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THE WIZARDS OF NEW MUSIC: REFLECTIONS ON THE 2016 ISCM WORLD MUSIC DAYS

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BY FRANK J. OTERI
ON MAY 20, 2016

Since returning from the latest iteration of the International Society for Contemporary Music's (ISCM) annual World Music Days, which this year was held in the remote South Korean fishing town of Tongyeong from March 27 to April 1, 2016, I've been struggling to figure out the best way to describe what I experienced during those six days. Part of the problem, believe it or not, is that for the past eight weeks, every time I start having deep thoughts about contemporary music, my mind invariably strays to Harry Potter. Admittedly I had spent the two months prior to my Tongyeong journey reading all seven of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels for the very first time. (Yeah, I know, where have I been?) I'd also been warned that these books (and the subsequent cinematic adaptations of them which I'm finally getting around to watching on DVD now that I've finished reading the books) tend to incite fanatical obsession.

But I think there's a deeper reason for this seeming takeover of my synapses. If you think hard enough about new music and how it makes its way in our present society, there are striking similarities to the fictional wizarding community that Rowling has so elaborately depicted in her narratives. So I thought it would be instructive to attempt to flesh out some of the parallels between these two worlds in the hopes of coming to a deeper understanding of our special corner of the universe and why it is the way it is. And, who knows, though the process I might even get some rabid Harry Potter fans interested in new music and vice versa.

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First, some background for Potter novices might be required here, so bear with me. (If you're as hardcore a Potter junkie as I've become, feel free to skip the next couple of paragraphs.) In Potterville^[1], wizards perform most commonplace activities—everything from cooking and cleaning to commuting—by using magic. For example, they get around either through flying on brooms, using floo powder (stuff which enables them to travel through the fire in chimneys), apparition (focusing on a desired location in their minds), or—for very long distances—portkeys (strategically placed innocuous objects that, when touched, take you to a specific faraway location). But the majority of people in the world are unable to perform magic; these unmagical people are referred to as muggles. Muggles are almost completely oblivious to the existence of wizards. In fact, when directly confronted with magic, most muggles refuse to believe it exists. But that's not totally due to their ignorance or indifference.

Although there are some wizards who are fascinated with muggles and their customs, and some wizards even wish there could be a greater understanding across all social sectors, the Ministry of Magic and the International Confederation of Wizards impose a strict International Statute of Secrecy which forbids wizards from performing magic around muggles and, because of that, wizards go to great lengths to hide their world from folks who are not part of it. (E.g. one of the gateways between the muggle world and the wizarding world

Ansan and Incheon are both not too far away from Seoul which means an hour by plane to Busan and then the requisite ground transportation. But I'm not sure how the folks from Kanazawa, Japan, got there, unless they had access to a portkey. It looks relatively close on the map, but flight routes are extremely convoluted. The best route might just be by boat, but at close to 500 nautical miles it doesn't seem like a fun trip.

And then there's the [Hong Kong New Music Ensemble](#) (HKNME) which was on hand for two entire programs. It takes longer to get from Hong Kong to Tongyeong than to get from New York City to Los Angeles, but I'm very glad they made the journey. An extremely versatile, modular ensemble which, for the purposes of the repertoire they were called upon to perform, morphed from a "Pierrot-plus configuration" (flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, and percussion) to a full string orchestra under the direction of [Sharon Andrea Choa](#). And the repertoire was equally varied. They opened the first of their programs with [Reflections on Arirang](#) (2013), a trio for clarinet, violin and piano by [Joyce Wai-chung Tang](#) (b. 1976, Hong Kong), which was inspired by very famous South Korean folk tunes. [As the snowflakes return to the sky](#), a 2010 string orchestra work by Japan-born, now Vancouver-based [Rita Ueda](#) (b. 1963) was designed to induce various auditory illusions (unfortunately there is no available audio link). [Monolithe](#) (2010) by [Jean-Marie Rens](#) (b. 1955, Belgium) seems somewhat strangely titled to me since the piece is chock full of

