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# Dragon Rhyme by Chen Yi

## **Abstract**

Russell McCutcheon, Assistant Professor of Music and Director of Bands in the Sunderman Conservatory of Music, published an analysis of "Dragon Rhyme", a major new composition for wind band, by composer Chen Yi in *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band, Volume 9*.

## **Keywords**

music education, Chen Yi, wind band

## **Disciplines**

Music | Music Education | Music Performance



# Teacher Resource Guide

## Dragon Rhyme

**Chen Yi**

(b. 1953)

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### Unit 1: Composer

Chen Yi\* was born in Guangzhou, China, on April 4, 1953. Her parents were both medical doctors and ardent devotees of classical Western art music. She began her musical study with piano lessons at the age of three and violin at the age of four. Her father had an extensive record collection, and she learned classical repertoire from her many hours of listening to her father's recordings. Her dream was to follow in her parents' footsteps and become a medical doctor herself, but that was not to be.<sup>1</sup>

When she was fifteen, Chen was sent to the countryside as part of the Cultural Revolution in China.<sup>2</sup> The Cultural Revolution, led by Mao Zedong, lasted from 1966 through 1976; during that time, colleges and universities were practically closed to new students. The "send-down" policy dictated that instead of college, urban junior and senior high graduates be "sent up to the mountains and down to the countryside," where they would work as farmers and laborers.<sup>3</sup> While in the countryside, Chen had her violin with her, and she performed songs and melodies from approved music for the farmers and villagers, practicing Western music in secret. After two years working as a farmer, she returned to Guangzhou to become concertmaster of the local Beijing Opera ensemble.<sup>4</sup>

In 1977, China resumed its college entrance examinations, and that year Chen was one of thirty-two students accepted into the Beijing Central Conservatory composition program. While there, she studied with Wu Zuqiang and Alexander Goehr. She went on to become the first woman to receive a master's degree in composition in China in 1986. She then traveled

\*Chen is her family name; Yi is her personal name. Chen Yi can be referred to as Dr. Chen, Ms. Chen, or Chen Yi.

to the United States and studied composition with Chou Wen-chung and Mario Davidovsky at Columbia University, receiving her doctor of musical arts with distinction in 1993.<sup>5,6</sup>

For three years, Chen held a residency with The Women's Philharmonic and Chanticleer, supported by Meet the Composer, which resulted in a multimedia concert for orchestra, choir, Chinese traditional instruments, dancers, and image projection titled the *Chinese Myths Cantata*.<sup>7,8</sup> From 1996 to 1998, she served on the faculty of the Peabody Conservatory of Music, and in 1998, she accepted the position of Cravens/Millsap/Missouri Distinguished Professor at the Conservatory of Music and Dance at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.<sup>9</sup>

Chen has received many fellowships and commissioning awards; her honors include a first prize from the Chinese National Composition Competition, the Lili Boulanger Award, the CalArts/Alpert Award, and the ASCAP Concert Music Award. In 2006, she was appointed by the China Ministry of Education to the prestigious Cheung Kong Scholar Visiting Professor at the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music, and in 2011, she was renewed for three additional years as part of China's One Thousand Experts Project in a shared appointment with her husband, Pulitzer prize-winning composer Zhou Long.<sup>10,11</sup>

Chen has composed for almost every genre, including chamber ensembles, Chinese instrumental orchestras and ensembles, instrumental solos, full orchestra, and vocal/choral ensembles. Her other works for wind band include *Suite from China West* for wind symphony, *Wind* for wind ensemble, *UMKC Fanfare*, *Spring Festival*, and *Tu* for symphonic wind ensemble.<sup>12</sup>

## Unit 2: Composition

*Dragon Rhyme* was composed in Kansas City, MO, in 2010; it is the first commission from the National Wind Ensemble Consortium Group, led by Glen Adsit. The Hartt School Wind Ensemble, with Adsit conducting, premiered the work in Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium. After receiving the commission, Chen Yi began to explore the various tone colors and sonorities of the modern wind band.<sup>13</sup> In the opening notes of the score, the composer writes:

The instrumental texture is rich in colors, from transparent and delicate to angular and strong. Taking the image of the dragon, which is auspicious, fresh and vivid, the music is layered and multi-dimensional. It symbolizes the Eastern culture. When it meets the world, it becomes a part of the global family.

*Dragon Rhyme* is comprised of two movements, titled I: “Mysteriously-Harmoniously” and II: “Energetically,” and has a duration of approximately fifteen minutes and thirty seconds.

