

Interview with David Macbride

This interview took place between Michael Jones and David Macbride at Macbride's home in West Hartford, CT, on December 23, 2017. It was recorded, transcribed, and edited by Jones.

David Macbride: I'm of mixed ancestry, imagine my last name being "Macbride", nobody would ever guess that I'm half Asian. My mother is Chinese so for me it wasn't something that I really considered myself in terms of identifying myself in a public way. When I grew up I felt proud to be half Chinese because I felt different from a lot of the other people around me, but on but on the other hand nobody saw me as being Chinese. It was like a secret, and so it's only in the last 10-15 years that I've really identified more with that part of my background. In my bio, I would just say "Being of Eurasian Heritage, my mother being Chinese, my music is a personal expression of a mix of Eastern and Western traditions." So, you know, I put it in my bio, but I also knew that my music went in a lot of different directions. There are some pieces that have more recognizable Asian elements but a lot of pieces that you would never think of as being Asian. But, again, because it was something that people don't see me as, my own perspective on that was "well nobody sees me as Asian so I'm not sure that I really am" in a public way. So that's kind of a weird double mirror [*sic*] kind of thing. I have a niece who changed her last name to Chen. She's a quarter Chinese and we began to kind of share that together and I'm inspired by her in many ways, with her investigating her roots, changing her name and learning how to speak Chinese, all of that which were things I had done to some extent, but to see the next generation-- to see her change her name because she strongly identified and wanted people to know her as Asian. Alongside the fact that my mother was getting and older and we'd speak Chinese together

and then she passed away rather suddenly, at that point I decided I'd lived enough of my life as a Caucasian. I want to now live the rest of my life as an Asian person because I am a person of mixed ancestry, so I began to identify more, primarily as a way to honor her legacy. So, you know, the piece I wrote for you, *Southern Dynasties*, is a part of that. There were pieces much earlier that had Chinese titles too but I began to just "come out", as it were. To really just do it, and it feels very right and natural. I am an American, I'm certainly steeped in Western tradition but I know that all of my music has some of that Chinese background. It's not something I've learned; studied that much, though I do know some about it. It's more just a part of my temperament. It's just how I grew up. It comes out whether the pieces has anything recognizably Chinese or not, but more and more I think the music is becoming less goal-oriented, more meditative in some ways and it feels right. In a way, it feels like I grew up in the Bay Area and moved away from home to come to the East Coast, so in a way I moved away from Asia and more towards the West, or Europe, or whatever, and I feel like I'm coming home even though I don't live in Berkeley. Artistically and personally in many ways I feel the connection to my family and it feels like I'm coming home to California through that. My teacher at Columbia, Chou Wen-Chung, is certainly one of the biggest figures in terms of a Chinese composer in the United States of his generation. He brought over all the big-name composers. I studied with him and what was kind of interesting was that at that time I was really looking for his mentorship particularly as a Chinese composer, and he did not see me particularly as Asian. And so, it was frustrating and actually kind of painful for me. We've kind of talked about it, I had to kind of work that out like "here, I'm part Asian too -- show me what it's about", but he didn't really share that. But he shares it occasionally. So yeah, it's different than a fully Asian person who is seen as Asian. All I think of is it's like you have an image of yourself and you have how people

see you and it's the combination of these that help identify your Self. One doesn't necessarily just identify with what they think *they* are, it's also what people think *you* are. And so, I'm getting this – I don't know, it's a little bit like this masquerade. Not a deliberate masquerade but a little bit like -- there are basic assumptions being made that are not entirely correct. There have only been a few people in my life who have come up to me that I didn't know and said "Oh, you're half Asian." Most people don't see it. But when you do mention it they kind of go "oh." The music is personal but it definitely has that element. I've been to China a few times and always feel very comfortable there because it seems a little bit like home. I hear the music and my mother makes much more sense when I see her in that light, and speaking to her in Chinese she often made much more sense than when she would speak in English. She found herself. And I imagine what it must be like with her to be a Chinese person in this country and always be a little on guard with the culture and the discrimination she felt here. Is that a mouthful for you?

Michael Jones: No, it's great! So, it sounds like accessing this Asian composer community was difficult for you?

