

6 Character Sonnets by Eric Yip

for medium voice, flute, tenor saxophone, and piano
Op. 21

commissioned by Ensemble Fioritura

Lance Mok

Text by Eric Yip
London: April 2025

ca. 21½ mins

1. 不 / No	I
2. 裂 / Tear	12
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The sonnet is unique as a poetic form in that it is driven by transformation. The volta, or turn, is traditionally included in the second-half of a sonnet, and it is where the poem must enact a moment of change. These six poems are, in their own way, sonnets based on Chinese characters. They all contain voltas, but they themselves are also moments of change. The poems vary in their aspects and are ultimately not bound to the particularities of what we would consider queer subject matter. What they do have in common, however, is a preoccupation with strangeness, deniability, and the unease and thrill of moving between places, languages, and bodies.

The first sonnet of the sequence, 〈不 / No〉, begins in a state of negation. Queerness, as uncategorisable as it is, is perhaps easiest to define by what it is not: not normative, not confinable, not static. When we describe a thing as odd, we are saying that thing does not align with the grain of the world. With oddity also comes hesitation and denial, and as the speaker or speakers move through these sonnets, they often find themselves moving against that well-defined grain. That moment of strange friction is where change is catalysed and made concrete. It is where we locate the in-between space in which we exist, the gap between what should be and isn't, the 'nothing that holds what we want'.

The song cycle was commissioned by Ensemble Fioritura with funding from Arts Council England's National Lottery Project Grants for the project *Silhouettes of Passion's Master-mistress* and was premiered by countertenor Keith Pun and the Ensemble at Conway Hall, London, United Kingdom, on 16 May 2025.

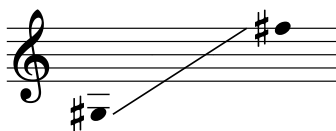
Programme notes by Eric Yip

Instrumentation: medium voice, flute, tenor saxophone, and piano

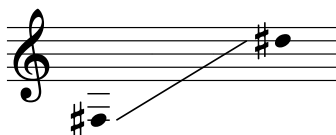
The voice part is mostly sung in English, with Chinese characters sung in Cantonese.

The respective range of each song is as follows:

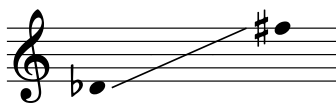
1. 不 / No



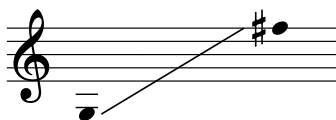
2. 裂 / Tear



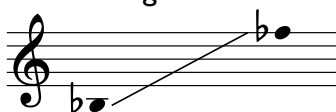
3. 暑 / Summer



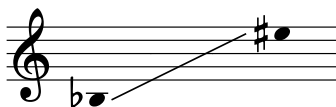
4. 譯 / Translate



5. 曲 / Song



6. 畫 / Painting



Text

Sonnets by Eric Yip

不 / No

How the word stands like an inverted tree,
a refusal to obey the laws that birthed it.
Or is it a proper tree 木 with its top
chopped off? All that life wondering
if my brain's inverted, improper, asterisked
with defects. Be honest, straight 直
or bent 彎? Bent like a branch or straight
like a trunk? Like a man? You like men?
Ma said don't stand slanted 歪 like a girl.
歪 like 不正. Not proper. A man's spine
should be trunk-strong. Once, after a fight,
she sat me down with a cup of fig soup.
Tell me you're not like those defective men.
I looked her straight in the eye and said no.

裂 / Tear

On a bench in the laundromat, I see him
slumped, sobbing, his back reflected

in the washer's porthole. Inside the machine,
a deep, irregular whirr, the metal drum

tossing loose socks, shirts, invisible limbs.
Never have I seen a man break

so completely, as if a vast crevasse
had unzipped his life. Later, hauling

a warm bag of clothes up uneven flights,
I recall my father's woolly voice,

our last meal together, the ceiling fan
chopping light above us, when he asked

if I would ever forgive him, how slowly
he took off his glasses and wept.

暑 / Summer

Days were thirty-eight degrees,
our bodies just under. I dreamt of winter
while you ran your soul into ovals.
You said running doesn't feed wallets;
I agreed. The appeal of piety grew apparent.
Moths applied themselves to gloating windows.
On the same railing our shirts touched.

When I told you I was leaving
I expected scorn. We walked to the shore
where silhouettes were fishing. Spume
encroached on our toes, obscenely cold.
And the waves pleating, repeating
like habit without thought, wading
all this way to our feet to be lost.

