



# Compass Rose

## Literature and Art Journal

COMPASS ROSE interviews Mitchell Clark

**Compass Rose:** *In general, who and what were your influences throughout school, and how did you inevitably end up studying music?*

**Mitchell Clark:** Early on my interests were in science, but I enjoyed music a lot and at thirteen I got the idea that it was something I could do myself. I learned guitar, largely teaching myself, and immediately began composing instrumental pieces and songs. This quickly displaced my interest in science. As a composition student at conservatory I had the opportunity to study Korean music, and Asian music in general, and all this affected me deeply.

**CR:** *How do you think being raised in New England influenced you growing up?*

**Clark:** As I say, my early interests were science related, and my love was the biology of seashores. So my stomping grounds were the shores of Rhode Island and, in the summer, Maine. Who knows if I ever would have gone on to study marine biology, but there's something about seashores that remains fundamental for me. Some of it is symbolic, perhaps—one world edging up against another—but for me its more textural, with all senses of perception involved.

**CR:** *Your work has been performed all over the world, but what travels have you made that have truly impacted you as an individual and as a composer?*

**Clark:** As far as journeys to distant places go, my travels to East Asia have been the most significant. But the most important place for a large portion of my life was the backyard of our house in Rhode Island.

**CR:** *In "Zephyrs: Some Correspondences Between Bai Juyi's Qin and La Monte Young's Composition 1960 # 5" You combine traditional Chinese music with contemporary western music. What were your hopes and ideas behind this cultural mixing? How much of this composition speaks about you and your experiences as a westerner fascinated with Chinese culture?*

**Clark:** Actually, "Zephyrs" is not a musical composition but an essay that investigates parallels between a 9th-century Chinese poem about the *qin* (a Chinese instrument which I've studied) and a 20th-century American musical composition in a verbal notation. Part of the connection between the two is that each can be viewed as simultaneously "literary" and "musical." Literary music is a long-standing notion in Chinese artistic culture, and in the 20th-century with the advent in the West of verbally notated music—with Marcel Duchamp, La Monte Young, Christian Wolff, and others—a new sort of literary music came into being.

In “Zephyrs,” the cultural mixing ranges from a basic connection (that the composer La Monte Young was familiar with and influenced by Bai Juyi’s poem) to more involved cultural connections between China and the West. These have to do with philosophical symbols (the butterfly, for example) and linguistic connections (the relationships found both East and West in words for “music,” “joy,” and “dream”), as well as—central to the essay—musical sounds made by the wind. “Zephyrs” came about through my interest in the literature and lore concerning the sounding of musical instruments (whether intentional or not) in the wind, which is a topic that readily cuts across cultures.

**CR:** *Your interest and expertise in the Chinese seven-string Qin is somewhat unique. How did you first become familiar with this instrument, why do you enjoy it particularly and how has it affected the way you compose and listen to music?*

**Clark:** My first encounter with the *qin* was a performance I attended at Brown University as a teenager. I didn’t know of the instrument before that, but came away fascinated by it. Although a direct influence of the *qin* on my composing was a piano piece I wrote long ago, I’ve not been interested in composing for the *qin* itself. I’m more concerned with the challenges of the traditional Chinese music for the instrument. This led to the study other aspects of Chinese culture which inform the playing of the *qin*, especially Chinese literature and philosophy, in addition to the language.

**CR:** *You studied with a master of the qin, Wu Wenguang, for four years. Can you speak a bit about your experience with him?*

**Clark:** Wu Wenguang is a remarkable player of the *qin*, and is one of the greatest living masters. Just to watch and listen to him play was a privilege, and from that I learned a great deal. He also directly taught me some of the pieces he played. It was a wonderful experience.

**CR:** *What drives you to compose music? Is it a possession of emotion that lends itself to a melody? Is it a deep understanding of an instrument and its capacity, testing the boundaries already laid down? If you had to describe your creative process, how would you express it?*

**Clark:** If I were to describe the process in a simple way, I would say this: I enjoy making things—different kinds of things—and I feel compelled to do so. And these things have tended to be musical or literary.

**CR:** *Often when we become known for one of our talents, other parts of ourselves, which we may feel equally in tune with and good at, can go unnoticed. What do you feel are some things that you do well, or that you are proud of, that do not get to shine through as often?*

**Clark:** I guess the best way to reply to that would be to mention my fiction writing. I have been writing as long as I’ve been composing—since my early teens—although I’ve shared the writing with far fewer people than my composing. When I was younger it was mostly poetry, only lately has it been prose, specifically fiction. I’ve already done a great deal of non-fiction writing about music.

**CR:** *As life goes on, we gain in experience and knowledge that leads us down new paths and to new beginnings and projects. Where is your work and your life heading at this point and what changes and*

*experiences have brought you to this new period in your life?*

**Clark:** If one follows the path of being an artist, there are going to be—there are going to have to be—new beginnings, and with those new challenges, whether they’re part of one’s “career track” or not. And artistic discovery may well include explorations which demand a change in or a modification of the medium in which one’s working. For me this has been, over the past five years, a transformation that has included my music moving towards a more narrative orientation, and which has led from composing to writing fiction. An important part of this transition was writing an opera where I wrote both the text and music (as it was a “ballad opera,” the music is supplied by existing music of mine). I see the transition as entirely logical, but it’s certainly a challenge to communicate that.

**CR:** *All of us eventually get little nuggets of knowledge to pass on, usually in the form of a motto, quote or mantra. What do you think is one phrase, or philosophy of that that has guided you, or was deep in significance when you came upon it?*

**Clark:** I have no particular such motto or mantra, but since you’ve asked I’ll relate something I was impressed by in a filmed interview with the Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami, which I just watched. He was speaking of what he saw as his task as director in communicating the reality of the story in a film. He said: “We put a series of lies together in order to reach a higher truth.” This struck me as being very much a crucial issue in writing, as far as I’m concerned, whether writing music or fiction