David Macbride: Yeah! Because I'm not one of them and I'm not recognized. That's the toughest part in a way. With Western people, I'm one of them and if they don't see me as Chinese, well okay, but Chinese people did not see me as having anything to do with them either, so I felt isolated. And I still feel that way a little bit.

MJ: Is there a technique or a style of writing that would be considered very "Chinese"?

DM: Yeah, well there is of course traditional Chinese music which is more monophonic and has to do with color with regards to a single line. And I think that that aesthetic informs much of what you would consider present-day, contemporary Asian composed music. There's that aesthetic. But everything is getting mixed so much now and certainly even the composers who have come to this country and had stellar careers like Tan Dun and Chen Yi; they're Western-trained composers who have Asian elements, so there's nothing purely Chinese about them at all. For me it's never been about trying to sound Chinese, though I have written pieces that are like "Oh yeah that sounds very Chinese." In fact, I had a piece performed in China with an orchestra where I got up and introduced the piece in Chinese, and the audience was amused by this foreign guy speaking their language, and this was back in the 80's so it was a little bit more of a novelty than it is now. And then music happened and they were literally laughing because they recognized what I had gotten from their culture and has incorporated it; imitating it, but I did it pretty well so they got it. So that was a kick. But that's just one instance. I'm there, now I'm here, and like all composers you're trying to get some stuff done and have it be recognized in some light, and every composer has their secret things that most people don't know about, but I feel like mine is my heritage. It's not like I hired a PR person to say "Hey this guy's half-Asian and his music is different! Why don't you do it, his name's Macbride but he's half-Asian, what is that?"

MJ: Do you find yourself being self-conscious about people programming your music and seeing the name "Macbride" writing these Chinese titles and being like "Oh, what's this white guy know about Chinese music?"

DM: Oh, no, no, I've never felt that. There are a few pieces that have Chinese titles, but, no I don't think about that. I've never felt uncomfortable about what I do. I guess the uncomfortable part is not being seen for who I am, because why would anybody know? It's a hidden thing. If I had a Chinese father with a Chinese surname people would be like "Oh, your last name is Wei? I don't see it." I have a cousin who's fully Chinese on that side and when his wife met me for the first time she said "Oh it's like white Kenny. Like my husband, but white." We look exactly the same because genetically we're half-brothers. My mom is a twin. So, I look at him and I see myself. Anyway, I'm getting into the personal side, but as far as the music goes I don't want to say that I'm an Asian composer. It's just not anywhere near the truth. I'm just a guy in the United States writing music but it's been informed by my background and what I have investigated in the tradition.

MJ: You mention that you're an American composer who writes with Asian influence, and it was interesting to me that when you were naming composers who signify Asian music in America that you named Lou Harrison, who is in no way of Asian heritage. So, I'm wondering does the term "Asian-American composer" mean anything to you and what does it mean to reconcile an American tradition with an Asian tradition and bring these two together?

DM: You know, I think that everybody is different and I don't think that it's too simplistic to say that "this is one thing and this is another." In fact, that's part of the problem. So, I can't speak for an Asian composer who's born in the United States, I can't say that's this is because that's

not my experience, but I would say that being an Asian person certainly means that you deal with your heritage not just musically but in every other way and depending on your particular determination artistic life you might bring that to the forefront of your music, you might help define that that's what it's about. There are certainly Asian composers who have not made a big deal about their being Asian in terms of their music. I think of Chinury Ung and Earl Kim. There are certain Asian elements to their music but they were steeped in the tradition of mid-20th century generational, fairly complex music. I don't think they could help having it have personal qualities that were Asian, but their personal qualities that were specific to them, too. I think it's very easy to say "Okay, well, this is the mold and that's what it is." There are many Asian composers now and I don't know them all and will never pretend to know them all, but from what I've heard it's as diverse as anything. I would caution against trying to pigeon-hole and saying "this is how it is" because it's a pluralistic place we live in and certain people may become better known in some ways because they fit some bill that the audience is looking for. I think the United States has long as had an incredible fascination with China, and so when something comes from China that is billed as being Chinese it interests American audience. It gives it an extra push. Like, "Oh, this is different." It's a selling point.