譯 / Translate

Traduttore, traditore
—Italian proverb

If asked to explain 人情味, I'd point to
No one knows *placeholder* in Cantonese.
this joke is untranslatable, please laugh
behind this one. In another language
relaxes his scowl. *How is your grandmother?*
孀孀, 婆婆—one dead, the other waiting.
sometimes I think you don't know

the last cart noodle shop in Kowloon City.
At a party, I am Jimmy Carter's interpreter:
to save face. There is a sentence stranded
my tongue dissolves. The customs officer
How I split *grandmother* in two:
A life lost in the saying. Dear reader,
what I mean, if you know what I mean.

曲 / Song

The closeted singer sings of heartbreak
as variegated houses trace the track
towards a train-bound town
indifferent to description.

He is like me, except prettier,
with fans who gift him roses
and forearms inked in his name.

I picture him relinquished of duty
in blank hinterlands.
Just another clueless tourist.

I'm tired of artifice.

What I need now is purpose
in my voice, the way stones sound
like stones, thorns like thorns.

畫 / Painting

Night had drained all paint from the room.
As it were, the clock shaving seconds
in the dark where time drags itself out
like swans on dull water. By the bed,
our pile of implements: blindfolds,
briefs, a vial of liniment. Hours ago
you made me a new kind of canvas
and now my whole self thrums with a soreness
even turpentine can't cure. For years
I thought a blank canvas symbolised nothing,
but it is only nothing that holds
what we want, the way eyes close
so snow can fall peerlessly in the country
of sleep, where we grow old together.

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Op. 21
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Lance Mok
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I. 不 / No

Lento ♩ = 63

Voice

Flute

Tenor Saxophone

Piano

Lento ♩ = 63

15

f *mp liberamente* *mp giusto*

f *p*

con Ped.

3

Fl.

Tsax.

f *p*

mp

22 **stretto**

- vert - ed, im - prop - er; as - ter - isked with

Fl.

Tsax.

25 **4 Agitato** ♩ = 92 **f**

de - fects. Be hon - est,

Fl.

Tsax.

4 Agitato ♩ = 92 **f**

2. 裂 / Tear

Con moto ♩ = 120

Score for the first system of "2. 裂 / Tear". The tempo is marked "Con moto" with a quarter note equal to 120 beats per minute. The time signature is 4/4.

Voice: Two staves with whole rests in both measures.

Flute: Two staves. The melody consists of eighth-note runs in the first measure, followed by a half note, and then another eighth-note run in the second measure. The dynamic is *pp sempre*.

Tenor Saxophone: Two staves. The melody consists of eighth-note runs in the first measure, followed by a half note, and then another eighth-note run in the second measure. The dynamic is *pp sempre*.

Piano: Four staves (treble and bass clef). Both staves have whole rests in both measures.

Score for the second system of "2. 裂 / Tear". The tempo is marked "Con moto" with a quarter note equal to 120 beats per minute. The time signature is 4/4.

Voice: Two staves. The melody starts with a triplet of eighth notes (marked *p*) followed by a half note and a quarter note. The lyrics are "On a bench in the".

Flute (Fl.): Two staves. The melody consists of eighth-note runs in the first measure, followed by a half note, and then another eighth-note run in the second measure.

Tenor Saxophone (Tsax.): Two staves. The melody consists of eighth-note runs in the first measure, followed by a half note, and then another eighth-note run in the second measure.

Piano: Four staves (treble and bass clef). Both staves have whole rests in both measures.

29 *mp* *rit.*

Fl. *mp* *rit.* *dim.* *3*

Tsax. *dim.* *3*

Ped. _____ Ped. _____

plete - ly, as if a vast cre - vasse

32 *p*

Fl. *p* *3*

Tsax. *p* *3*

Ped. _____ Ped. _____ Ped. _____ Ped. _____

had un - zipped his life.

37 **4** *Meno mosso* ♩ = 80 *p* *3* *3*

Fl. *p* *3* *3*

Tsax. *p* *3* *3*

4 *Meno mosso* ♩ = 80 *mf* mechanically

Lat - er, haul - ing a warm bag of

3. 暑 / Summer

Adagio ♩ = 63

Voice

Flute

Tenor Saxophone

Piano

mf

p ma pesante

Ped.

3

p *mf* *mp*

Days were thir - ty - eight de - grees, our

Fl.

Tsax.

mf

p

8

34

f

And the waves pleat - ing, re - peat - ing like ____

Fl.

f

Tsax.

mp 3

f 3

36

mp

hab - it with - out thought, wad - ing all this way to our

Fl.

p

Tsax.

p

mp

4. 譯 / Translate

Vivo ♩ = 168

Score for the first system of "4. 譯 / Translate". The tempo is Vivo (♩ = 168) and the time signature is 3/4.

