

A Taoist Hymn

Who can be muddy, yet in stillness slowly become limpid?

Who can in stillness, stirring, slowly come alive? (Ch. 15)

A man is supple and soft when living, but rigid and hard when dead.

Grass and trees are tender and pliant when living, but dry and brittle when dead.

Thus the hard and the stiff are companions of death;

the soft and the pliant, companions of life. (Ch. 76)

(Lao Zi (attrib.), *Dao De Jing*, transl. N. Buckland and Q. Bao)

The *Dao De Jing* (*Tao Te Ching**), written in about the 4th century B.C., is the classic text of Daoism (Taoism). It is commonly attributed to a mysterious, possibly mythical, figure known as Lao Zi (Lao Tzu). (His name is really more of a title, meaning something like “The Old Master”.)

Several early manuscripts of the *Dao De Jing* survive, sometimes with significant differences between them. The lines from Chapter 15, above, may be compared, e.g., with the conciser, more abstract version found in another early manuscript:

Muddy water, stilled, slowly clears.

Stillness, stirred, slowly comes to life.

There are, as well, numerous translations into English, and they are often astonishingly different. Ancient Chinese is so imprecise and allusive that no translation can claim to be definitive, and rather than choose between existing translations, I have chosen to make my own versions of the above lines in consultation with Bao Qiong, endeavouring to keep them as simple and as close to the original as possible.

This piece is not intended for practical use in Daoist worship (I do not know if Daoists even sing hymns), and makes no attempt to mimic or borrow from Chinese or Daoist music. It is simply an admiring Westerner’s musical reflection on some invaluable thoughts from a profound philosophical text.

Performance Notes

A Taoist Hymn is suitable for performance either a cappella or with organ accompaniment.

When performed with accompaniment, the organ may optionally be replaced by a string ensemble – either string orchestra or string sextet (3 violins, viola, cello and double bass, or 4 violins, viola and cello). String parts are available on request.

Additionally, the organ right hand or (in a string ensemble) high solo violin part in bars 1–41 and 85–123 may be played instead on a soprano (descant) recorder, provided a good recorder and player are available. (Recorder reads the part as written for organ, sounding an octave higher.)

The part for solo soprano may also, if desired, be played instrumentally rather than sung (even when the work is otherwise performed a cappella), by either a flute, oboe, clarinet, soprano saxophone or violin (but not by violin when the accompaniment is a string ensemble). If this part is performed instrumentally its lyrics (i.e. the lines from Chapter 15, above) must be made available to the audience to read as they listen. The instrumentalist should play from the score if possible, or from a part that includes the lyrics.

The solo soprano part should be sung or played with a pure, accurate tone, sweet not harsh, and with minimal vibrato. The choral singing should be in similar style.

In a cappella performance an expressive rubato may be used, but in performance with organ or string accompaniment minimal rubato must be used, because of the added regular rhythms in the accompaniment. Pause marks in parentheses have been marked in the vocal parts; these should be observed in a cappella performance only (ignore them when performing with accompaniment).

In a cappella performance the bracketed bars must be omitted, as indicated in the score (pages 1, 2, 5).

Neil Buckland
Melbourne, 2007

Duration: approx. 4 mins

www.bucklandmusic.com.au

* Two different systems of transliterating Mandarin Chinese are commonly found in English publications. The newer, *pinyin*, system is the one now in standard use in China and elsewhere. I have given pinyin spellings first, but since the older spellings (in particular “Taoism”, “Tao Te Ching” and “Lao Tzu”) remain better known in the West I have given them in parentheses. For the same reason I have used “Taoist”, rather than “Daoist”, in my title.