MJ: You've talked a lot about being seen as Asian and how America has a fascination with China. In an American mind, what does this Chinese presentation look like? What would an American see and say "Oh, that's Chinese"?

DM: Well, in terms of music? I would say it's certain inflections of tones, so that a tone is not a fixed entity. In fact, it's really not about the pitch at all but more about the color of it and so the

color is affected by attack, decay, wavering in pitch, almost like a tonal language. So those are the things that you hear, and you also hear a very dramatic sense of space. It's either very overt and theatrical or that there's a sense of silence that's permeating the whole thing. So, to me what's recognizable as "being Chinese" in this case is that it's almost showman-like to me. There's a kind of story-telling. It's like opera. Even in chamber music there's sort of this "someone is going to leap out from behind a rock" kind of feeling. It's not a about a personal statement of "this is the arc of my story" or the arc of a life. It's more about visceral qualities of life that to me is very natural and very much about nature. The nature of sound. There are personal elements to it but I don't feel that I'm listening to this person's story. It's more that you're listening to crickets or how they jump around. There's drama in all kinds of things. "Here's a sound, there's a sound. Isn't this amazing?" Fire crackling and this and that. And other times it's humorous and dramatic. That's part of the culture and the personality of their art. The person I would relate to for you is Jianpeng Feng. He's very much being a showman but at the same time there's a childlike wonder to his playing. Even when he's not doing Chinese music. There's a virtuosity and bravura to it that's very Chinese, almost like a sleight-of-hand. I think Americans love that kind of show. I don't think all Chinese/Asian composer do that. Many are interested in getting away from that. To me, you can't simplify that. It's too complex. There are qualities but people can see those qualities and react and go a completely different way because they don't want to do what everybody else does. So, what's Asian? It's all of these parts, but it has certainly permeated and infused in everything going on here in America. Who hasn't been affected by Asian art? It's in the air. That's part of the great thing about it.

MJ: Going off of the ubiquity of Asian art and how everybody has interacted with and been influenced by it in some way: what are your feelings towards composers not of that background trying to emulate these styles. Like, I think of composers like Lou Harrison or other white composers writing works for gamelan—

DM: Oh, in Lou Harrison's case he's so completely facile and, to me, sincere in what he's doing and does it so impeccably so to me there's no issue. I don't even see the issue in what your actual race is. It's how well you do something and how long. He studies a life time to do this. He assimilated it for himself and it became his language. So, to me, if maybe there's a drawback and somebody has a one-night-stand with that style; kind of flirts with it for a while and then goes on to something else you're probably not going to get much depth.

MJ: Is appropriation something that you encounter?

DM: Oh yeah! But people appropriate all kinds of things. Not just Asian things but they're appropriating everything, but sometimes in really interesting ways. But sometimes in ways that are kind of like "that was lame, that was cheap". That doesn't appeal to me. We're past that in a way, though. People can breathe in all kinds of things now. It's kind of a shame to me when people, instead of processing and having it come out in a personal, reflective and genuine way they are almost like a flat mirror and it bounces off and comes back as a reflection of the real thing and a pale imitation. You're not getting the real genuine article. You're getting an imitation of an article, and often it's an imitation of an imitation of a thing. That's the tough part. A lot of

people don't recognize the real thing. "Oh, that's good?" but it's actually a knock-off of a Gucci bag. It's just a disposable thing.

MJ: Do you have an example of one of the "good", interesting reflections that somebody has done of Chinese music? Does anything spring to mind?

DM: Ha, oh, yeah, well let's see, this is the hard part. Repertoire. Well, I'd mention Ken Ueno, who had a piece done right here in my living room. It was a duo, and very appealing. Stripped down. It was wind and percussion and he really made the percussionist take on wind elements and the wind player take on percussion elements. He's obviously thought about it and worked on it. You know, I'm not as up on the current scene as I should be, but I would say John Cage, he's certainly somebody who knew about it and tried to incorporate it and go further. I admire a lot of the Chinese composers who've come to prominence in this country. Joe Long is a fantastic composer, and Chen Yi. The two of them are incredible. I think it's not about being Asian for them. It's genuine expression, and they run the gamut.