### Unit 3: Historical Perspective

*Dragon Rhyme* has its roots in the music of the Beijing (Peking) Opera. Beijing Opera is a highly developed opera form, both in China and in the larger musical world. Initially performed only in Beijing, it gained wider acceptance and became very popular in the early 1900s, which led to its designation as “National Opera.”<sup>15</sup>

Music is integral to the performance in Beijing Opera, as evidenced in the common saying *ting xi*, which is usually translated as “going to the opera” but literally means “listening to theatre.” The basic melodies of Beijing Opera are *Erhuang* and *Xipi*. *Erhuang* is often graceful, sedate, lower, and slower, while *Xipi* is faster, higher, and more rambunctious.<sup>14</sup> While *Dragon Rhyme* does not use any direct melodies from Beijing Opera or Chinese folk music, these two styles are observed in the contrasting movements. *Dragon Rhyme* also uses the interval of the seventh as its primary motivic figure, which is a common interval played by the *Hu Ch'in*, a type of two-stringed fiddle held in an upright position by the performer. The *Hu Ch'in* is the main string instrument that leads the other strings.<sup>16</sup>

### Unit 4: Technical Considerations

*Dragon Rhyme* calls for mature performers adept at reading and playing complex rhythms independently, including quintuplets and septuplets. The piece includes a harp; this part is required, although the composer states that performance on a synthesizer would be acceptable.<sup>17</sup>

The first movement, “Mysteriously-Harmoniously,” is often thinly scored with many soloistic sections, duets, and trios. There are many altered chromatic scales, with a combination of half and whole steps, which will challenge musicians in their technical skills. The entire movement is written in 4/4, quarter note = 84.

The second movement, “Energetically,” is much more thickly scored with many tutti passages. Meters shift between 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, and cut time, with many tempo changes. Rhythms remain intricate, but they are primarily performed in unison within various choirs, so they should be mastered more easily. This movement features an extended percussion soli. The work can be performed with three percussionists and timpani, but it may be beneficial to have an assistant on one or more parts. In rehearsal, conductors might explore other works that use percussion melodically instead of merely providing support to the winds.



## Unit 5: Stylistic Considerations

The most critical stylistic element to consider is the treatment of the accent. In Western music, accents are usually performed by emphasizing the initiation of the note and then sustaining a softer dynamic for the remainder of the duration. In *Dragon Rhyme*, the accents are based on the Chinese language. The accents must be very focused, with most of the energy on the beginning of the note and a more dry approach to the sustain of the note.

The many interlocking rhythmic parts in the first movement are typical of Chen Yi's music. The composer refers to them as “cloud effects,” as much like the clouds in the sky they first appear to be stationary and fixed but, upon closer inspection, are actually moving quite quickly and independently. She encourages conductors to not over-work the rhythms in these sections, as they are primarily creating a textured effect.

In the second movement, the score calls for the bass drum player to also play wood block. The composer clarifies that this is not a Western wood block, but it is meant to be the sound of the hard wooden rim of the Chinese bass drum called the *Dagu*. This drum, similar to large Japanese Taiko drums, has a very deep sound with little sustain and a wooden rim that is played as well. The composer suggests that a large piece of resonant wood be used for this sound and that a large, deep marching bass drum might be more appropriate for the bass drum itself. Some have found that a piano bench may be repurposed for this sound, but take care to use an old bench, especially with enthusiastic percussionists.<sup>18</sup>

## Unit 6: Musical Elements

### MELODY:

The melodic motif in *Dragon Rhyme* is based entirely on the “see-saw” interval leaps of sevenths and fourths.<sup>19</sup> It appears briefly in the introductory material but is given a prominent place in m. 40, played by oboe 1 and 2, English horn, trumpet 1, horn, glockenspiel, and harp. These leaps form the basis for the entire work.



FIGURE 1. PRIMARY MOTIF THAT FORMS THE BASIS FOR *DRAGON RHYME*.

### HARMONY:

Movement 1: “Mysteriously-Harmoniously” is not based in any one key or pitch center and avoids functional harmony altogether, but it is not atonal. Instead, as in music of the Beijing Opera, the independent horizontal melodic

lines are the focus rather than the vertical alignment of chords. Movement 2: “Energetically” is more tonal, rooted in D major, then D-flat major, ending in A major.

#### RHYTHM:

Rhythms are complex, featuring many quintuplets, sextuplets, and septuplets in both eighth- and sixteenth-note figures. There are many areas of syncopation and fractional-beat entrances. While the many overlapping rhythms serve to reinforce the nebulous nature of the first movement, rhythm provides the driving force in the second movement.

#### TIMBRE:

The composer uses the various choirs within the ensemble effectively, creating a sense of untouchable, undefined motion in the first movement through the cloud effects in the woodwinds, harp, and glockenspiel. The many solo and small group parts emphasize the mysterious nature of the movement. The first movement is very metallic with lyrical solos interspersed. The second movement opens with a fanfare and, while it has moments of repose, is most often angular and strong. There is no percussion in the first movement, and when percussion enters in the second movement to take on a fully realized role, it is a striking contrast.

## Unit 7: Form and Structure

According to the composer, the first movement, “Mysteriously-Harmoniously,” is best described as a through-composed tone poem. The second movement, “Energetically,” is a modified variation form using the main motivic material from the first movement.<sup>20</sup> Glen Adsit, leader of the *Dragon Rhyme* commission, provides the following formal analysis:<sup>21</sup>

SECTION	MEASURE	EVENT AND SCORING
Movement 1: “Mysteriously-Harmoniously”		
Introduction	1	All twelve pitches are used to create layers and textures through the harp and glockenspiel parts; another layer is added in clarinet on beat two of m. 1, and this continues in alto saxophone in m. 3.



