Eight Chinese Poems Set to Western Musical Keys

Translation and Commentary: Lin Zhenhua

Poem One
咏柳  In Praise of a Willow by HE Zhizhang
(659-744)
贺知章 (C major, Allegro)
碧玉妆成一树高,  Veridian Jade, her toilette complete—the
tree stands tall,
万条垂下绿丝绦。  Suspending from ten-thousand
branches silk sashes of green.
不知细叶谁裁出,  By whom were the exquisite leaves
shaped and trimmed?
二月春风似剪刀。  The mid-spring wind that's like a scissors
keen.

Note: Veridian Jade (Biyu) was the beloved concubine of a fifth-century prince. 
Chinese poetry often compared beautiful women to flowers and plants; here, 
the beautiful tree evokes the lady and the splendid artifice of a privileged 
environment.

Poem Two
长相思  To the Tune: “Everlasting Longing”
李煜  by Li Yu (937-978)
(C minor, Adagio, piano)
云一緪, 玉一梭。  Whorl-of-cloud chignon and jade-stalk hairpin,
淡淡衫儿薄薄罗。  Gauzy tunic and satin skirt thin;
轻颦双黛螺。  Gently she knits a pair of dark-painted brows.
秋风多, 雨如和。  Autumn gales are on the rise, mixed with
autumn rain,
帘外芭蕉三两窠。  Two or three plantains are shaking beyond the
portière.
夜长人奈何！  Can so long a night be endured again?
Poem Three

花非花
Not Quite a Flower by BAI Juyi
白居易
(772-846) (D♭ major, Adagio, piano)
花非花，雾非雾，
Not quite a flower, not quite mist—
夜半来，天明去。
At midnight it comes, at daybreak goes away.
来如春梦几多时?
Its coming, a spring dream too brief to taste;
去似朝云无觅处。
Its going, a fading cloud that leaves no trace.

Note: As a riddle, the poem’s subject is dew. On another level, it describes the clandestine visits of a lovely woman and expresses the poet’s longing for her.

Poem Four

调笑令
To the Tune: “Comic Satire” by WEI
韦应物
Yingwu (737-792)
(E♭ major, Allegro)
胡马，胡马，
The Tartar horse, the Tartar horse,
远放燕支山下。
Far off he roams below the Yanzhi range.
跑沙跑雪独嘶，
Racing over sand, racing over snow—only the sound of neighing.
东望西望路迷。
Gazing now eastward, now to the west, he has lost his way.
迷路，迷路，
The way is lost, the way is lost—
边草无穷日暮。
The sun sets on the boundless frontier plain.

Note: Yanzhi Mountain, part of a larger range in northwestern China, was an important battle site during the Tang empire’s expansion into Central Asia. Poems that glorified warfare and depicted the harsh environment and fierceness of the so-called “barbarians” constituted a thematic subgenre called “Frontier Poetry.” Wei Yingwu’s piece undermines the standard heroic tropes.

Poem Five

待山月
Awaiting the Mountain Moon by JIAO
皎然
Ran (730-799) (E minor, Adagio)
夜夜忆故人，
Night after night, missing an old friend,
长教山月待。 I bade the mountain moon stay by my side.
今宵故人至， This very evening that friend arrived,
山月知何在。 But where does the mountain moon hide?

Poem Six
桃叶歌 A Song for Peach Leaf by WANG
王献之 Xianzhi (344-386)
桃叶复桃叶， Peach-Leaf, oh Peach-Leaf dear,
渡江不用楫。 To cross the river you’ve no need of an oar.
但渡无所苦， Just don’t be anxious about the passage,
我自来迎接。 I’ll come in person to greet you on the shore.

Note: Peach Leaf (Taoye) was Wang Xianzhi’s concubine. The poem was meant to assuage her fear of crossing a river, and plays on the meaning of her name—a leaf can float effortlessly across (line 2).

Poem Seven
捕鱼谣 The Fishing Ballad by CAO Ye
曹邺 (816-?) (B major, Moderate, forte)
天子好征战， The “Son of Heaven” loves to make war,
百姓不种桑; The common people farm no more;
天子好少年， The “Son of Heaven” cares for the young,
无人荐冯唐; No one will recommend Feng Tang.
天子好美女， The “Son of Heaven” is fond of the fair,
夫妻不成双! No couple stays in a pair!

Note: Feng Tang was a wise and capable man who was recommended for office during the reign of the Han emperor Wu (r. 141-87 BC). Because of his age, of over 90, he was passed over.

Poem Eight
望夫石 The Lover-awaiting Stone by WANG
王建 Jian (767-830) (B minor, Andante)
望夫处， Where she watched for her man,
江悠悠。 On and on the river flowed.
化为石， One day she changed into stone,
不回头。 And could no more turn her gaze.
山头日日风复雨， Day after day on the hilltop, wind follows rain,
行人归来石应语。 When the traveler comes home, the stone will speak again.

Commentary:
Robert Frost said, “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” Despite the difficulties and challenges, both Chinese and occidental translators have spared no effort to accomplish the seemingly impossible task of preserving verbal meaning. Yet they have rarely addressed the musical aspects of Chinese verse. Much of traditional Chinese poetry was meant to be sung. In my selection, poems 2 and 4 are “song lyrics” (ci) written to specific tunes; poem 6 is called a “song”; and poem 7, a “ballad”. It is generally assumed that lyric poems in uneven line lengths (which include poems 3 and 8, among others) were sung to music. Unfortunately, very few texts of original scores have survived. Tune titles and instruments remain but we have little idea of the poems’ melodies and other musical features. This is a shame, for no doubt the original audiences of the poems’ performances (not readers of written texts) would immediately recognize the emotional tone of a piece by its key and tempo. As an experiment, I have assigned Western musical keys to the selection and also provided each poem with a tempo and dynamic marking. The experiment is inspired by my understanding of Western music. For example, poem 1 is in C major, a scale whose characteristics I understand to be innocence, simplicity, and naivety. I do not mean to suggest that Western and Chinese music were similar. My aim is only to restore attention to the poems’ original musicality.