MJ: You mention Cage, and I've noticed in your music that there's a fascination with space, silence, and meditation. Does that come from your Asian background or your roots in American experimentalism or both?

DM: I think both, but I don't think it really comes from being aware of these traditions but for me it just seems much more natural and internal. I think that I've always talked slowly, which means there are pauses for reflection. To me my voice seems loud but to a lot of others sounds

pretty soft. I listen. Really, a composer's job is to listen. So (if I can again go way back), I didn't talk until I was over two years old, though I think I had something to say. I was just listening. And I think I listened my whole childhood. Just listening to whatever. Not only music but whatever was going on. So, to me, that's your first job as a composer is to listen to everything. And silence? There's no such thing, right? So, you've got a lot to listen to. It became very clear to me that as part of expression of something that was important that there had to be places where you felt the silence. I think I was doing that before I even knew who Cage was and certainly before I knew anything about Asian music. It just seemed right. I wrote a percussion solo, *Envelop*, in 1971 when I was a sophomore at Hartt, and the whole title is "Silence Envelops Sound." That's where the title came from. And, I may have just first heard about Cage's *Silence* but it was like "yeah, definitely." I joke to myself that part of my goal and path is to fade away to silence in composing because it makes sense on some level to just keep turning it down, particularly since the world is turning it up. Having people have the opportunity to really focus and have to work to hear feels like a noble aspiration. It's not an intellectual approach. I'm aware of it in pieces, I'm aware of "oh yeah this is a point where I need to add some." I've gotten to a place where's a certain emotional urgency, it's almost like a climax or focal point of silence. A place where "This is Really Important. Listen." Whisper: "Now." Once you do that you've experienced that you have to choose very carefully what the next thing might be. And you also have to just let that be allowed to happen and digest it. If there's something important you don't just run on to the next thing.

I think what's really fascinating to me, as a white American, a lot of the experimental tradition that I've come into contact with has been the likes of Cage or Pauline Oliveros,

who are so rooted in silence and listening. Getting involved with those characters or others naturally leads to these Eastern philosophies like Zen. That intersection is very interesting to me, and how our whole tradition is so steeped in those sensibilities.

DM: Yeah! I definitely think that for one, this country looks to the East. People here have been soaking in that for a long time. I really think that in a sense what are some of the oldest traditions come from Asia, certainly Africa as well, but Asia also renews itself so it also becomes some of the newest currents of thinking. These things don't wear out! We're all looking for some increased meaning in things and when you start to think about how fragile and transient life is, then you look to cultures who have figured that out. Not necessarily worked their societies out to work in harmony, I'm not talking about that. But have long standing traditions as to what might this experience might be and that it is just the blink of an eye. So, music is nothing more than just thinking about that fragility of time. If you're so steeped in yourself that you're not sensitive to that then you'll kind of force your way to do something and create a world that may be very attractive but in some ways is artificial. But, if you're aware of that then you don't force yourself on it. You just coexist with it and hopefully come up with something that allows that to be heard. It's certainly part of an American tradition to do that. We've always looked for new things, that's part of why this country exists. What's the next frontier? We don't have the long-standing traditions that would box us in. We don't have Beethoven, which can be a huge inhibitor of change.

MJ: Yeah, I was going to ask: do you think that Asian composers who go to Europe and create dialogue with European traditions encounter different problems?

DM: No, I don't see it as that. I don't see European music as being static, but I do think if you try to do it by somebody else's standards you'll always fail. You've got to create your own standards. The main thing is to realize what you don't want to do or *can't* do, for better or for worse. Cage, by all accounts, was not particularly musical in the traditional sense, thank God. I think Asian composers certainly want to know what Europe has done. I think of Takemitsu as a perfect example, who didn't recognize his own native music but looked to Europe for models and so forth, and it was only later in his life, with Cage's encouragement, that he looked at his own music. So, he's in a kind of double mirror thing. He's looking to Asian music but also to Debussy and others. He totally found a way to do it really, really well for himself. Again, I just don't think there's "a way." "The Way." Everybody's way is "a way" but there is no "The Way." It's not that simple and the more you simplify the further you get from it. I really hope that people don't say "this is the answer" because it's just a conversation. But of course, there are different ideas. It's a conversation, but a conversation that will be really fruitful and topical right now. The balance of world power is really shifting. The US is crumbling in some ways, but China with all its problems, is economically rising and when they see us fumbling around they just step right in. Solar, carbon credits, big, big ways. Who's to say it can't be music? So it goes. China is it. China to me is the story of the 21st century. Wherever China goes, so goes the world.

