

FOUNDATIONS OF  
CHINESE MUSICAL  
ART

BY

JOHN HAZEDEL LEVIS

*Illustrated with Musical Compositions*



HENRI VETCH • PEIPING

1936

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# 中國音樂之基礎

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## PREFACE

DURING the years 1931 to 1934, I gave over forty lecture-recitals on the music of China including original piano compositions based on Chinese principles, adaptations of Chinese themes and arrangements of Chinese melodies with explanatory talks. These took place mainly in America but also in China. A specialized treatment of the subject was given before such institutions as Harvard, Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, etc., but popular recitals, including vocal renderings of folk songs and the song-cries of street vendors with many original pianoforte compositions on Chinese themes, were given before more public audiences. During the course of these appearances numerous requests were made for a comprehensive book on the subject. This book is a result of that demand. But it is a study of only that part of my lecture and concert material which deals with the ancient music-poems, the musical art that underlies their construction, and the meaning of that art for modern musical composition, whether instrumental or vocal, and for Western or Chinese instruments. Other parts of my lecture and concert programmes, the folk music, and the free use of Chinese themes for harmonic and mainly pianoforte setting, and questions regarding the general history of Chinese music, are left for another work.

My connection with Chinese music dates back to the earliest years of my life. With the natural advantage of being born and brought up in China and with over twenty-five years' residence in the country, I had a singular opportunity to approach this music with an intimate and natural psychological insight. Because the ancient music of China was always more or less hidden and very seldom played by the Chinese themselves, my attention was at first mainly directed to the folk and popular music. But soon after my departure, at the close of 1928, on my first visit to America, I reached a stage where my whole approach to the subject began to turn to its unexplored side—the music of China's past ages. One often hears in China of "the lost music" which is said to have reached, according to fragmentary accounts, a high state of perfection and beauty at one time.

I have often asked myself, "How far is the art of the ancient music of China really lost?" Essays, monographs, symposiums on the subject,



even the most competent authorities in modern times both in China and in Europe gave me no answer to this question.

I therefore set about through experimental research of my own, to follow up every possible clue which might lead to the recovery of this ancient musical art, or technique of musical composition.

The hypothesis with which I originally entered upon my studies was twofold. First, I held that the distinctive tonal basis of the Chinese language must have had some influence upon the conscious musical expression of the people, and secondly, that the great development of Chinese art and culture, evident to the world in other aspects, must have found a certain parallel expression in music, since it is extremely unlikely that music alone should be undeveloped among a people who have created high forms of painting, architecture and sculpture.

Curiously enough, my first glimpse into rare and authentic documents of Chinese musical notations was not in China but in America, where Dr. Arthur W. Hummel, who has my deep gratitude for his help, directed me to the volumes in the rare book collections of the Chinese Division of the Library of Congress. But the most valuable documents were found in my two later journeys to China.

To my delight and surprise, I found that these documents contained a whole world of music which *illustrates the only art of melody in any known musical system.*

Thus in this work the foundations of a great storehouse of musical wealth are laid bare. The basis of the whole musical art of the Chinese merely awaits our study, the art subsequent to the 5th century A.D., at any rate, *is not a lost art*, and musicians of the modern world may actually compose music to precise musical forms of the Chinese, dating back at least as far as the beginning of the T'ang era (A.D. 618). These claims are substantiated in the present volume by the inclusion of the Chinese scores, a key to their transcription as closely as possible into Western notation, their actual transcription into Western notation, their detailed analyses and by the theoretical statements of the Chinese themselves. My own compositions upon these forms and principles of musical structure are reserved for separate publication.

I believe that the best approach to this subject is through the ancient music-poems, for, undoubtedly, any such thing as an art and science of musical composition in China that is at all recoverable, must come from them.

This research therefore attempts (a) to discover the art of the composition of ancient Chinese music (from about the 5th century A.D. to the end of the Sung dynasty, A.D. 1279); (b) to show its living value as an art of composition to-day; (c) to discuss those distinctive elements of Chinese musical composition that are of universal application and which have hitherto not been employed consciously in the Western world of music.

The present work, therefore, is mainly concerned with answering the questions, "Is any organized art of musical composition recoverable from the ancient Chinese?" "What stage of development did this art reach?" "What are the distinctive features of this art?" and, "What value has any such art for the modern world?"