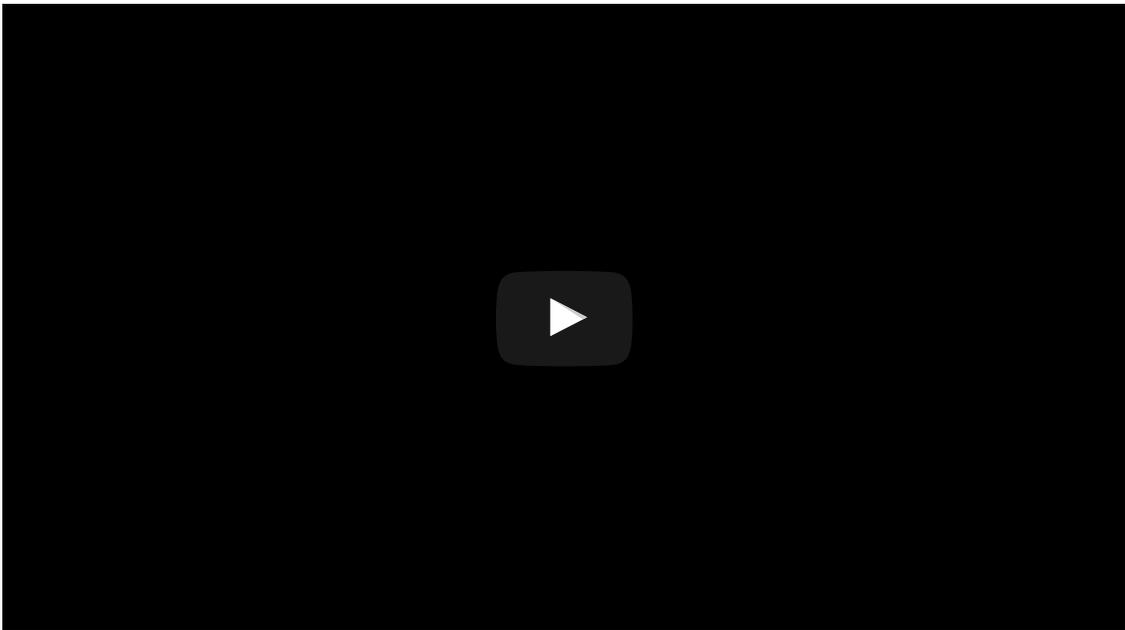
lush harmonies. But there is a considerable amount of repetition and harmonic stasis which is intended, as per the composer's own description, to explore "the perception of time through the dialectical relationship between stillness and movement." *Into the outer* (2014) for 13 strings by Taiwan-born, Australia and New Zealand-raised, and San Diego-based [Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh](#) (b. 1984) is, according to her, about "propagation versus consumption" something which is considerably more difficult to aurally process than the relationship between stillness and movement so I just focused on it as pure sound. As luck would have it, she recently posted to SoundCloud the very performance I heard in Tongyeong, so you can hear it, too:



LAUNCH GALLERY

HKNME opened their second program with [Dérive](#) (1984), a Pierrot-plus-percussion sextet by the recently deceased Pierre Boulez (1925-2016). It was the oldest piece on the official concert program and was, in fact, older than many of the composers whose works were performed this year. But [Midsummer Song](#) for string orchestra, though composed by [Raminta Šerkšnyte](#) (b. 1975, Lithuania) in 2009, hinted at much older music, late 19th/early 20th century European romanticism,

whereas *Fragmenti v «Ja gulyala veselo»* (2014) by [Balázs Horváth](#) (b. 1976, Hungary) suggested an alternative present tense. A double bassist, playing way above the instrument's usual register, pursues a relentless ostinato that microtonally descends ever so slightly with each additional iteration as strings and percussion explore a wide range of sonorities. I was at the edge of my seat until the very last moment. But perhaps the most wonderful thing on that concert was the world premiere performance of *Woodland Heights*, an extremely unusual 2014 string orchestra piece by Irish composer [Nick Roth](#) (b. 1982). The musical materials for the piece are culled from data about the growth of trees in an ideal forest spanning a 720-year period. According to his program notes, "each crotchet" corresponds to "one year in ecological time." To further drive the point home, branches occupied seats next to the string players who, upon occasion, rubbed them. At a climactic moment toward the very end of the piece, some of the players went off-stage to bring back a tree which they mounted in a large flower pot on the middle of the stage. While most of these tree-based shenanigans did not actually make any sound, it made for a fascinating visual counterpoint with the process music the strings were performing.



LAUNCH GALLERY

In between the two HKNME concerts was yet another incredible local seafood meal with some of the delegates (writing about the food in Tongyeong would require me to write something twice as long so I'll resist), a very brief night's sleep, and the third of the ISCM's General Assembly sessions. Among the agenda items that morning was the election for an ExComm position which was vacated by Gaudemus director [Henk Heuvelmans](#). I am deeply honored to report that I was elected unopposed by acclamation. It would be disingenuous for me to claim that it wasn't the highlight of the morning for me, but there were other really exciting things that transpired as well. There was a captivating presentation by [Javier Hagen](#), president of the [Swiss ISCM section](#), about [recorderology.com](#), a website that synchronizes notated scores to musical performances, as well as an informative survey of composers of Basque origin ("a nation without a country, actually a country without a nation") by Mikel Aingeru from [Musika Gileak](#). There was also a