MJ: And musically we're discovering that there's lots of different ways to be Chinese.

DM: Yes. An infinite number of ways. There are billions of people and they're all over the world. A major influence. I think the novelty is gone and thank God because that's the point

where you can begin to develop a deeper understanding. It's funny, Chou Wen-Chung is very opinionated about this, because he's studied the music and he's lived his life to a very high standard. He just outright rejected Cage. When Cage said "I'm gonna try this and taste something else later", he just thought he was a charlatan. Like, "what do you know about Asian stuff?" I think there's an axe to grind there, but at the same time it's his life and I can respect that.

MJ: Do you feel as though Asian composers are facing marginalization within the new music community?

DM: I think almost every composer is marginalized (Laughter). I don't think they're a special case. I don't mean that it's just a bad scene. I don't see that, but there are cliques. I don't know, I don't see it as a culture, but politics are politics. Some people have better skills at politics and it's really important to them to find positions of power and they wield that power. If some people have influence then other people gravitate towards that for better or for worse. But I think the scene is pretty healthy. I think there are more opportunities for younger composers than there were. Asian composers are a part of that, but also things like women composers' festivals and things like that seem to be supportive. Certainly, there's ways to go with that. We still in music history have not certified "the Great Woman Composer", but that's changing and composing is historically one of the last places to come around. Again, I'm not an "Asian" composer, I don't know what that means, so I can't speak to that. If I can speak to Asian students they're all very driven and career oriented.

MJ: Have you found yourself as an Asian mentor to these Asian students?

DM: To a small degree and sometimes I'm sort of curious why they don't study with me because I think the word is out that I'm half-Asian and sometimes I go "Come on! We could share some insights together." but on the other hand I've worked with some. And I've learned from them! I don't want to sound like sour grapes at all because it really isn't about that, it's about coexisting and learning from each other in our short time together and that's all I'm about. To me it's all about being of service and being generous in spirit.

MJ: Do you spot Asian elements in this students' music?

DM: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

MJ: What do those look like?

DM: With some it's very clear just through the tonal language, there's a lot of pentatonic scales. Others it's sort of a heightened awareness of music that they're emulating that have those elements I was describing before. It's dramatic and coloristic. With the younger composers it's a little more the façade of it and that's cool because they're consciously trying to reflect their visage. They're trying to say "I'm in the United States, but I'm Chinese" and you're not going to miss that. It's a little bit like "here I am selling myself" in a good way. In a very solid way.

MJ: Do you see that language transferring into a more internalized, refined voice as time goes on?

DM: Oh yeah, but that takes more time than they have at Hartt. I don't see many Caucasian students, if I may use that antiquated term, trying to emulate what are clearly Asian styles. I mean, minimalism borrows from that and is pervasive but I don't hear many people say "Oh I'm going to write something that's Asian." No, it doesn't seem like a main area of interest. There's just so much out there. The main thing is to develop a voice where you feel confident enough to pursue something no matter how strange or lost it might be. Or pursue something that's very clear and accessible because that's what you want to do. By all means, do it. Have some sort of direction. If I may speak for myself, that's the only reason I compose. I gotta do this thing. I mean, what else am I gonna do? But I also I know I'm making something and creating something and doing some good in the world and that thing comes out as part Asian because I'm genetically half-Asian and have been exposed to and find incredible value in that culture. I'm conscious of that and I think we have a lot to learn from it. It's pride. I'm proud of that heritage and want to reflect it.

MJ: Speaking of pride, do you find that Asian music is beginning to be recognized for all its facets? Like how Chinese music is so different from Japanese music and so forth?