If this art has a theoretical basis it can be recovered through a scientific study of the old notations under which it lies hidden.

Since poetry is undoubtedly the basis of the ancient musical art of China, the plan of this research divides the whole work into four parts: Part I. THE ORIGIN OF THE ART, which springs from the musical elements in the Chinese language; Part II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ART: How the art grew from ancient times through the understanding and use of the elements of the language; Part III. EXAMPLES OF HIGHEST DEVELOPMENT: The actual use of the musical elements of the language in the composition of music for poetry (analyses of composition and forms); Part IV. THE VALUE OF THE ART IN THE MODERN WORLD: The ancient art as a living form of musical creation.

Thus the book gives a general account of the fundamental relationship between music and language, a detailed exposition of the musical basis of the Chinese language, an historical account of the uses made of the elements of music in words for purposes of musical composition, the analyses of a number of pieces chosen so that each reveals a distinctive feature, and finally an exposition of the rules for reconstructing the musical art of the ancient Chinese. Preceding the various appendices is a final chapter devoted to the future of Chinese music.

Since this is the first modern work to deal with the subject, it is necessarily imperfect and by no means a finished task, but one which will of course take years of intensive research on the part of scholars. Though it may be far from infallible, I shall be satisfied if I have

succeeded in my attempt to prove by scientific methods of investigation that the ancient art of Chinese music can be recovered, that it is a highly developed art and that it is of practical use in modern times, as a pure musical art independent of words. This work therefore is not intended to represent a complete exposition of this art. But I do claim that within the scope of what I have set out to prove concerning the most vital phases of the subject, my conclusions have been based on the firm ground of sufficient evidence.

In China music flows through two main channels which, to my mind, find a marked parallel with the two fundamental philosophic concepts of the people, the Taoist and the Confucian. Because there is no place in this work for a discussion of both, I shall merely designate one as the "free" and the other with which this book more specifically deals, the "precise."

The first draft of this book with the main conclusions was completed in 1932. The intervening period of three years was spent in further study not only in Chinese music but in related branches of Chinese culture and also in the application of my method of study to a much larger number of examples. Thus since the first lectures were delivered in America the work has benefited from further study and experience.

Not all those who have given their generous assistance in numberless ways can be mentioned. Of these, the following have my acknowledgment and deep gratitude: Dr. Arthur W. Hummel, Chief of the Chinese Division of the Library of Congress, who was able to refer me to such rare books of musical notations that I felt must be in existence; Dr. J. E. Lodge and Dr. Hummel further for their suggestions regarding the arrangement and subject-matter of a part of the book; Professor Robert Winter, of Tsing Hua University, for his trouble in reading and correcting the MSS. and for his critical suggestion also regarding the arrangement; Dr. Frances Burnce, of Teachers' College, Boston, who, at considerable sacrifice, of which I was not cognizant at the time (1932), advanced the funds for an important journey and residence in Peiping; Mr. Teng Yen-lin, of Peiping, for assistance with Chinese books; Miss Jane Nierling, and Mr. Richard Green, of Washington, for unselfish assistance in the copying and drafting of symbols and graphs in a quantity of experimental work in the Library of Congress not included in these pages; the late Dr. Liu Fu, of the National University of Peking, for his great kindness in going over a preliminary draft of the manuscript minutely to verify



the validity of the statements made and in pointing out the smallest details concerned with a more accurate presentation ; Mr. T'ien Tê-wang and Mr. T. S. Sung for their collaboration in the translation of poems ; Miss Irene Lewisohn, and Mr. G. Ellsworth Huggins, of New York, to whom I am deeply grateful for financial assistance that came at a critical time of the undertaking ; my publisher, Mr. Henri Vetch, to whom I have also to express my appreciation for his deep interest in the work and for the facilities placed at my disposal in connection with its completion and publication ; the officers of the Congressional Library in Washington, Imperial Library of Kyoto and National Library of Peiping for invaluable assistance, to Mr. J. Hope-Johnstone for his reading of the final proofs, and above all, my wife and Mrs. Sarah Iris Regardie-Morgan for continual encouragement and faith.

J. H. L.

SHANGHAI, JANUARY, 1936.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE .. .. .	PAGE V
-----------------	--------

## PART I.—THE ORIGIN OF THE ART

INTRODUCTION.—LANGUAGE AND MELODY .. <i>language and melody</i>	3
---	---

The fundamental relationship between language and melody, and the different use made of the combination in the Chinese and the European languages. The general effect upon these two musical systems.

