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## **A MUSICAL ANALOGUE WITH BLURRED SPACE IN MY ERHU SOLO FIREWORKS<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** This paper discusses my recent erhu solo project *Fireworks* which is a musical analogue that I analyse using Chuang Tzu's blurred aesthetics to investigate a musical space between determinacy and indeterminacy in Chinese national music. What is particularly interesting to me about this blurred musical space is that it is not polarised around an idea of 'the invisible' or 'the indefinable' as pure negative space but can be perceived in a more graduated area between positive and negative, fixed and unstable. Behind this concept of musical space is the creation of an 'interpenetrated' identity, a fluctuating boundary between opposing qualities, or the subject's and object's identities. In seeking to find structural analogues congruent with the concept of the blur, the challenges and focus of this work rely upon the architecture of ambivalent states, which include string timbre and frequency, the relations of determinacy-indeterminacy, space and spacing architecture, performative indeterminacy and fragments, and silence. This focus of this research into a

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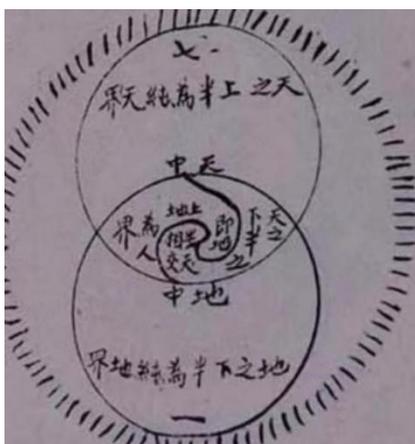
musical engagement with blurred aesthetics has allowed me to examine how I might approach musical structure, specifically by the framing of events or phenomena, and by expanding my musical language and creative ideas..

**Keywords:** Blurred, Indeterminacy, Musical space, Harmony, Erhu.

## INTRODUCTION

Pre-study – The Daoist Aesthetics of blurring

Blurred: space fusion, gap, sensitive relationship



**Figure 1.** Tai Chi heaven and earth cross map

## Definition of blurred

My research began by exploring music similar to Chuang Tzu's<sup>2</sup> blur aesthetics, which is understood as constellations of knowledge about sensitive space and time in the process of change. Chinese scholars pointed out the harmony advocated by Chuang Tzu as the state of integration of multiple spaces, namely man, heaven and earth. Chuang Tzu used music as a metaphor to achieve the

2 Chuang Tzu had a unique position among the early Chinese thinkers. He believed that the experience of musical harmony is ineffable and non-representational, transcends the boundaries of the human world, and needs to empty one's mind and inner feelings (Rogacz 2022).

ideal state of harmonious aesthetics (Liu 2007). Man and nature merge into one to achieve a natural harmony. Chinese architecture realises the communication between man and nature, such as the structure of the Suzhou garden window view and rockery, which attaches importance to borrowing scenery and pursues the harmonious structure of the integration of man and scenery.

Chinese music historians indicate that the 'harmony' in the music theory of Chuang Tzu not only involves the meaning of music discipline, but also has the meaning of psychology. This concept is further extended from music theory to social ethics and even philosophical thought (Xiu 1980). This harmony has both objective and subjective meanings and can be understood as the process or the interval of the fusion of two or more spaces between determinacy and indeterminacy. Determinacy can be interpreted as a dynamically active space of music that can be sensed. Indeterminacy can be interpreted as an opening musical space with unpredictable qualities. Rest and transition in Chinese national music are also intervals between notes or sounds, and the blurring state that rest and transition present is exactly what Chinese artists are pursuing. 'Blurred' is a description of the changes within this harmonious process as a subjective, empirical term, suggesting a general mode of experience in which different spaces are simultaneously and identically perceived and fixed. At the same time, I used analogous blur as a tool of music interpretation in the way that Professor Philip Thomas understood indeterminacy: works that are under the banner of indeterminacy include composers who are often referred to as The New York School, namely Earle Brown, John Cage, and Morton Feldman. Their use of indeterminacy as a notational and technical device derives from an individual aesthetic that was undoubtedly shaped by developments within their colleagues' music, and has particular implications for the understanding and interpretation of their works (Philip 2007).