SECTION	MEASURE	EVENT AND SCORING
	4	The most complex layer of the movement begins in E-flat clarinet and continues with B-flat clarinet and oboe; this triple canon also employs all twelve pitches.
	17–26	English horn, clarinet, and alto saxophone introduce a quasi-chromatic scale, which appears more fully realized in m. 26.
	28	The peak of the introduction; continued quasi-chromatic passages in woodwinds with sustained <i>ff</i> chord in brass.
	34	The introduction draws to a close; canonic figures return in flute 2 and oboe, diminishing in rhythmic intensity and volume.
Main theme	40	The main motif of the work is presented by oboe, English horn, and trumpet.
	41	Flute and piccolo play what the composer calls the “broom gesture,” sweeping listeners’ ears clear of previous material.
	43–91	Melodic treatment of the main motif with continued layers of sustained sound, quasi-chromatic scales, and broom gestures.
B theme	91–102	English horn introduces the B thematic material while fragments of the main motif continue in staccato woodwinds and sustained brass.
Closing	103–115	Piccolo and glockenspiel play a broom gesture, clearing the ear for the closing section and the return of the canonic figures in m. 105 in E-flat clarinet, B-flat clarinet, and oboe; in m. 106, the opening figure returns in glockenspiel only without harp; horns state an augmented version of the main motif in m. 108.



SECTION	MEASURE	EVENT AND SCORING
	116-122	Brass play a fragment of the main motif with pentatonic clusters on each note that come to a climax in m. 119, then are swept away by piccolo and flute, leaving sustained clarinet and glockenspiel trilling in minor seconds.
	123	The harp now returns to the opening figure, this time without glockenspiel; saxophone plays an answer to the brass pentatonic section.
	131	The quasi-chromatic scales reappear in clarinet 1 followed by piccolo in m. 133; sustained chords with all twelve tones return in m. 136; fragments of the main motif are presented with the same staccato and sustained treatment as before.
	140	The first movement ends with all winds sustaining a twelve-note chord while harp and glockenspiel continue the running figure to m. 143.
Movement 2: "Energetically"		
Fanfare	1-14	Sustained trills in woodwinds over fanfare trumpets, answered by bassoon and low brass in mm. 3-4.
Respite	15-22	A quiet repose while saxophone choir and oboe present main motif.
Percussion	23-70	Percussion soli inspired by traditional Chinese drumming.
	70	Winds enter into the rhythmic texture, giving pitches to the unpitched percussion.
	102	Woodwinds present chromatic glissando, answered by brass while percussion continues.
	118	Woodwind scale figures do not follow traditional form or harmony as in movement 1.



SECTION	MEASURE	EVENT AND SCORING
	128	Dialogue between woodwinds and brass continues.
Climax	166	Main motif presented in augmentation in low brass and low woodwinds while percussion, trumpet, and horns provide insistent rhythmic drive.
Respite	190	Tonality moves down a half step.
	206	The final section of repose before the driving end to the movement; melody in oboe is drawn from the pentatonic material in m. 116 of movement 1; horn 1 plays melody.
Coda	222	All previous elements return in strongly rhythmic figures.
	230	Woodwinds and low brass play augmented main motif accompanied by pulsating septuplet figure in trumpet, horn, trombone, harp, and tom-toms.
	244–246	Culmination of work with <i>ff</i> A major chord (with added ninth), followed by a single quarter note dominated by notes A and E, reinforcing A major tonality.

## Unit 8: Suggested Listening

- Vincent Persichetti: *Symphony No. 6. Composers Collection: Vincent Persichetti*, North Texas Wind Symphony, Eugene Corporon, conductor. GIA, CD-627, 2005.
- Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings: *The Ruse of the Empty City: A Traditional Peking Opera. Custom Compact Disc Series*. Folkways Records, FW 8882, 1960.
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- Chen Yi:  
*Chinese Folk Dance Suite for Violin and Orchestra. Momentum*, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Shui Lan, conductor. BIS, BIS-CD-1352, 2003.  
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*Spring Festival. Bandquest*, American Composers Forum. Hal Leonard, HL 04001980, 2002.

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<sup>1</sup>Chen Yi, telephone interview with the author, May 9, 2012.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Yu Xie, Yang Jiang, and Emily Greenman, "Did Send-down Experience Benefit Youth? A Re-evaluation of the Social Consequences of Forced Urban-rural Migration During China's Cultural Revolution," in *Social Science Research*, 37 (2008): 686-700.

<sup>4</sup>Joanna C. Lee, "Chen Yi," in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/48452> (n.d.).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Chen Yi, telephone interview with the author, May 9, 2012.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>"Chen Yi: Biography," <http://www.presser.com/Composers/info.cfm?Name=ChenYi> (n.d.).

<sup>9</sup>Chen Yi - Lorena Searcy Cravens/ Millsap/ Missouri Distinguished Professor of Composition," <http://conservatory.umkc.edu/faculty-profile.cfm?id=27> (n.d.).

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<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Halson, *Peking Opera: A Short Guide* (Hong Kong, New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Glen Adsit and Adam Fontana, "Analysis: *Dragon Rhyme* by Chen Yi" (2010).

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