

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
(ca. 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 (c. 937-978)

(C minor, Adagio, piano)

云一緺，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

白居易

花非花，雾非雾，
夜半来，天明去。
来如春梦几多时？
去似朝云无觅处。

Not Quite a Flower* by BAI Juyi*(772-846) (D \flat major, Adagio, piano)**

Not quite a flower, not quite mist—
At midnight it comes, at daybreak goes away.
Its coming, a spring dream too brief to taste;
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

韦应物

胡马，胡马，
远放燕支山下。
跑沙跑雪独嘶，

东望西望路迷。

迷路，迷路，
边草无穷日暮。

To the Tune: "Comic Satire"* by WEI*Yingwu (737-792)****(E \flat major, Allegro)**

The Tartar horse, the Tartar horse,
Far off he roams below the Yanzhi range.
Racing over sand, racing over
snow—only the sound of neighing.
Gazing now eastward, now to the west, he has
lost his way.
The way is lost, the way is lost—
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

皎然

夜夜忆故人，

Awaiting the Mountain Moon* by JIAO*Ran (730-799) (E minor, Adagio)**

Night after night, missing an old friend,

长教山月待。
今宵故人至，
山月知何在。

I bade the mountain moon stay by my side.
This very evening that friend arrived,
But where does the mountain moon hide?

Poem Six

桃叶歌
王献之

A Song for Peach Leaf by WANG

Xianzhi (344-386)

(F major, Allegro, mezzo forte)

桃叶复桃叶，
渡江不用楫。
但渡无所苦，
我自来迎接。

Peach-Leaf, oh Peach-Leaf dear,
To cross the river you've no need of an oar.
Just don't be anxious about the passage,
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
曹邨

The Fishing Ballad by CAO Ye

(816-?) (B major, Moderate, forte)

天子好征战，
百姓不种桑；
天子好少年，
无人荐冯唐；
天子好美女，
夫妻不成双！

The "Son of Heaven" loves to make war,
The common people farm no more;
The "Son of Heaven" cares for the young,
No one will recommend Feng Tang.
The "Son of Heaven" is fond of the fair,
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
王建
望夫处，

The Lover-awaiting Stone by WANG

Jian (767-830) (B minor, Andante)

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 naïveté. 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.