

Reflection and Remembering: Tan Dun's *12 Sounds of Wuhan*



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I. Context and Premiere

In early 2020, Chinese-American composer Tan Dun composed *12 Sounds of Wuhan: Prayer and Blessing* for voice, percussion, and orchestra, dedicated to the people in Wuhan who were battling Covid-19. The work premiered on 11 February 2020 at the Queen Elisabeth Hall in Antwerp, with the composer himself conducting. In subsequent performances, the Zenghouyi chimes were arranged into the orchestration. Tan Dun also selected quotations from the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi as lyrics to highlight Chinese cultural identity.



Zenghouyi Chime Bells, Hubei Provincial Museum

II. Sonic Symbols and Cultural Orchestration

The tam-tams made in Wuhan function as the sound of the city. They were used for alarms and folk rituals; their sonic significance was immediate, concrete, and ritualistic. The Zenghouyi chimes serve as an auditory symbol of eternal China, with a sound that is historical, abstract, ceremonial, and imbued with national political authority. The juxtaposition of the two elevates a specific, contemporary urban tragedy to the level of an eternal, national rite of mourning and blessing. Unlike in 1997 (which symbolized sovereignty and national glory), the chimes in 2020 are used to **memorialize** and **heal** global trauma. Similarly, an in-depth analysis of the Laozi texts employed reveals that, within the context of the pandemic, concepts such as “the Tao follows nature” and “the highest goodness is like water” provide philosophical solace and a cosmological framework.

V. Reflection and Discussion

When a composer employs materials laden with potent cultural symbols, and emphasizes a mission to promote national culture, can a composer remain autonomous from global audience expectations? How might we, as scholars of (global) musicology, navigate between representation and agency, translation and autonomy, when interpreting commemorative works like *12 Sounds of Wuhan*?

III. Cultural Translation and Self-Orientalism

In the process of achieving cultural translation through composition, Tan Dun integrates the distinctive timbres of Chinese instruments into the symphonic tradition, allowing them to serve as a vehicle for cultural expression and identity formation. Laozi's philosophical ideas are manifested in the orchestration and text, while ritual Zenghouyi chimes and Wuhan-made tam-tams, as elements of cultural orchestration, become integral components of Tan Dun's construction of self-orientalization and polystylism. Self-orientalization is reflected in his deliberate selection of the most emblematic symbols of **Chineseness**. This strategy of self-orientalization finds justification and validity within this particular work by serving a genuine, urgent, and humanitarian commemorative purpose.



Premiere of *12 Sounds of Wuhan*, Sina.com

IV. Through Cultural Memory

Through this act of cultural orchestration, Tan Dun transforms the local memories of Wuhan into a global cultural memory infused with Chinese characteristics. Drawing on Jan Assmann's cultural memory theory, *12 Sounds of Wuhan* transcends commemoration, becoming a sonic monument of remembrance. Tan Dun emerges as a “memory engineer,” constructing a transnational soundscape that mediates collective trauma and healing.