CHAPTER I.—THE MUSIC OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE .. <i>of the chin language</i>	10
---	----

Fundamental principles. The *raison d'être* of the elements of music in the language. Melodic movement. The natural speech sounds. The music elements and meaning in the language. The elements of melodic movement in Chinese and the basis of all melody.

CHAPTER II.—THE BASIS OF MUSICAL COMPOSITION .. <i>basic composition</i>	19
--	----

The basis of musical composition. The place of melodic movement in the composition of words in poetry. The musical structure of poems in terms of melody, rhythm and form. The relative importance of scale structure. The basis of melody in Chinese words. The basis of melody in musical composition. The neumes.

## PART II.—THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ART

CHAPTER III.—THE ART OF MUSICAL COMPOSITION .. <i>art</i>	47
---	----

The inception of an art of tone-painting in music. The importance of line and line forms in the progression of sounds in composition. Movement the essence of form. The conditions forming the basis of movement in musical creation. The universal elements of relationship between speech and song more fully discussed. The development of musical forms through poetry.

CHAPTER IV.—SCALE STRUCTURE .. <i>scale structure</i> <i>音阶结构</i>	63
---	----

The origins of the scale system. The 12 *lüs*. The pentatonic or five tone scale. The addition of the two *pien* or auxiliary tones. The seven tone scale. The seven modes of the seven tone scale. The so-called sixty and eighty-four scales. The five modes of the pentatonic scale. The intervallic structure of the scales in different keys. The nine tone scale. Unequal temperament and the use of fractional tones. The more complicated scale basis forgotten in modern China.

CHAPTER V.—PARALLELS BETWEEN THE NEUMES OF CHINA AND EUROPE .. .. .	81
---	----

*Parallels between the neumes of china and Europe*  
*neumes*  
*neume*  
*neume*  
*五音七声八音九种乐善存字*

### PART III.—ANALYSES OF COMPOSITIONS OF HIGHEST DEVELOPMENT

#### CHAPTER VI.—NOTATION .. .. . 89

Phonetic notation. Diastematic notation symbolized. The different sets of phonetic symbols used to describe the tones of the scale at different epochs. Why different systems were used. The phonetic and other symbols denoting movement. The use of a dual notation. The rhythmic symbols. How the notes are expressed in musical compositions. How to understand the time values.

#### CHAPTER VII.—METHOD OF STUDY .. .. . 97

The lack of a previous set methodology with which to work. Broad divisions. The basic structural form of compositions. The tonal superstructure. Analysis of materials of composition common to the songs in general. Analysis of particular compositions. The statement of the structure. Extension of graphic forms in statement of structure. Analysis of rhythm in metre. Analysis of melody in movement. Statement of the tonal superstructure. Analysis of the tonal superstructure in terms of movement. Analysis of the tonal superstructure in terms of rhythm. The relation and combinations of the basic types of moving tones. The relation between themes and their recurring forms. The relation between themes and different themes in a composition. The combination of themes. The law of form in Chinese musical composition. The principles governing the application of the tones upon the neume structure. The methodology applicable to the study of all the compositions.

#### CHAPTER VIII.—MUSIC-POEMS AND MELODIES OF HIGHEST DEVELOPMENT. THEIR TRANSCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS .. 104

Music-poems composed in the T'ang and Sung dynasties with tonal superstructure added in the Ch'ing dynasty: Music-Poem I (Untitled), analysed to show the *strict* application of tones upon neumes; the basis of melody, rhythm and form analysed (pp. 104-124).—Music-Poem II (*Tan Kuei*), analysed to demonstrate the general application of tones to neumes; its melody, rhythm and form analysed (pp. 125-139).—Music-Poem III (*Chu Chib*), analysed to illustrate one of the shortest forms of musical composition; its melody, rhythm and form analysed (pp. 140-144).—Music Poem IV (*Pên I*), analysed to show the basis of structure and tones in a larger composition; its melody, rhythm and form analysed (pp. 145-167).

Music Poem V (Untitled) with structure and tonal superstructure entirely composed in the Sung dynasty; analysed to show the significance of scale notation, and the thematic structure and tonal superstructure in relation to the whole composition (pp. 168-171). Music-Poems VI—IX of the Sung dynasty, transcribed to show the use of modes, seven and nine tone scales (pp. 172-178).