Questions that I pose in this article include: What is in the blur? How does the blur happen and what impact does it have? How do compositional intentions and performance possibilities interact in the blur? These kinds of research questions do not seem to be the mainstream research in Chinese academia. Professor Vladimir V. Maliavin's description of the difference between Chinese Taoism and Western process transformation helps to illustrate what sensitivity means in this harmonious space and time:

Daoist intentionality is therefore the passage from the indefinite Mind to the definite one, from no-limit to the great limit. Contrary to the Western notion of intentionality, it has no objective contents. It is a pure creativity marking the limits of things or moments of transformation, the 'in-between' spaces. Oscillating between the pulsating continuum and the continuum of pulsation, it represents a pure affectivity, an eternal reaction, a course of self-cause, and thus an inexhaustible effi-

ciency. What is the prototype of this movement of deferring/returning which leaves no visible trace and yet brings about qualitative change? I think we should look for it in the kinaesthetic unity of the living body that makes possible all finite movements. (Maliavin 2008)

### **Other Compositional Articulations of Blurring**

Borrowing from Maliavin (2008), the blurred space of Daoism is not only something objectively located in space or time interval. The blurred space is where the boundary between determinacy and indeterminacy or more different worlds are empirically continuous and moving. At the same time, it is realised that the fusion of opposites is the combination of the cognition of sensitivity with the cognition of the individual, and is related to the flow of time. This is clearly shown in the Daoist blurred diagram (Tai Chi map of heaven and earth), which includes the heaven and earth and the intersecting human world (Figure 1.1). Although the human world (the fused part) presupposes something intangible and concrete, the fluctuations of factors within it indicate the existence of something unstable or undefined.

What I'm particularly interested in is that blurred space is a more progressive area that can be perceived between positive and negative, between fixed and unstable. Behind this concept, there is a sensitivity in the fluctuating boundaries between opposing qualities, or identities of subjects and objects. Referring to work of philosopher Alfred Whitehead and the form of process as an infinite state of complex relations helped me to think about Chuang Tzu's blurred space in one way:

Process has a sense of rhythm. In this way, creative activity has a natural pulsation and each pulsation forms a natural unit of historical fact. The interweaving of data, form, transformation, and result is characteristic of every factual unit. In the historical world and its formal sphere, every fact, when fully realized, has an infinite number of relations. These relations are the cosmic view of this fact. To fully understand these abstracted relations, we must accordingly delve into the infinity of these relationships (Alfred 2019).

There is also sensitivity in infinity. Thus, the blurring space can be understood as an individual's cognitive space created by sensitivities within the interaction of the subjective/internal and the objective/external world within a given framework after fusion.

For this researcher, the blurring ideas of Chuang Tzu, Maliavin and Whitehead inspired me to study contemporary Chinese national instrumental music

with a Chinese traditional music background and western modern music language from different perspectives that are analogues congruent with the concept of blur, through the interpretation of the sensitivity of the interaction between subjective and objective.

Due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the progress of this research was greatly affected. I have restructured the research as a self-collaboration through a project named *Fireworks* in which I seek to amplify the personal cognition or evaluation behaviour brought by the interaction between internal and external space in the structure of contradictory states, in order to explore the role and change of sensitivity in the interactive space. As a solo erhu project, this study can be seen as the early stage to explore ideas to be further developed in different forms of musically framing a situation in which subtle changes in performance mode reflect the performer's changing sensibilities and blurred music space for performance changes.

## **STRING TIMBRE AND FREQUENCY**

### **Source of Inspiration and Space for Expansion**

In September 2020, *Fireworks* artist Cai Guoqiang carried out the project titled *The Birth of Tragedy* (Figure 2.1) on the Charonde River in Cognac, France. The theme of the artwork is related to my own work and thus aroused my interest. The transition and fusion presented in *Fireworks* are the presentation of the blurred space, which is similar to the way I simulate the blurred space with music.

The 'Cursive' of the Second Act (Figure 2.2) also expresses a celebration of the spirit of freedom. What I find particularly interesting is how transitional fusion affected the *Fireworks* piece to present a changing effect. The degenerative process of smoke in a space that gradually disappears as the sound goes on is very important. Once the smoke has disappeared, it eventually exists as clear, persisting in a blurred space element that is not a single occurrence but complex and changeable. The overlapping of tone colour space and the interweaving, enlarging, and expanding of blurred space reveals the relationship between the elements of space.



Figure 2.1. Cai Guoqiang, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 2020.

