

Anna Burr

### Composition and Meaning in Daixuan Ai's Silent Theater

“Born in Hunan, China, in 1998, Daixuan Ai’s music combines tradition with modernism and connects Eastern and Western cultures. She is a composer, pianist, and teacher who is dedicated to learning and understanding the musical legacy from the past and opening her ears and heart to absorbing and creating music of today’s world. Her compositions are well-crafted, formally precise, deeply thoughtful, and she often finds ways to honor her cultural heritage in them.”<sup>1</sup> Silent theater is no exception. The piece features an interwoven variety of styles from contemporary classical techniques (such as usage of microtones, graphic notation, text instructions, aleatory, improvisation, screwdrivers and other experimental procedures) to classic Beijing opera style, depicted in melodic passages as well as in the percussion instrumentation. To Ai, these multitudes of styles are not mutually exclusive, and she regularly presents multiple styles together, almost as effects on one another to create meaning. As consistent with her style, Silent Theater has a program narrative that serves as the inspiration for the entire work, and informs the musical decisions Ai makes. She discusses this inspiration in her program notes: “On January 11th, 2023, an 18 year old student from Indiana University Bloomington was stabbed in the head multiple times on a local bus. The stabber assumed the student was ‘Chinese,’ saying in an interview with the police, “it would be one less person to blow up our country.” The crime was unprovoked; the stabber and the victim did not know one another. The victim was waiting for the bus door to open in order to get off when she was suddenly assaulted with a folding knife. The attacker then put the knife back into her pocket and returned to her seat as if nothing had happened. Soon afterwards, she exited the bus. She was charged with attempted murder, aggravated battery by means of a deadly weapon, and a hate crime. I wrote Silent Theater in

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<sup>1</sup> Ai “Bio/Epk” 2022

response to this horrific incident. It is dedicated to everyone who has suffered from racial injustice and hate. There is nothing more heartbreaking than senseless hatred and violence, enabled by ignorance, indifference, and by turning a blind eye to other's suffering."<sup>2</sup> Shortly following the aforementioned incident, I received a call from Daixuan. "That could have been me" she said, her expression visceral. Immediately, she began thinking of ways to express her emotions and create solidarity and healing within the communities she resided in: locationally, musically, and culturally. Silent Theater is one of the the results of her initiative, and is a vessel for the visceral emotions she felt towards the incident. A wide range of complex emotion is present in the piece, from violence to dissociative musical distancing and everything in between. In my analysis, I seek to describe, through Ai's musical decisions, how various styles interact and interweave with each other, how theoretical elements function and create form within the piece as a whole, and how these combined elements affect the resulting soundscape, emotion, and capture the programmatic inspiration of the work.

The piece begins slowly, "bleak [and] indifferent[ly]"<sup>3</sup> with a growling low E in the bass and harp, which introduces the opening central pitch. I call this the "opening central pitch" because there is no defined key signature, as typical of contemporary art music, and nearly every instrument enters on this note. The next entrance in the following measure features the cello, playing the opening motive E F A G#. This motive is important in and of itself, as it is also featured in the opening harp part, but a particularly important quality of the motive is the usage of half step, which unifies each part in this opening. The second violin then enters on E as well (staggered, one measure after the viola entrance on A B^C), moves up a half step to F, as expected, however then returns to E, a modified ending of the opening motive that still features

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<sup>2</sup> Ai Silent Theater Program Notes 2023

<sup>3</sup> Ai Silent Theater Score 2023, *ibid* for rest.

the half step. The next entrance is the first violin, this time on C# B Bb, the main relational aspect to the opening motive being the half step yet again. Together, all of the string parts (including harp) cycle through nearly all of the 12 chromatic pitches in the first 10 measures of the score, excluding only F#, creating a sort of implied tone row, yet not too strictly as notes repeat (and the 12 note row is 'incomplete.' It is true that a row can technically be any length, however, to suggest 11 out of the 12 pitches creates a sense of incompleteness, as we almost expect to hear or see in the score all 12 pitches). All the while, the part of focus is the solo percussion line, which has been adding another layer of "quasi improvised" texture since the beginning. However, both the string texture and the percussion texture are subservient to the conveyed sonic feeling of the music, and they are of equal importance. Measure 7 sees the two textures work united; the strings play fast wide microtonal shift vibrato increasing with intensity alongside the percussion, who is exponentially playing faster note values, both crescendoing to the first truly violent feeling chord of the piece in measure 8, as depicted by a fast sixteenth note scratch tone chord of E, Eb, B, and G#. Immediately following this chord, there is silence, which punctuates the phrase, serving as a kind of "cadence." The silence and unison is heavy after the staggered entrances and each line's unique rhythmic line, immediately disrupting the hazy atmosphere created by the first phrase, a kind of snapping into a realization. The next phrase is a similar texture (staggered entrances, similar percussion) but there is one main difference: Ai introduces F#, which finally completes the incomplete row from before (snapping into realization). This section employs F# heavily, as it appears in most of the lines. The half step motive is still represented, this time more frequently between F and F# (notated Gb). This phrase ends in the same way as the first, with the wide vibrato, the scratch chord and the silence, maintaining continuity. Contrary to the two preceding phrases, this final phrase before the major