## PART IV.—CONCLUSION

## CHAPTER IX.—THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ANCIENT ART .. 181

The rules of ancient Chinese musical composition are recoverable. Forms of musical composition of the most developed period are still available and defined in terms of the symbols of structure. The extent to which the ancient music may be reconstructed. The living value of the ancient art of Chinese composition. The place of the music of poetry in Chinese music more specifically discussed.

## CHAPTER X.—REMARKS ON THE FUTURE OF CHINESE MUSIC.. 197

Present state of Chinese music. What it means to-day to the Chinese; to the foreigner. The recovery of the ancient music. Its place in the rebirth of Chinese music. Why the ancient art has been practically lost in modern times. Chinese and Western music. What China has to offer. What China has to gain from Western music. The possibilities of amalgamating the best points of each. The wide field of research still left open in the study of Chinese music. The possibility of superimposing harmony on the ancient system of musical forms. The general effect of the introduction of harmony into the Chinese melodic scheme. The influence of the West upon the future of Chinese music visualized. The influence of Chinese music upon the future of Western music visualized. Conclusion.

## APPENDICES

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| I.—Table of 36 Chinese phonetic elements according to the different tones of the scale and dynamic quality drawn up in the Liang Dynasty (502-534) .. .. . | 210 |
| II.—Karlgren's arrangement of various phonemes as to their natural difference in audibility .. .. .  | 210 |
| III.—Karlgren's arrangement of the phonetic elements as to higher and lower pitch values .. .. .   | 210 |
| IV.—Example of purely Western instrumental composition and its basis of form as defined by Chinese symbols of structure ..                                 | 212 |

## BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Works in European Languages	..	..	..	..	..	214
Chinese works	..	..	..	..	..	216

