamless transition of emotion into a solitary melody. Here, the subtle interplay of musical elements alters the preceding mood, as a brief musical entity spanning a bar delicately brings the concluding section to fruition. While the change may seem modest, the manipulation of dynamics, underscored by the addition of a *poco* sign at the fermata, punctuates the passage with finesse, culminating in a graceful comma. Bar 152 thus serves as the culmination of this musical journey, with the musical entity unfolding downward, evoking a sense of temporal delay as the phrase seems to reach its conclusion. At this uncertain point, however, the music defies expectation, transitioning seamlessly into the next solo which features a rapid descending figuration from the Bass Clarinet at bar 153. Beginning in forte, the melody gradually fades, descending to a somber C# before segueing seamlessly into a solo cadenza for Percussion, a testament to Chou's mastery of orchestrating transitions of mood and texture.

The solo cadenza for Percussion, while seeming to bring the section to a close, subtly shifts at its conclusion, to create a seamless connection with the following phrase. Bar 155 serves as a transitional moment, paving the way for the composition's true conclusion in bar 160. The transformation witnessed here, from the linear structure of bar 152 to the introduction of another Percussion phrase after its conclusion, echoes the rhythmic patterns established by the solo Bass Clarinet in bar 153. It is like witnessing a calligrapher's brush suddenly turn in a new direction, encapsulating the fervent expression of the preceding moments in a single musical gesture. This metamorphosis continues as the composition evolves into different figurations, speeds, rhythms, directions, and dynamics. Amidst this continual transformation, each conclusion of the passage reveals a meticulous attention to detail and expression, reminiscent of the elaborate strokes of a master of calligrapher.

⁷ This approach is reminiscent of the transition between the first and second themes in the sonata-allegro form of Brahms' sonatas. For example, the transition (mm. 31-50) of Brahms's Violin Sonata No. 2, Op.100 in A.

The continual process of expansion, contraction, interaction, and transmutation contributes significantly to the profound sense of organic growth evident throughout the *Eternal Pine* series. Finally, we introduce the use of variable modes to embody the same principle of continual transformation, reflecting the duality of *yin-yang* in Chou's compositions. It is noteworthy that a *yin* segment is characterized by a major second interval, while a *yang* segment features a minor third interval. Despite the reader's limited familiarity with variable modes theory, it is not difficult to identify either segment. Consider, for instance, the section from bar 98 to the conclusion (m. 120) in *Lofty Peaks* from *Ode to Eternal Pine*, a prime example of the constant metamorphosis between the *yin-yang* duality (Example 6).

Example 6: *Lofty Peaks, Ode to Eternal Pine* (mm.98-120)

98 **A tempo, ma più mosso**

The musical score is written for a vocal ensemble and percussion. It consists of four systems of staves. The first system has two vocal staves (Soprano and Alto) and a percussion staff. The second system has two vocal staves (Tenor and Bass) and a percussion staff. The third system has two vocal staves (Soprano and Alto) and a percussion staff. The fourth system has two vocal staves (Tenor and Bass) and a percussion staff. The vocal parts are written in treble and bass clefs. The percussion part is written in a single staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'A tempo, ma più mosso'. The score includes dynamic markings: *p* (piano), *cresc. poco a poco* (crescendo little by little), and *dim. poco a poco* (diminuendo little by little). The percussion part includes specific instructions for the heavy gong (center), brass (center), and wood shaft (edge).

p cresc. poco a poco

dim. poco a poco

p cresc. poco a poco

dim. poco a poco

p cresc. poco a poco

heavy gong mt., center

center

brass

wood shaft, edge

p *mp* *mf*

Andante, accel. poco a poco
106
(dim.)

poco f mf p più f mp

wire, edge (wire)

felt, center B.D. mt., center

a tempo molto rall.

to Piccolo lunga to Bs. Cl.

più ff molto

Bva-1

at 1/3

center p mf pp molto

In the intricate fabric of musical expression, Chou deftly crafts a symphony of perpetual metamorphosis, reminiscent of the vivid and bold movements of a cursive style of calligrapher's brush. With precision and finesse, he deftly transfers the connecting strokes, meticulously orchestrating rhythmic elements, density, viscosity, pressure, shading, direction, speed, turns, undulations, abrupt stops, and force. Through this skillful manipulation, Chou's use of closure emerges as a defining characteristic of his compositions. Here, all musical component converge harmoniously, creating a multidimensional tapestry that mirrors the intricate dynamics found in the art of cursive style of calligraphy.

The author has briefly outlined the metamorphosis processes through the interplay of strokes. The dichotomy of opening and closing, similar to the basic units of calligraphic artistry, not only serves as the foundation of the structural composition in Chou's musical oeuvre, but also unfolds as the basic canvas upon which the dance of lines performs its graceful choreography.

Amidst the myriad of Chou's unique artistic techniques, this discourse will shed light on two particular manifestations: the parallel and non-parallel movements of paired lines, flowing harmoniously in the same direction with similar motion, born from the movement of the brush on the canvas, and the use of connecting strokes. Chou's perspective on alignment transcends traditional boundaries, seamlessly blending Eastern and Western ethos into a novel alignment paradigm. As Chou himself articulates, it is an alignment that transcends the limitations of Western paradigms.

Conversely, the theory of variable modes serves as the theoretical linchpin underpinning Chou's practical execution of calligraphic lines. Through the lens of counterpoint and variable modes theory, Chou creates a musical landscape where East and West converge, transcending time-space dimensions. The work of the *Eternal Pine* series, which represents the zenith of Chou's musical convergence in his twilight years, can be viewed as the magnum opus that encapsulates the summation of his musical creations.

Chou Wen-chung's sonic palette is a testament to the harmonious interplay between tradition and innovation, East and West, calligraphy and music. His compositions serve as a bridge between cultures,

inviting listener on a journey of discovery through the intricate tapestry of sound. Through his exploration of counterpoint, variable modes theory, and the integration of calligraphic principles, Chou has redefined the boundaries of musical expression and left an indelible mark on the landscape of contemporary music. His sonic palette continues to inspire and captivate audiences, transcending time and space to touch the hearts and minds of listeners worldwide. His music embodies the beauty of cultural synthesis and the power of artistic expression to transcend boundaries and unite humanity in a shared celebration of creativity and imagination. As we celebrate Chou's remarkable achievements and contributions to the world of music, we honor his legacy and reaffirm our commitment to fostering cultural understanding and appreciation through the arts.