shift at 22 begins in relative unison on the scratch tone, continuing with some rhythmic variations in the celli and violas (then violins) that mirror the opening texture. This time, the exits are tapered instead of the entrances. All of these elements combined suggest almost a reversal of the structure of the opening phrases. This section ends with a similar phrase punctuation in terms of crescendo then silence, but this time it is tremolo instead of the wide vibrato. Additionally, Ai indicates that the last punctuating note in the strings, which would usually be scratch tone, should be instead as “high or as low as possible” as expressed by the triangle notehead Ai employs. All of the final pitches lie below the staff with a glissando leading downwards, indicating a descent to the lowest of lows. The last sound is the percussionist ringing a prayer bell, which then leads to a fermata on a half rest; effectively a moment of silence. For what we have just heard, and for what will come after.

Measure 22 introduces the second major section. It is astronomically faster, quarter =176 compared to the opening quarter =48, and is described as “sudden, violent.” In discussion with Daixuan, she stated that each note attack was meant to represent the act of stabbing, which comes across very well sonically. Here, we have the full sinfonietta playing for the first time in the piece and the strings finally remove their mutes, creating a dense, almost overwhelming slash of sound, comprising of the notes (from bottom to top of the score) E, Bb, C, Db/ C#, G, D#, A, Ab, B, F#, F. This chord is interesting because once again, it has only 11 out of the 12 chromatic pitches, missing only D this time. After three repetitions of the slash (same pitches), time begins to warp through a measure of  $\frac{5}{8}$ , distorting the sense of time. This is the first instance of the sudden and violent section, and compared to the other instances, this is just a preview, or base for the following sections. This instance is only 5 measures long; the following instances grow until nearly double the length. Ai once again employs silence after each unison slash, creating a

shocking and jarring sonic environment between full sinfonietta and absolutely nothing. After three repetitions of the slash, time begins to warp through a measure of  $\frac{5}{8}$ , distorting the sense of time. This is the first instance of the sudden and violent section, and compared to the other instances, this is just a preview, or base for the following sections. This instance is only 5 measures long, and only features one metric shift. Ai also punctuates the end of this section with yet another fermata on a half rest, another moment of silence, appropriate for digesting the music, or even incident, that just occurred.

However, this shift does not necessarily act as a springboard leading into new material, which I believe is due to the emotional under narrative of the work. It is almost though this first sudden violent section is an intrusive thought, as measure 27 sees the return of the opening material, though it is different this time. The texture is extremely similar to the opening instance: strings, harp, and solo percussion only with the same staggered entrances and general rhythmic ideas. However, instead of once again cycling through the motives, Ai has the strings (except for the harp, who has leaps) sliding around in half steps, in what feels like a modified continuation of the opening material, returning to the bleak and indifferent feeling. We go through two more iterations of the opening texture (the second of which is characterized by its drastic dynamic beginning) before something entirely new happens, measure 39's false harmonics.

