

Ground for contrabass and rock

Carolyn Chen 2007

for Han Han Cho

Move in an ordinary way.

Walk as you walk without thinking. Sit as you sit comfortably. Without theatre, ceremony, or deliberation.

Follow the movement and the objects before you. Hear sound, but do not worry it with intentions.

The piece begins and ends with the space at rest, the bass and rock waiting in it.

The bass lies with strings up. The rock lies as it will.

the space rests

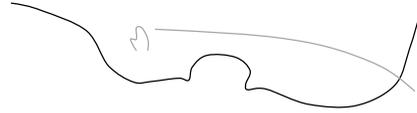
walk



sit

rest

brush right hand



Slowly pass right hand lightly over the top surface of the wood, in one stroke, left to right, several fingers touching the wood at once. Begin at the leftmost point that hand comfortably falls, and slide, following the weight of the arm, blind to the shape of the wood. Eyes close. Sense changes as they pass. Lighten touch. Float into air.

brush left hand

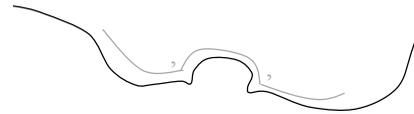


Left hand follows, right to left, a smaller, fainter, mirror gesture, closer to your body. The bass has symmetry, and your body has symmetry, but you cannot move along a perfect line of symmetry.

rest

The gesture's shadow passes, but not yet its memory.

trace finger



With one finger of right hand, begin tracing from left to right the outer curves of the wood on its top surface. Deepen sound. Watch the line of the finger. The movement is punctuated, in commas, at points where curves meet.

Broaden the line.

Drift from following the curve of the bass into following the weight of the arm. End on the wood or off.

rest

Longer. Shadow and half of the gesture's memory passes.

place hand 

Place right hand on strings, a hand-width away from the bridge.

place rock 

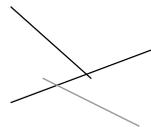
Place rock on strings where the fingerboard departs from the body.
A small, definite, unpitched sound.

Balance.

brush off 

In one motion, brush right hand toward bridge and off strings.
Its heaviness makes an unpitched sound.

No break in the phrase, but taking
whatever time is necessary to prepare...



bow

One stroke, full bow. Bow tip begins halfway between rock and bridge,
glides in place at a diagonal to the strings.

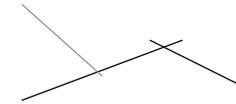
Sound of bow stroke greater than sound of string.

rest

a full breath

journey toward the bridge

Draw back, moving toward the bridge.



On the way, there is a story in the sound.

The bow leads. Follow the course of the bow.

There may be change in direction and speed.



The sound of the strings may be more forward, but always there is the sound of the bow.

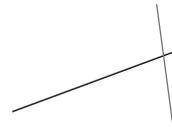
rest

breathing

the air clears

bow steeper, bow longer

At a steeper angle, close to the bridge, something shorter, but constant – a glittering conversation.



Let bow drop into its weight, without force, allowing pitch, allowing for unevenness.



Before an end is expected, without a break, there emerges something that is constant in another way, moving back toward the rock, then following the bow – something slower, fuller –

a longer journey.

A blanket of stillness.

rest

stillness spreads

three movements toward the bridge

Each stroke begins at some point between the rock and the bridge, moving toward the bridge.

One stroke is brief.



One, a conversation between strings.
(Following the bow.)



The last, a sum. Slow. (Remembering.)



With as much space as they need.

On playing

If at some point the rock falls, it is not necessarily a mistake. The possibility of its falling is a natural consequence of playing with a rock. Your reaction determines whether the falling is a mistake or a consequence. You can continue with your work, and if it seems that it needs the rock, replace it without ado.

If this is a piece, it asks to be played without amplification and without score. It would not seem to fit a large space, although it might fit a small gathering that was not a concert. To play it with people requires transparency and directness.

Light should not be bright unless it is outside. Inside, light may delineate beginnings and ends. For example, the piece begins in darkness, then dim light as space rests. The moving passes in dimness and light ends in the middle of the last gesture. The moving ends, the player leaves, the space rests in relative darkness. The darkness need not be perfectly symmetrical.

At the first performance each line of the last page of tablature was printed onto a separate page, leading in succession to a sitting space on the ground, close to the bass.

Program note

This piece began with the idea of the guqin, an ancient Chinese zither whose repertory is transmitted by oral tradition, and which uses a unique tablature notation system that shows finger position and nature of hand movement, but does not directly reveal pitch or rhythm. In this music, what matters is not just sound, but the quality of the movement that produces it, the connection between the player and listener, and their place in nature. The piece came about through our working together, sitting across from each other, in the way that guqin music is learned.

the space rests

walk
sit
rest

brush right hand
brush left hand
rest

trace finger
rest

place hand
place rock
brush off
bow one stroke
rest

journey toward bridge
rest

bow steeper
bow longer
rest

brief
a conversation
a sum

the space rests

the space rests

walk sit rest

brush right hand brush left hand rest

trace finger rest

place hand place rock brush off bow one stroke rest

journey toward bridge rest

bow steeper bow longer rest

brief a conversation a sum

the space rests

