

Motivic Structure in Chou Wen-chung's *Eternal Pine Series*

by Eric C. Lai

As a composer deeply committed to the genuine confluence of Eastern and Western cultures in the formation of a new mainstream of art music, Chou Wen-chung (1923–2019) departed from his practice of writing exclusively for Western instruments in the last decade of his life in search of new ways of musical expression. The result is a group of works referred to as the “*Eternal Pine series*,” consisting of an original composition *Eternal Pine* for traditional Korean instruments (2008), followed by *Eternal Pine II* (gayageum and changgu, 2008), *Ode to Eternal Pine* (Western ensemble, 2009), *Eternal Pine III* (also known as *Sizhu Eternal Pine*, Chinese ensemble, 2011–12), and *Eternal Pine IV* (pipa, dizi, and percussion, 2013).¹ Through *Eternal Pine*, Chou desires “to integrate modern instrumental techniques and musical structure with age-old Korean musical practice in exploring the potential of these instruments,” in particular the practice of *chong ak*, an early genre of Korean chamber music that expresses “human emotion inspired and symbolized by natural phenomena but projected with serenity and dignity” and “evokes imageries that have inspired East Asian minds for centuries.”² Their similar titles notwithstanding, *Eternal Pine II–IV* and *Ode to Eternal Pine* are not transcriptions in the strictest sense, but rather “recompositions,” of *Eternal Pine*.³ The works within the series, therefore, are related by programmatic reference, formal layout, and thematic reference, but may differ from one another in treatment of material, inclusion of new content, and stylistic feature. In this essay, I will examine several motives highlighted by the composer himself, their deployment on the musical foreground, and how they contribute to structure and coherence.

1 *Ode to Eternal Pine* was dedicated to Elliott Carter on the occasion of his one hundredth birthday; this might explain Chou’s return to Western instruments in this work to honor Carter’s cultural heritage.

2 Chou Wen-chung, introductory note to *Eternal Pine* (New York: C. F. Peters, 2008), n. pag.; “Notes on the Music,” in *Ode to Eternal Pine* (New York: C. F. Peters, 2009), n. pag.

3 Chou Wen-chung, program note for *Sizhu Eternal Pine*, in *Tribute to Chou Wen-chung*, Taipei Chinese Orchestra, May 2012, program, p. 32.

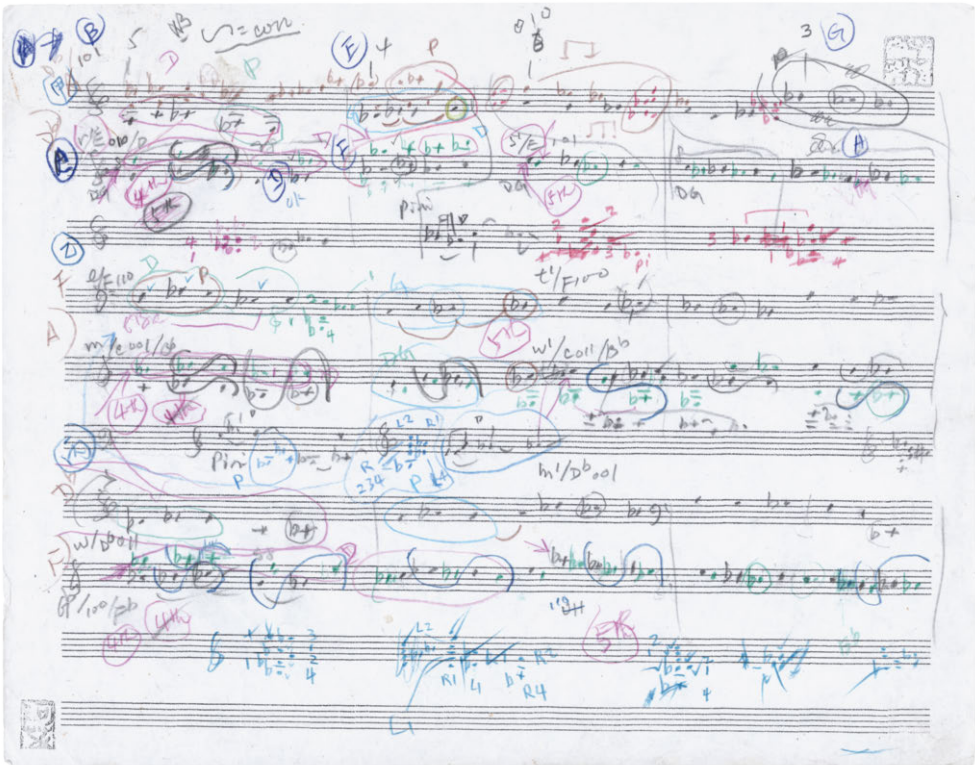


Plate 1: Chou Wen-chung, *Eternal Pine*, sketch (Chou Wen-chung Collection, PSS).

Plate 1 reproduces a page from Chou’s sketches for *Eternal Pine*. This sketch, which belongs to a folder marked “Studies & sketches for Med. on Eternity, pt. 1,” is laden with information, including musical notation in different colors showing motives (some of them circled) or chords accompanied by numbers.⁴ For the former, three in particular stand out, and are accompanied by the Chinese characters *jia* 甲, *yi* 乙, and *bing* 丙, penciled and circled in light blue on the left margin of the page. The three words refer to order in the original language, and can be translated as “first,” “second,” and “third,” respectively. Plate 2 presents an analysis of the three motives, which are now renamed A, B, and C.