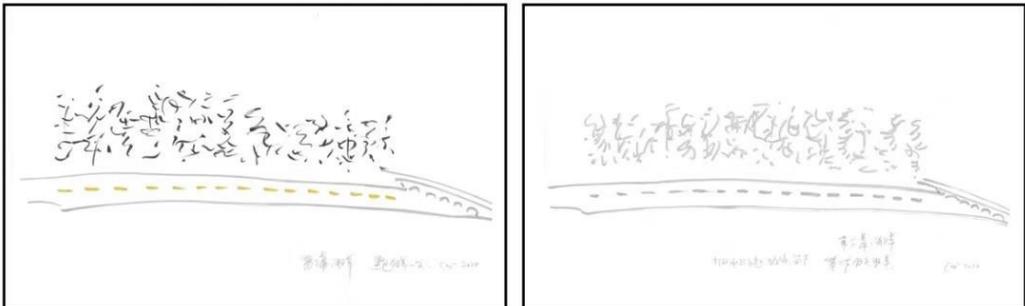
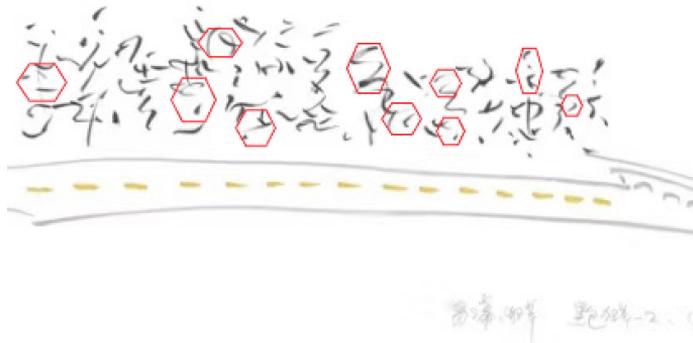


Figure 2.2. Manuscript by Cai Guoqiang, *The 'Cursive' of the Second Act*.

### Determinacy-Indeterminacy

The concept of blurring space is further enhanced through the relation between determinate-indeterminate durational space. While the determinate space is defined as a count, as measurable, standardised, or objective time, the extended transitional representation of the space in Figure 2.3 provides the participant with a more sensitive space defined within a context-given framework. The transitions and extensions of string kneading in erhu performance are individual behaviours generated by the interaction of subjective and objective factors. Changes in the speed and strength of string kneading can record subtle differences in interpretative subjective sensitivity.



**Figure 2.3.** Manuscript by Cai Guoqiang, Black Cursive, The ‘Cursive’ of the Second Act.

In Figure 2.3, I first translated the pre-set intermediate space and interval energy in the sketch and circled the disappearing process space between certainty and uncertainty. The red space is then transformed from left to right into ten acoustic forms in accordance with the writing order of calligraphy. In order to focus on the exploration and association of the blurred space and in addition to the changes in the space and spacing of the red graphics, I also magnified the presentation of the performance technology upon the timbre of the instrument to show what kind of spatial feeling that the combination of different timbre states of the same pitch will bring. I then set three modes: F (fast kneading, sustained sound, and dense frequency); S (slow kneading, sustained sound, and loose frequency); and K (compound: weak to strong or strong to weak). Each mode thus becomes an independent space and the independent crosses are mixed, so that there will be a total of six found forms: F, S, K, FS, FK, and SK. Finally, I combined these different playing methods and spatial rhythms of sound types and presented a map of sound forms (Table 1). The purpose of this setting is to provide an opportunity to compare and record the nuances of the final sound effect within a given framework.

**Table 1.** Different letter combinations in the column represent different sound forms.

| Bars | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 11 | 16 | 17 |
|------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
| F    | 1 |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    | 1  |
| S    |   | 2 |   |   |   |   | 1 |    | 2  |    |
| K    |   |   | 1 |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |
| FS   |   |   |   | 1 | 1 |   |   |    |    |    |
| FK   |   |   |   |   |   | 2 |   | 2  |    |    |
| SK   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    | 1  |

The sound effect is set according to the track of strokes in Figure 2.3. The thick strokes are similar to the sound intensity, while the strokes that are dissipated are similar to the sound that is loose. The lines indicate the order, position, and frequency of the appearance of the sound form (i.e., the number of times that the form appears in each bar).

Table 1 was arranged according to the spacing that appears in the space in Figure 2.3. For example, it can be found that the sound form of FK appears twice in bar 7. According to the interpretation of the symbols in Table 1, FK represents the combination of fast kneading and compound type, and the sound form presentation on the music score (Figure 2.4) is found to be consistent.

