

A Picture for Ancient Northwestern China

– for grand piano, vocals, and percussions

This piece is a semi-improvisation with a given theme and lyrics for vocals. However, practically, all the parts except for the male vocal are performed by one person through different tracks.

The theme is to portrait the view of the Gobi Desert in Northwestern China with a sense of history and desolation. The lyrics that are given to the female vocals are an ancient Chinese poem that described the sunset view of a small isolated military town on the boundary of the country, where sands are blocking in the sky, horns are blowing, but the gate was inanimately shut. Translations are attached at the end. Lyrics assigned to the male folk singer is a folk song telling the story of a man thinking of his loving girl but is very unlikely to talk to her even if he sees her because of the strict traditional rules. The melody has the style of traditional northwestern folk songs and was performed in a very emotional way of the combination of mourning and singing.

Some extended techniques are used in the piece. For instance, some augmentations are applied to the grand piano, like putting steel rulers on strings, pressing on the string to preserve only a portion of the harmonics, and singing directly to the strings under the lid to generate some reverb. Some other techniques include singing through a paper roll to generate a sense of distance, and to a drum to obtain a broad reverb. Moreover, some traditional Chinese instruments are also used, like Xun, a clay instrument to be blown into, and Yuqi, some dehydrated shells being bind together.

Translation of the poem:

When autumn comes to the frontier, the scene looks drear;

Southbound wild geese won't stay e'en for a day.

An uproar rises with horns blowing far and near.

Walled in by peaks, smoke rises straight

At sunset over isolate town with closed gate.

I hold a cup of wine, yet home is far away;

The northwest not yet won, I can't but stay.

At the flutes' doleful sound over frost-covered ground,

None falls asleep,

The general's hair turns white and soldiers weep.