As Plate 2 shows, each motive consists of five notes, and appears at the beginning of the staff after one of the Chinese labels in the sketch (Plate 1). Their musical significance, in addition to their citations in other primary sources, is due to their appearances in multiple sections of the final score

4 Consultation with other sketches has revealed that the numbers may refer to instrumental fingerings.




Set-class 5-3 [01245]	<u>CSEG</u>	<u>Shape</u>	<u>CAS</u>
A (甲), m.34 s/A	<24310>		<+--->
B (乙), m.41 1/F	<24301>		<+--->
C (丙), m.47 w/Db	<23410>		<+--->

Plate 2: Analysis of the three motives.

including “Meditation on Eternity, Part I,” “Ode to Eternal Pine,” “Meditation Part II,” “Lofty Peaks,” and “Codetta.” In “Meditation on Eternity, Part I,” they surface for the first time in their original order and pitch profile (after *Plate 1*) in the gayageum solo at m. 34, m. 41, and m. 47, although other presentations are noticeable in the daegeum part, such as an earlier statement of motive C in m. 42.

In terms of the relationship among the motives, as members of set-class 5-3 [01245], they are transpositions of one another. However, each has its own distinct profile, which can be understood as contour-segment (CSEG): motive A <24310>, motive B <24301>, motive C <23410>.⁵ The contours also appear graphically and as contour adjacency series (CAS) in the example.⁶ Although the CSEGs are not related to one another by inversion, retrograde, or retrograde inversion that is a focus in standard contour analysis, there is a progressive transformation from one motive to the next. Motive A, which is assumed to be the progenitor, becomes B through reversing the downward <-10> to become an upward <-01>. A similar

5 For CSEG and contour theory, see Elizabeth West Marvin and Paul A. Laprade, “Relating Musical Contours: Extensions of a Theory for Contour,” *Journal of Music Theory* 31, no. 2 (1987), pp. 225–67. For an analysis of contour in Chou’s music, see Mary Arlin, “The Cultural Origins of the Theoretical Structures in Chou Wen-chung’s Windswept Peaks,” in *Polycultural Synthesis in the Music of Chou Wen-chung*, ed. Mary I. Arlin and Mark A. Radice (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 167–212, esp. pp. 172–74 and 202–03.

6 Michael L. Friedmann, “A Methodology for the Discussion of Contour: Its Application to Schoenberg’s Music,” *Journal of Music Theory* 29, no. 2 (1985), pp. 223–48, esp. pp. 224–26.

II. Meditation on Eternity, Part I
 松之戀, Adagio 영원한 묵상

34

pp < mf < mf pp < mf > pp < f

p < mf

p < f

p < ff > p < ff ff sempre

hard rubber mt.

soft rubber mallet

Plate 3: Chou Wen-chung, *Eternal Pine*, mm. 34–36 (New York: C. F. Peters, 2008).

operation takes place from B to C, when the former’s <-43-> becomes the latter’s <-34->, which is now part of a rising contour <234-> that differs from the opening “turn” (<243->) in motives A and B. This kind of subtle, almost imperceptible, transmutation is typical of the foreground in Chou’s music, mostly manifested in pitch interval and rhythm but also evident in gestural shape as in this case.

Other information pertaining to Chou’s compositional technique is also on display in *Plate 2*. In *Eternal Pine*, each motive continues with additional pitch material to complete the “variable modes,” constructs in Chou’s compositional system generated by an elaborate process in accordance with the principles expounded in the ancient Chinese treatise *Yijing* (“Book of Changes”).⁷ As such, the mode associated with each motive – s/A (motive A), l/F (motive B), w/D \flat (motive C) – is represented by Chou’s nomenclature in the analysis.⁸ Labels of this kind appear often in Chou’s sketches to indicate modal unfolding and large-scale pitch connections – in this case, modal centers A, F, and D \flat trisect the octave into major thirds. The use of the “augmented triad” for high-level pitch organization in Chou’s music has been documented in various sources. Here we find another example of that in *Eternal Pine*.⁹

7 See Eric C. Lai, *The Music of Chou Wen-chung* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 43–46, for a discussion of Chou’s variable modes.

8 “s,” “l,” and “w” stand for modes of “sun,” “lake,” and “wind,” respectively. The letter name after a slash is the modal center. See Lai, *The Music of Chou Wen-chung* (see note 7), pp. 44, 61.

9 The earliest mention of the augmented triad as “frame” appears in Kenneth Kwan’s “Compositional Design in Recent Works by Chou Wen-chung” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1996), pp. 16–17.

tioned before. From a formal perspective, the unfolding of the motives in the whole section – C-B-A-B-C – now displays a palindrome, instead of the original’s A-B-C. The introduction of a new passage that alters the narrative discourse of musical events from the original version reveals Chou’s freer treatment in *Ode to Eternal Pine*.

The structural significance and strategic placement of the three motives notwithstanding, their presentations also provide extra-musical connections through their “somber but steadfast presence” in every version of *Eternal Pine*,¹¹ whose program conveys not only the motives collectively as a topic of “meditation” of human experience that finds its parallel in the evergreen conifer – “a symbol of longevity and eternity of nature”¹² – but also an autobiographical utterance of the composer’s resilience in the midst of social turbulence, human atrocities, and life’s challenges that he had experienced, a resilience that mirrors the strength of the pine tree as it stands tall over mountain peaks to withstand the destructive forces of nature.¹³

11 Yayoi Everett, “Chou Wen-chung: *Eternal Pine*,” in Chou Wen-chung: *Eternal Pine* (CD, Brooklyn, NY: New World Records, 2015; no. 80770-2), booklet, pp. 2–9, esp. p. 4. In her analysis, Everett identifies a “central motive,” which corresponds to our motive C, in particular the version played by daegeum (m. 42).

12 Chou, “Notes on the Music” (see note 2).

13 Information pertaining to Chou’s early struggles in China is available at chouwenchung.org/about/biography/.