The texture starting from measure 39 is completely different from what we have seen before. The instrumentation featured is oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, percussion (non solo), harp (for one note), and strings (which feature the false harmonics); an entirely new formation of instruments for this piece. The first chord centers around E, A#, B, Eb, and Ab, from which Ai moves the lines in both the continued half step motive as well as wider intervals (never extremely wide though, each line is still tightly knit together). After the first chord, the

instrumentation largely returns to the original, however, also features the clarinet starting a high C# with wide vibrato, in a melodic line that foreshadows the Beijing opera style later in the piece, with hinted pentatonicism, however still largely in a 12 tone texture. Even though the texture is different, the style is cohesive, complimenting the preceding material very well. This phrase is, in typical fashion, punctuated with a fermata and a gliss to the lowest note. The next entrance at measure 46 marks the return to the sudden and violent material. The time distortion is more prevalent in this iteration, featuring 3 measures of modified time metrics, out of 8 measures total. At measure 54, a new section unlike the others begins: with tension, quarter=60. It is characterized by dense tall triadic Bartok pizz texture in the harp, alongside a string texture that is quite a bit noisier than before with wider intervals, in an almost musical distancing of the virtuosic tonal style. This leads to perhaps one of the most climactic points of the music so far, measure 58. The strings texture changes to a long forte gliss, then to a grace note decorated drone line. The texture “cadences” as expected, except the percussion plays through, acting as the bridge to the next part: “upbeat and energetic” at measure 62. This is an intense transition to make considering the emotion of the piece preceding it, however, the percussion continuation acts as a portal to the Beijing opera style, sweeping the listener into a different sound world. Ai indicates that the “strings need not to be in unison; blurred intonation is desired.” It is this effect that truly creates the musical distancing of the Beijing opera material. The performance descriptors “upbeat and energetic” don’t truly match the mood of this section, even though that is how it must be played in order to create the correct effect. Indeed, the mood is much more dissociative, distanced from its source material in an almost manic way. The entire beauty of an art form and culture flashing before our eyes in a distorted state seems to shriek: *how could anyone hate this beauty? How could anyone be so ignorant?* It is the cognitive dissonance

between the immense beauty and love of the truth of cultural reality, and the hate perpetuated and propagated by a white supremacist nation. This section does not end with silence, as it should not. Every instrument is crying out; Ai indicates that a gliss motive in the strings should “gradually get[...] faster and more frequent; quasi improv. Do not match.” This is the first ending that does this, a pivotal moment in the piece. This leads into the longest iteration yet of the sudden and violent material, this time with 5 measures of time distortion out of 12, over double the measures of the first instance. After a little more than a bar of silence after the last slash, a shrieking upward motion played in every part leads into measure 79, “with urgency and anxiety.” Each string part is frantically playing all 12 chromatic pitches in increasingly complex and intense rhythm, each staggered entrance beginning with the opening motive E F A G#, accompanied by percussion tremolo with hard plastic mallets. Ai takes techniques from the opening and, through increased rhythmic and pitch-placed franticness, creates perhaps what could be considered the emotional culmination of everything so far, prompted by first the Beijing opera music and then the sudden and violent material, or the memory of the attack. Through the usage of half step glissandi, Ai takes us from this incredibly turbulent culmination into yet another manic distorted vision of the Beijing opera. The instructions begin the same as before, no unison and blurred intonation, but this time, the music is longer, and Ai requests at measure 93 that each part should improvise on the style of Beijing opera, providing one measure of motive. A striking “sudden and aggressive” attack from the horn, trumpet, and trombone punctuates the phrase in measure 95, leading us into yet another sudden and violent section. This time, 8 bars of time are modified out of 14, over half. Once again, punctuated with silence. From this point, an accelerando of unison slashing takes us from measure 114 to measure 137, one of the longest sections yet. The final chord, featuring heavily E, Eb, and C (a kind of secondary motive

presented in the music) is held with a 5 second fermata, crescendoing to a triple forte. It is then followed by a 9 second fermata of silence, the longest moment of silence yet, leading appropriately into the next section “quarter =144 with long suppressed frustration. Ai indicates that it should be “loud, noisy” with “aggressive multiphonic, little to no fundamental” in the bassoon and oboe. The resulting texture is what I can only really describe as a fistfight; the adrenaline has fully kicked in and through this section, Daixuan shows that she, who fights for love, will be the victor. It is a gnarly battle, but at about measure 173, the horn, trumpet, and trombone begin playing fragments of the Beijing opera style. Still distorted of course, but coming through the texture nonetheless. The strings first provide a searing gliss texture, then begin slashing again while the Beijing opera music fights to break through and be fully realized. At this moment, measure 184, something truly unexpected happens: the brass (first) and winds (second) begin walking off the stage and take the Beijing opera with them, as Ai indicates that they should “improvise fast, up and down scalar gestures on [various] pentatonic scales.” as they leave the stage. What is particularly fascinating about these instructions is that she specifies a different pentatonic scale for each part: E natural major in the piccolo, Eb major in the oboe, E natural minor in the clarinet, and Eb minor in the bassoon. These key choices create a kind of final evolved form of the half step idea as that is the link (along with parallelism) between the keys. The strings continue to slash brutally until they too slow down, every part is instructed to “gradually become less aggressive” and to play “softer and less frequently.” We aren’t sure who the winner is anymore, or what even really happened. The winds just disappeared, the stage is half empty, what are we left with? We return to the opening material, this time distorted and modified. The instruction is “heartbroken and creepy” instead of “bleak and indifferent.” While this begins on E and still employs half steps, the opening motive doesn’t have enough energy to



