

Composing the Music for Returning Souls

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When I compose music I am absorbed completely in the search for that one perfect note, the one that resonates with my inner voice. I do not worry about whether this note will please others, because I believe that before I can please others I need to please myself. I have worked in this way for almost 40 years, and it has served me well. But listening for inner music is a solitary pursuit.

As a musician, then, I am intuitive, so it is probably not surprising that in my personal life I can be impulsive, following my passions and emotions without thinking about the outcome. A year after my mother's death, the loneliness of searching for that one perfect note while living in an adopted country sparked the desire to return to my native country of Taiwan after a thirty year absence, to search for something that was missing in my life.

On my return to Taiwan I stumbled upon Hu Tai-Li's film project. The story of young Amis tribe members who were hoping to revitalize their tribal way of life through returning their ancestors' souls unexpectedly mirrored my personal search. Although the specifics of geography, time, age, and belief differed, we shared the intention of finding a more meaningful purpose to our lives, which is a driving force in human creativity. The strong sense of empathy that their story engendered lessened my sense of isolation. While organizing this tour of Returning Souls across the United States, I also found a sense of community with the people who are presenting this event. These are people who are interested in other people's stories, and people like Hu Tai-Li, who has been telling other people's stories for forty years.

As well as empathizing with the young Amis in the film, I admired them for their determination to find answers despite many obstacles. Compared to their quest to retrieve their ancestors' souls and rejuvenate their culture, my self-absorption as a composer seeking to find that one perfect note began to seem trivial, or at least limiting. While finding the right notes is my job as a composer, becoming a member of this larger circle, hearing and becoming part of their stories, has been an empowering and inspiring experience.

In the end, articulating what I am doing, and why I am doing it is still difficult. I can only say that the impulse to share Hu Tai-Li's film with others is strong. Perhaps someone in the audience will become aware of their own parallel intention. Perhaps their sense of isolation will be lessened, or their courage deepened. Whether they be Amis or not, may their souls be returned.