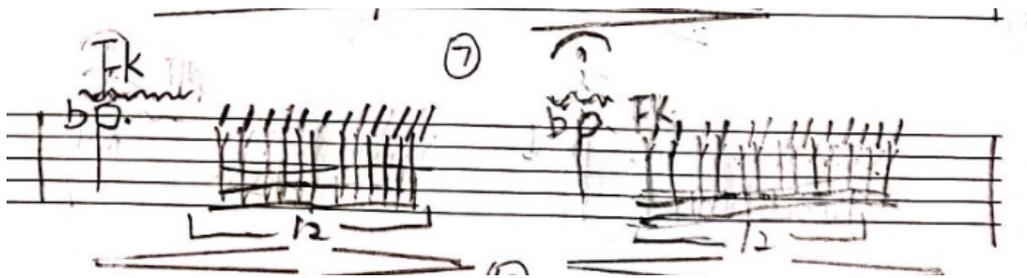


Figure 2.4. *Fireworks*, fr. II, bar 7.

The development of single timbre, for example in Tan Dun's Orchestra *Theatre* commissioned by Japan's Santori Hall, is referred to here. The entire song takes the 'Re' sound, fixed pitch as the centre, and embellishes the 'Re' sound through different octave homophone transformations, different durations, different playing methods, different timbres and different grace note forms. Although such a setting fully excavates the timbre and acoustics of a single note 'Re', this specific strategy seems to be due to the fact that the fixation of single notes cannot adequately record the subtle differences caused by subjective sensitivities between the score and the performers. I used the combination of different variations of different tones to try to explore differences in subjective sensitivity control under a given framework and amplify the influence of sensitivity on timbre.

## SPACE AND SPACING ARCHITECTURE

In order to communicate with blurred musical space, I created an interaction of conflicting expressions – subjective and objective, spatial and temporal – what is referred to in Mazzolini's words as, "a disturbing and acentric panorama in which nearby and distant, above and below, before and after are no longer clearly separated, but rather mixed with one another in a perennial diaspora of forms" (Mazzolini 2013). In this painting, I created subjective conflicts and col-

lisions with blurred space to provide performers with the opportunity to practice performing around sensitivity to time changes.

From the perspective of the expression of positive and negative space, these spaces are opposed to each other and negative can be defined as silent. In the open time, the performers create the consciousness of switching back and forth between the positive and the negative, which can be regarded as a transition space. In the case of a more open space, the sensitivity of the performers' interpretations creates a sense of conflict of change.

The performer's inner sense of counting is influenced by the indeterminate continuous silence as indicated by a long fermata symbol right before the bar. After the countable tempo, there is an immeasurable transition space within which subjective definitions of 'short, normal, and longer' is changed by the tempo as well as the expressive sensitivity of the gestural movements entering the transition space, i.e., the very long silence after the gesture of the glissandi along the erhu string at the end of bar 9 (Figure 3.1).

**Figure 3.1.** *Fireworks*, fr. III, bar 1–10.

However, it is not only the connections of each space that are involved. The context or position across the phrases, fragments and instrumental transitions can have interaction. In terms of the structure of the whole work, I use the free connection and combination of nine fragments so that space is not the only interrelated aspect. A compound of determinate-indeterminate transitional spaces allows the performer to consider space and spacing across micro and macro scales.

For example, in fragment IV, V, VI (Figure 3.2), the combination of the Chinese national mode and Dorian mode is provided as the basis, and the performer uses the cyclic mode of changing instruments to play overlapping extended tones, fermatas, and gestures to connect the sections. Figure 3.2 shows the way gestures are handled between the three materials and how the performance revolves around the meaning of this relationship. Fragment IV features the trill

gestures of erhu and gaohu. In fragment V, the continual staccato gestures of erhu and gaohu are shown. In fragment VI, the glissandi gestures of the erhu and gaohu link the rhythmic coordination between the two instruments as well as the subjective sensitivity of freely choosing when to change instruments.

Figure 3.2. *Fireworks*, fr. IV, V, VI.

## PERFORMATIVE INDETERMINACY

In addition to sound forms and fermata symbols, the work also uses different layers to express indeterminacy and thus enhances the sense of space and spacing. I decided to borrow notation similar to improvisation as a part of this movement, to construct the overall structure in an unknown and different way. In terms of the structure of music, the main material comes from the previous part of the piece. I have adopted the approach of multi-layered lines where the performer can negotiate the polyphonic material in the sheet music by himself and determine the direction of the music. The polyphonic material here adopts a variation form similar to that of Jiangnan Sizhu, which is a practical attempt to combine improvisation from traditional Chinese music with improvisation from modern music (Figure 4.1). This practice has provided me with an indeterminate and more flexible approach to expression. As a result, the interdependence between the melody lines becomes transitional but still relevant because the performers' decisions depend on their interpretation of the performance situation.

Figure 4.1. *Fireworks*, fr. VII, bar 1–12.