return. Instead, the focus becomes the harp, which finally employs the screwdriver; this is an entirely new sound for the piece, and indeed creates an incredibly creepy effect in tandem with the emptiness and exhaustion. The first phrase does not end with a scratch tone, but rather fades into nothingness. Offstage, the trumpet lets out one last shriek, one last attempt to fight, ultimately glissing in a double forte dynamic into the lowest of low again. Another fermata punctuates this phrase, but this time it doesn't feel like a moment of silence; it feels like death, or weaving between life and death. This leads back into another iteration of the "heartbroken and creepy material" this time beginning pianissimo. The screwdriver is used longer this time, and while the phrase is still punctuated with silence, this time Ai indicates a short fermata. From this silence, the offstage trombone bursts in miraculously with a "singing" Beijing opera style melody, in an almost divine manner. However, even this glorious trombone line cannot escape the lowest void, and concludes by wide vibrato warbling and then glissing into the lowest of low. Then, the double bass and cello hold Eb and E (respectively) for ten seconds, while the trumpet responds with fragmented embellished notes. This prompts all of the offstage winds to start playing upward sweeping gliss motions at staggered times, the most final shriek. All of them once again are pulled into the lowest void, the conductor raises their arms to conduct yet another entrance of the sudden and violent music, the strings take their position, and nothing happens. The downbeat is expressed, pantomimed by the group, but there is no sound. Two seconds pass, and then the rest of the group (excluding the percussion) somberly leaves the stage. The percussion is the only thing we have left, and performs a mournful solo of increasing and decreasing rhythmic and dynamic values, almost like waves. It is no longer violent, just oscillating from pianissimo to mezzo forte and then back again, repeating twice until a final push that decays into the ring of a prayer bell, punctuated with a fermata. This concludes the piece.

Even after she poured her whole self into the composition of this work, Ai's commitment towards building solidarity and fostering healing did not end with the composition process; in January of 2024, Daixuan completely planned and executed the "Hope not Hate" event which featured a performance of Silent Theater, recitation of asian american poetry by Garrett Hongo and IU student David Park, an anti-asian hate digital art presentation by Christine Wang, and a speech by immensely important activist Helen Zia, who was so inspired by Daixuan's work that she herself requested to be a part of the program. Another incredibly special guest was present, the victim's mother, who gave a deeply emotional speech saturated with gratitude. It goes without saying that the event was astronomically successful, with a completely packed audience (we even had to get more chairs). The energy she created that day was holy, and at the end of the piece, she didn't even allow people to clap; she instructed everyone to save their applause until the end of the program, the poet stepping reverently, silently into the spotlight from which the percussionist just left. At the end of the program, Ai as well as the other performers received a well deserved boisterous and lengthy standing ovation. Many people cried, and many people prayed; it was truly one of the strongest acts of community solidarity and healing I have ever seen. One day later, I was driving with Daixuan and I said to her, "do you feel good about how everything went?" and she said "no." I was, of course, immediately shocked and inquired why to which she replied something to the extent of: 'it went too well, I was expecting something to go wrong and I was almost more prepared for that than a seamless performance.' At the time I called her foolish and insisted that she be proud of herself, but now I understand. The entire program was centered around something that went wrong, and was in and of itself an act of protest, which has historically and currently not been received well by the country in which we

reside. This kind of fear never truly goes away, no matter how eloquently and adamantly one fights. This kind of hate does not care about eloquence, intention, and thoughtfulness, only about the way one looks. Ai's words resound in my head:

“It could have happened to me”

*It could happen to me.*

## Works Cited

Ai, Daixuan, 2022, "Bio/Epk" <https://www.daixuanai.com/bio>

—— 2023, Score and Program Notes for Silent Theater, private access.