DM: No, I think that people have a long way to go to be able to distinguish that. It's not a judgement call on audiences or people, I just think that people don't have the background or insight. more immersion and actual study to recognize not only the difference between different countries but to recognize the diversity of what could be. I think people see whatever they're told to see and they respond to that. That said, I think individuals often have wonderful takes on

whatever the subject is, including music. But that doesn't come from necessarily a musical education, it comes from their own curiosity about life. If somebody reacts one way, they're incredibly dead-on sensitive to what you're about. Of course, when you write something you have no control (in fact it's wonderful) and whatever you were thinking about can go out to a million people and you'll get a million different takes on what it was. That's what makes music so special. I think a lot of people, if it's presented in the context of "this is Asian inspired" they will mind their own reflections about that and then find their answer or backstory for that and whatever they find is valuable. It may be from the books they read or something else, but it probably isn't music. Some people are so literate; they know so much more music than I do, but for most people it's about outside of music and how that informs the music. I think it's really important that people have a handle outside the music that they use to get into the music because the music is extremely abstract.

MJ: Do you think that'll lead to a more nuanced view instead of a Pan-Asian view of the music?

DM: I don't know. I think some people are sophisticated enough to know it's not just one flavor. Whether or not people will understand Asian new music, Pan-Asian, American, whatever. I'm not totally optimistic about that. There's just too many of us and not enough exposure. There are 100 million more predominant things competing for that attention. There'll be some people who really like it and lot of other people who have no awareness of it and that's the way life is.

MJ: Do you take pride in being a member of a community that can distinguish those characteristics?

DM: Well, I take pride in being a person who doesn't just look at something and say "that's what is it." I think about it and ponder it. Whether it's Asian music or not, I'm a person who thinks deeply about it. That's the whole point of art to me. So, yeah. There are many people who are like that. That's the joy of being in it. You speak to somebody who is not trained, the "oh I don't know anything about music, but" -- No! Get rid of that sentence. Just say: "this is my reaction." A lot of the time there are really amazing things that people might say. Not just about my music but about life and music in general. And the Asian part? It's a part of the mix. It's in there. It's part of the mix, and it has its own identities I'm not going to deny it that, but it's nuanced. Everything is. It's just not that simple. As far as where we're gonna go with this, I don't know, but I don't see that whatever new music is and there's a lot of new music where we might say "Well, that's not the new music I know", I don't see it taking over. It's gonna be on the fringes and that's okay. Given the way the world is going I'd rather be on the fringes.

MJ: Jumping off from there, I wanted to ask you about, to put it ungracefully, your politics and your views on communal music-making and leftism and if there is an Asian identity that fuels that and where that comes from. I'm thinking of pieces like *Standing* or *Music for a Large Space* that involve the audience but also pieces like *Staying the Course*. Where do politics come in and how does it interact with your American and Asian identities?

DM: As far as political statements, I mean, I've written a few pieces like *Staying the Course* that are pretty clearly political. I think that comes from my own family background. My dad was a socialist who was blacklisted during the McCarthy era and couldn't get a job. I was aware of that kind of political discrimination and was aware of discrimination towards my mom and was sensitive to that and knew that it was wrong and knew that I would always be working to fight that on some level. For a long time, I didn't think composing was the place to do it. It just wasn't connected to that because it was this art form that was off on the side; that had nothing to do with general society but more and more, especially in the 90s and 2000s and on I said "I could do this. I want to do this, and I have something to say about it." So, pieces like *Staying the Course*, and others like *Give Back Peace*, which was about the Iraq War, came from that. I wrote these pieces that have those messages and I felt that this is about as direct as I wanted to be and I didn't want it to become what I did. Then I had some second thoughts about doing that. Like, is it really appropriate? So, I have this piece that counts the number of people killed in the Iraq/Afghanistan Wars, alright, but what does that really do about anything? I was debating it, and I looked back and eventually said "it has everything to do with it!" Everything you do changes the world a little bit and in this way, I think people get that and respond to it. There's nothing wrong with that. I had to tell myself if one person thinks it's a little heavy-handed, so be it! There will be others who don't. That, and a number of other things, led me to communal participation. I did a piece called *Rose Garden* that was done in the Rose Garden and all these people showed up and they listened to all these different chamber groups playing all over the Rose Garden. It was not only a wonderful experience but it got me to think more and more than my music and music in general isn't about the composer at all. It's about the listener. There's a sense of my music but I'd rather express just music. In many ways, I'm more interested in the individual listener's experience.