Voice: Four measures of whole rests.

Flute:

- Measure 1: *mf* (mezzo-forte), eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5.
- Measure 2: Whole rest.
- Measure 3: Eighth notes Bb4, A4, G4, F#4.
- Measure 4: Quarter note E4, quarter rest, eighth notes D4, C4, B3, A3 (marked *ff*), eighth rest, eighth note G3 (marked *ff*).

Tenor Saxophone:

- Measure 1: Whole rest.
- Measure 2: Eighth notes Bb3, A3, G3, F#3 (marked *mf*).
- Measure 3: Whole rest.
- Measure 4: Quarter note E3, quarter rest, eighth notes D3, C3, B2, A2 (marked *ff*).

Piano:

- Measure 1: Treble clef, quarter rest, quarter note G#4 (marked *p*), quarter rest, quarter note F#4.
- Measure 2: Treble clef, quarter rest, quarter note E4 (marked *p*), quarter rest, quarter note D4.
- Measure 3: Treble clef, quarter rest, quarter note C#4 (marked *p*), quarter rest, quarter note B3.
- Measure 4: Treble clef, quarter rest, quarter note A3 (marked *sfz*), quarter rest, quarter note G3.

Score for the second system of "4. 譯 / Translate". The tempo is Vivo (♩ = 168) and the time signature is 3/4.

Voice:

- Measure 1: Boxed "1", quarter rest.
- Measure 2: Quarter rest.
- Measure 3: Quarter rest.
- Measure 4: Quarter note G4 (marked *mp*), quarter note F#4, quarter note E4, quarter note D4.
- Measure 5: Quarter note C4, quarter note B3, quarter note A3, quarter note G3.
- Measure 6: Quarter note F#3, quarter note E3, quarter note D3, quarter note C3.

Lyrics: If asked to ex - - plain

Flute (Fl.):

- Measure 1: Quarter note G4 (marked *f*), quarter note A4, quarter note Bb4, quarter note C5.
- Measure 2: Quarter note Bb4, quarter note A4, quarter note G4, quarter note F#4.
- Measure 3: Quarter note E4, quarter note D4, quarter note C4, quarter note B3.
- Measure 4: Quarter note A3, quarter note G3, quarter note F#3, quarter note E3.
- Measure 5: Quarter note D3, quarter note C3, quarter note B2, quarter note A2.
- Measure 6: Quarter note G2, quarter note F#2, quarter note E2, quarter note D2.

Tenor Saxophone (Tsax.):

- Measure 1: Quarter note Bb3 (marked *f*), quarter note A3, quarter note G3, quarter note F#3.
- Measure 2: Quarter note E3, quarter note D3, quarter note C3, quarter note B2.
- Measure 3: Quarter note A2, quarter note G2, quarter note F#2, quarter note E2.
- Measure 4: Quarter note D2, quarter note C2, quarter note B1, quarter note A1.
- Measure 5: Quarter note G1, quarter note F#1, quarter note E1, quarter note D1.
- Measure 6: Quarter note C1, quarter note B1, quarter note A1, quarter note G1.

Piano: Six measures of whole rests.

rit. **Meno mosso, ma burlesco** ♩ = 112

34 *p* *mf*

At a par - ty, I am Jim - my Car - ter's in -

Fl.

Tsax.

rit. **Meno mosso, ma burlesco** ♩ = 112

pp *mp*

Ped.____ Ped.____ Ped.____

38 *poco* **5** *f*

- ter - pret - er: this joke is un - trans - lat - a - ble, please

Fl.

Tsax.

mf *mp* *p*

5 *mf* *p* *mf* *p* *mf* *p*

Ped.____ Ped.____ Ped.____ Ped.____

5. 曲 / Song

Melodramatic almost to the point of self-parody ♩ = 40

Voice

Flute

Tenor Saxophone

Piano

con Ped.

f

mp

f

mf

The clos - et - ed sing - er

6

ff

tr

p

f

p

f

p

f

p

f

p

8...

8...

sings of heart - - - - -

49 **5**

mp *cresc.*

What I need now is pur - pose in my

Fl. *p* *cresc.*

Tsax. *p* *cresc.*

5

p *cresc.*

54 *f*

voice,

Fl. *f* *poco*

Tsax. *f* *poco*

f *poco*

6. 畫 / Painting

Largo e molto tranquillo ♩. = 34

Voice

Flute

Tenor Saxophone

Piano

Ped.

5

Fl.

Tsax.

(Ped.)

44 **5**

Fl.

ff

Tsax.

ff

5

ff

46

and now my whole self

Fl.

mf

Tsax.

mf

mf

f

(Ped.)

8