INDEX .. .. . 220

## PART I

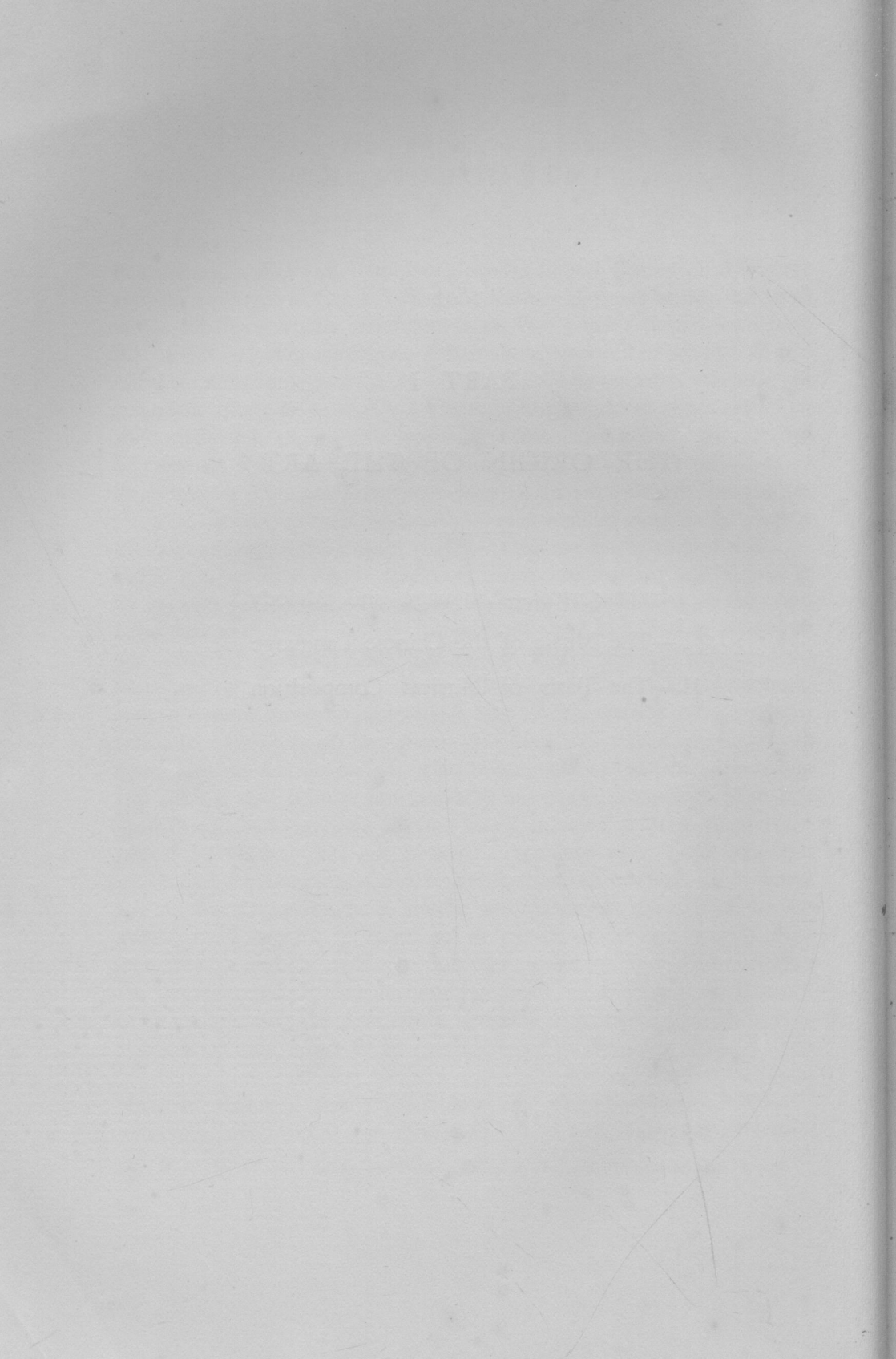
### THE ORIGIN OF THE ART

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INTRODUCTION.—Language and Melody

I.—The Music of the Chinese Language

II.—The Basis of Musical Composition





## INTRODUCTION

### LANGUAGE AND MELODY

SPEECH is intimately bound up with melody. Any language naturally finds expression through various pitches of sound in rhythmic settings which are closely related both to the phonetic structure of the words and also to the emotional colour that is sometimes given to them. Of the phonetic elements which we use to convey ideas, some seem naturally to be expressed in higher tones, others in lower; some with stronger, others with weaker stress, and again some with longer and others with shorter time values. In the interplay between these basic elements of melody and rhythm a certain unconscious type of singing is present in all speech, but is more evident in some languages than in others.

The sounds which we use to convey meaning through the medium of words find their closest connection with music in verse and it has occurred to a number of investigators that the key to the mystery of verse was to be found in its kinship with music. They have attempted to formulate specific laws governing the relation between the phonetic elements and their purely musical counterparts in tones and rhythms. To Sonnenschein "the fascination of what seemed a new revelation and a new discovery was strong; all the difficulties of metre and scansion seemed to disappear if only one substituted musical notes and rests of varying length for syllables, and musical bars for the feet of verse."<sup>1</sup> But, as he soon found out, the discovery had already been made by the Greeks and made anew in the 18th century by Joshua Steele in his *Prosodia Rationalis* (1779) which was preceded by an *Essay towards establishing the melody and measure of speech* (1775), and in the 19th century by Sidney Lanier in his *Science of English Verse* (1880), none of which were universally adopted. Further, modern experimental research as practised in the psychological and phonetic laboratories of Europe and America to this day shows that this question is still of vital interest, although, in the admission of all concerned, no positive results have been reached.

Since for reasons to be seen later, Chinese melody is more strongly related to language than is the case with any other melodic system,

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<sup>1</sup> E. A. SONNENSCHIEIN: *Rhythm*, Ch. 3, *Music and Verse*, p. 31, 1925.

this study has to be based very largely on the place of melody in language, particularly in Chinese:

If one tries to listen only to the musical side of ordinary speech in any language, one observes that the speaker's voice rises, falls, or poises in different syllables of louder or softer, shorter or longer rhythmic characteristic. These elements, at the same time, represent the basis upon which all melody is composed, the only difference being that in music proper there is an organized relation between them, and further, that all these elements are expressed in terms of the tones of the scale. In verse the kinship between language and music becomes more apparent because the organized relation between these elements is more or less provided, while any impassioned utterance given to the words of the poem tends to express the natural cadences of the rise and the fall of the voice in the actual tones of the scale.