Communal music making to me is not only a way to bring people together in a very positive experience; a bonding experience, but also a way for people to really think about their own expression. They are part of the whole creative experience, not only as listeners but, in a sense, as initiators of what could happen. They have a dual role or a multiple role of listening and creating as composer-performer-listeners. We separate composers and performers in Western tradition, but it really is about Makers and Listeners, but you can even break down that distinction. Why not have Maker-Listeners? We are all musicians. You do that and want to be able to have people not just *doing*, but *listening* and *recognizing* their own voice and seeing it as a valuable thing. You really get away from one person who's the boss, so it really is political. The communal music-making really is about getting away from the conductor, the boss, the composer, and let's get down to work together. On one hand, I'm writing a piece now about the observation of World War I, the centennial of the end, and it's very political. It's going to have slides of soldiers and – yeah, it's going to be really grim. On the other hand, I'm writing pieces totally about communal music making and listening and to me that's the next step from a direct political message. These communal pieces are a way for me to be really political, but more inclusive. It's not just me telling people what it is, but they also feel something and we're doing something together. That's revolutionary. That's really important. Just the way that people get together and do all kinds of things because not only do they need them, I think people realize by forming things they empower themselves to fight and resist what is going on, because much of what is going on is about trying to divide everybody. To divide Us. We're much weaker that way. You're talking about all kinds of forces that are trying to get you to be afraid, to be isolated, to be lonely, to be depressed. That all plays into “democracy happiness” and patriotism, those

things are all about instilling fear. But when you're all together and sing? There's no way to be afraid.

MJ: You use the term “revolutionary”, and interesting to have an composer in America writing these Communistic works. You look at East Asia as the place where, for better or worse, communism has taken hold. I'm wondering if, with your Asian heritage, you feel a sense of connection between your communal music and the political philosophies of Asia?

DM: No, I think of China's communist government as being incredibly repressive. No, I would rather use the word “democracy” in its truest sense. Communal to me is about democracy, not about communism. Communism, I guess on some theoretical level is pretty utopian, but in practice it's as repressive as anything we've ever seen. In China, to me, we're still dealing with a dynastic and imperial model with a different name. You have whole cult followings around figures like Jiang Zemin that make Mao look like nothing. I have no identity with any of that in terms of the government. I'm not as idealistic or elitist as Cage in believing in anarchy. I'd rather get my hands dirty and get involved in the political process. That being said, there's nothing wrong with a strong government, in fact I wish we had one. (Laughs)

MJ: Do you see this communal music making a revolutionary way to change American culture?

The word “revolutionary” is pretty loaded, but I do think that every time you bring people together, any time, whether you're doing my music or somebody else's it is a kind of revolution

and if there's a revolutionary aspect to it it's that it's not about my music or your music. It's about music. If the piece has my name on it, that's not important. I've done concerts where none of the composers are identified and you just listen to music. In a way that would be pretty revolutionary in Western concert music. "Let's go to a concert or any musical event where none of the creators are identified at all and just listen to music and make up your own mind." To me that might be not only revolutionary but might also be a pretty liberating experience.

MJ: Is that anonymity something that's more common in Asian cultures?

DM: I do think so! I think the idea of a concert is totally foreign to Chinese traditional music. In fact, public performance is not really the tradition. A lot of times it's just self-edification. There is of course music that's performed publicly but there isn't an owner of that music. The greatest composer of all traditions is "Anonymous." The most prolific and the best! (Laughs). So, I don't know, if you want to call that "Revolutionary" then let's do it! Let's start the revolution! Actually, John Lennon, a lot of what he did and believed is dead on. He just didn't bullshit.

MJ: I've noticed that you write a lot for percussion, and I wanted to ask what is it about percussion that makes it such a good vessel for your music?