## FRAGMENTS AND SILENCE

This work consists of fragmentary fragments and silent connection. What I am trying to create with this fragmented structure is “one against an infinite number of sounds or sound forms... Together they comprise the entire complexity of life” (Frey, n.d.). In *Fireworks*, each fragmentary section is connected by silence in the form of various fermatas, some of which even include the movement of changing instruments. This structural pattern of indeterminate durational negative space in between specific musical phenomena was a way for me to explore forms of blurred musical space – the deconstruction of the cause and effect of sensitive interpretation.

Silence is used as a strategy of opening up subjectively sensitive structural space related to the situation and environment for performers and audiences. For me, this is an exploration of personal ideas and a constitutive analogy of Chuang Tzu’s aesthetics. Silence is like a gateway into an ever-changing moment, and a rich world emerges. Similarly, Evan Johnson’s work blurs the threshold between sound and silence. In the four high voices of his *Vo Mesurando* (2012), “the music reaches a point of almost total erasure” (Rutherford-Johnson 2017). As the composer explains in the programme notes, “the material and energies of the work are ‘private’, quite often simply inaudible” (Johnson, cited in Rutherford-Johnson 2017, 178).

## CONCLUSION

The practice of my work *Fireworks* presents a musical analogue with blurred space and suggests how I and perhaps others can deal with the structure of music, especially in regard to the framework of events or phenomena. The process of set string timbre and frequency allows us to record subtle differences in subjective sensitivity. The space and spacing architecture provides more opportunities regarding subjective sensitivity to spacing, new methods of spatial treatment, and increased improvisation for performers to develop a performance practice. Here, performance behaviour is not only expressed in the present but also has a dynamic relationship with the past and future. In my opinion, the participation is not just a personal one: it is also characterised by a shared or cooperative participation that makes the performance scenes blend with each other in an intimate manner. Through these active intervals and time changes, this memory structure can free and blur connections that move beyond a more static or flat way of thinking and in order to understand the blurred musical space or spacing that can lead to a performance with an unpredictable quality. My intention is not

to invent a new musical language, nor to establish a musical language symbol system. Through the process of musical practice, I seek to realise the pursuit of blurred musical space and invite new creative ideas.

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## A MUSICAL ANALOGUE WITH BLURRED SPACE IN MY ERHU SOLO *FIREWORKS* (summary)

The erhu solo project *Fireworks* is a musical analogue that I analyse using Chuang Tzu's blurred aesthetics to investigate the musical space between determinacy and indeterminacy in Chinese national music, especially under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, to explore my self-collaborative performing arts practice. In the Daoist view, the experience of music and harmony is ineffable, non-concrete, and transcends the realm of man (Rogacz 2022). Harmony for Chuang Tzu is beyond observable nature and reaches the way it is inherent. Pursuing harmony requires infinite transcendence and transformation. While the Daoist endorsement of harmony has been discussed in early Chinese thinkers' philosophy, the function and understanding of 'blurred-in' harmony has hardly been explored. What is in the blur? How does the blur happen and what impact does it have? How do compositional intentions and performance possibilities interact in the blur? To answer these questions, we analyse how different scholars have interpreted the concept. Daoist intentionality is therefore the passage from the indefinite Mind to the definite one, from no limit to the great limit. Contrary to the Western notion of intentionality, it has no objective content. It is pure creativity marking the limits of things or moments of transformation, the 'in-between' spaces. (Maliavin 2008). 'Blurred' is a description of the changes within this harmonious process as a subjective, empirical term, suggesting a general mode of experience in which different spaces are simultaneously and identically perceived and fixed.

This article communicates with blurred music space from four aspects. The string timber and frequency provide the participant with a more sensitive space defined within a context-given framework. The string kneading in erhu performance not only shows the interaction of subjective and objective factors but also records the subtle differences in interpretive subjective sensitivity. Space and spacing architecture creates an interaction of conflicting expressions – subjective and objective, spatial and temporal. In the case of more open space, the sensitivity of the performers' interpretations establishes a sense of conflict of change. In performative indeterminacy, I decided to borrow notation similar to improvisation as a part of this movement, the interdependence between the melody lines becomes transitional but still relevant because the performers' decisions depend on their interpretation. In fragments and silence, silence is used as a strategy for opening up subjectively sensitive structural space related to the situation and environment for performers and audiences.

We can conclude that the participation of subjective sensitivities in the blurred musical space provides more performance poetically. Participation is not only a personal one but also characterised by shared or cooperative participation that makes the performance scenes blend with each other in an intimate manner. Through these active intervals and time changes, this memory structure can free and blur connections that move beyond a more static or flat way of thinking in order to understand the blurred musical space or spacing that can lead to a performance with an unpredictable quality.

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