As far as the nature of the phonetic elements is concerned, increased or decreased muscular force necessarily coming into play in the expression of different phonetic elements creates a corresponding natural difference in pitch and in stress. Karlgren has listed different degrees of stress<sup>2</sup> and also higher and lower pitch differences<sup>3</sup> in various phonetic elements, and he asserts that these differences exist between them "by nature." Miller<sup>4</sup> has worked out a table for a number of the vowels by which he tries to show that by nature, phonetic elements differ from each other in pitch. Chinese philologists, inherently musical in their approach to the study, have classified the various elements and have given to each a musical equivalent not only in terms of the actual tones of the scale but also in terms of stress values. A full table from the Liang period (A.D. 502-556) including all the thirty-six phonetic elements in Chinese is also given in Appendix I, in English.

The question now arises, as to how far the poising, rising and falling movements of the voice in speech are conditioned in pitch, stress and time by the various phonetic elements which compose them. The problem is made more difficult by the fact that another variable influence must be taken into consideration. This influence is that

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix II.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix III.

<sup>4</sup> D. C. MILLER: *The Science of Musical Sounds*, p. 239.

of the human emotions. It is entirely independent of speech. Essentially human in its nature, it often upsets all purely mathematical and logical calculations regarding the physical relations between the different phonetic elements and their corresponding musical, tonal and rhythmic values.

Let us look a little more closely into the nature and function of these two branches of musical influence in speech. Concerning the physical relations between the phonetic elements and the tones and rhythms of music, we may make the following observations:

- (1) In all speech the voice rises, poises or falls in different combinations.
- (2) In particular languages and particular words, the phonetic elements used tend to qualify these movements, limiting them in pitch, stress and time content, all of which are purely relative to the phonetic content of adjacent syllables.

The basic elements naturally take a primary place as they are present in all languages and recurrent in different combinations in different words. The exact tonal values of the phonetic elements are secondary because at most they merely define the more exact relative nature of such tonal values whether in pitch relation, quantity, dynamics or quality. In the actual composition of melody upon words, one has therefore to take into consideration the basic elements of melody that already exist in the words themselves, the phonetic clothing which gives such basic elements their more exact setting, and finally the interpretation of all these elements in terms of the tones of the scale.

The above considerations dealing with the physical side of speech represent an *outward* influence upon music. The inherent sounds of the various speech elements come to the surface and lend themselves to such tones of the scale and such rhythms as are most natural to them.

But the emotional influence upon the sounds of speech is contra-distinctive to that of the physical nature of the phonetic elements themselves. It represents an *inward* influence. Melody in the musical practices of nations is influenced by emotion entirely apart from language, and emotions largely condition the line forms in which melody flows. Psychologists agree that rising, sinking, and poising movements of tones upon which all melodies are based are connected in the broadest way



with the corresponding emotional reactions of vigour, weakness or balance; optimism, pessimism or equanimity. It is thus possible to conceive of melody entirely apart from language or even as existing, to a certain extent at least, as an independent factor in speech.

Melody and language may then be approached from these two angles, namely :

- (1) The influence upon musical sounds of the physical changes that accompany the expression of the various types of speech elements (the *outward* influence), and
- (2) The influence of the emotional nature of human musical expression bearing directly upon language (the *inward* influence).

The second of the two forms of approach is, in China, what we might call a largely intellectualized process whereby the tonal elements are subdued in their emotional content and, in fact, turned into a different channel altogether, that of acting solely as integral elements in the words themselves. This important fact will be clarified in succeeding chapters since it must necessarily be discussed at length. It should also be noted from the outset that this peculiar phenomenon in Chinese influences the general nature of Chinese music, in contrast to Western music which is more purely emotional in its character.

The two influences, the physical and the emotional, represent two forces that must necessarily be in constant interplay or conflict. In this conflict, it is the second, however, which usually maintains the upper hand. The actual tonal values of the phonetic elements themselves are subdued, sometimes dominated and often seriously influenced by this element, the *emotional* in the West and the *intellectualized* in Chinese. The polysyllabic nature of Western languages and the monosyllabic nature of the Chinese language are also important factors connected with these differences of approach. These factors will be later treated in further detail.

What is the relation between the general character of a language and the musical system which accompanies it?

There is a great difference in the phonetic systems found in various languages. They differ greatly in content, that is in the sounds employed or neglected, and as Sapir says, "this is inevitable, for the vast number of possible and ordered existing speech sounds makes an unconscious selection necessary."