I think percussion is a great vessel in terms of this subject of Asian music, too. Percussion is the doorway to noise, percussion is the doorway to liberation, to freedom. As you know, you don't play one instrument you're constantly creating your instrument and it's never finished. In that way it's not only liberating, it's as close to composition as you can get. Composition is totally

forming, it's the journey, right? Percussion, to me: we're like brothers. Asian music is not about Western ideas of pitch or temperament, so percussion is the bridge of noise to get away from equal temperament. I'm really interested in not just writing for percussion but mixing different tunings because then you really bring out the richness of the incongruities between, let's say a piano and a timbrack or a violin and a cowbell. For me, *Percussion Park*, was just one exploration of that idea of incompatible incongruities. For example, I wrote a piece for xylophone and talking drum, and they're both trying to talk and inflect. It's like languages, and having a good time babbling together and not making sense. To me, percussion is the world. If we're talking about East meets West and the whole universe, percussion is it! Africa, Asia, it's the whole world! I'm not dissing writing a sonata for violin at all, but when a violin expands its sonic repertoire, what does it do? It becomes more percussive.

MJ: I almost think a violin playing in equal temperament feels like those whitewashed textbooks you'd read in high school and then when you put it up against something that's not in that intonation it totally makes you reconsider the foundation of that equal temperament.

Right! The dogma of what was handed down begins to be reconsidered. Percussion is a constant reconsideration of any premise you can think of. To me that should be the spirit of all instruments. That's what an instrument is about. Sure, you develop your own voice, but your voice can be a product of multiple influences. It isn't the Bel Canto model of "this is the way one should sing." It's about "What's your voice?" and you can have a voice that's lots of different sounds. Just like in language! Like my actual voice I can go AHA! (*shouts loudly*) or I can

kind of mumble. The voice is so expressive why wouldn't you want all of that on your instrument? In composition that's what it's about, or can be about. The term "classical music" is meaningless now. People ask me what I write and I guess I say "concert music" and they assume it's classical but classical music is the last thing I want to write.

What do you want to write?

Just music! I don't care what you call it. New music is probably the best term, but in a lot of way it's fighting that whole establishment thing. No conductor, no dictator, none of that crap. Let's just make music together. They can be rough sounds, they can be really gentle, beautiful sounds, they don't all have to be abrasive. You can do anything. It's all there, but you have to listen. You can't just talk.

MJ: It's striking to me to hear about the "double-facing mirror" between an Asian identity and an American identity and a classical identity and a new music identity and how you've found in percussion the way to bring these together.

DM: And how to get away and break outside. Get away from that. It's liberating, and like most things they're better off probably being destroyed. (laughs) No, seriously! Curriculums, school, any kind of structures that have ossified. I'm not saying we destroy the world, I'm just saying "let it go." It's still there! It's gonna be there tomorrow! Aren't we in the business of having fun?

MJ: When I think of Chinese instruments being used for the purpose of new music I immediately jump to Cage and Harrison, and I'm wondering are there other Chinese or Asian composers who are looking at percussion as a medium?

DM: Oh, I'm sure there are. I don't have all the names, but I definitely think it's part of the palette of Asian composers, just part of their scenery. Who's specializing in that I don't know. I'm terribly illiterate when it comes to what's going on. I've written quite a bit of percussion music so perhaps I'm adding a new flower on this beast. I'd love to find more people like myself, and feel less isolated. One of the composers I have the most history with is Stuart [Saunders Smith] but I don't see him in being any way Asian. He's very European and he cultivates that. I think to some degree maybe the idea of reflecting more popular trends which I feel I'm a part of. My music is informed by popular elements like Rock n' Roll, and that's a connection that could be made to Asian elements, too. Asian music and American music have both been incredibly affected by popular trends. China's fascination with the United States is off the charts. Ever since there was any contact that was true. There's a "you guys are heathens" but also "whoa, what are you doing with that?" It works both ways. Wish we could get our governments to hang out and cooperate and nurture that kind of brotherhood.

MJ: I think of all these positive interactions happening between American artists and Chinese artists and it's emboldening to me. The thought of an American government inciting hatred or violence towards Chinese people is laughable because we've all had so many positive interactions with that culture. They can't be dehumanized to us.

DM: Right, The People United Will Never Be Defeated. The people will persevere.