

Arts in Review -- Music: East Meets West, Again

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ABSTRACT

In "The Long Road," the opening movement, chaotic string writing – alternately siren-like, fragmentary and eerie – is set against heavy, irregular percussion figures and a synthesizer that briefly sounds like an idling engine, but makes its way to an oddly courtly, but de-tuned, melancholy quartet passage.

FULL TEXT

Over the past few decades, Asian composers, and composers with Asian roots, have melded Eastern and Western musical accents by combining the instrumentation and musical forms of both worlds. It is not always easy, given the different conceptions of intonation, rhythm and harmony that underlie each tradition, but it works mainly because of the erosion of rigidity on both sides. The yield, all told, has been an arresting repertory that represents neither tradition so much as individual composers' omnivorous psyches, expressed through the use of a boundary-free toolbox and an expanded lexicon.

Two recent recordings – "Overtones – Harmonic Seasons" (Harmonia Mundi), a set of collaborative works by Wu Wei and Wang Li, and Miya Masaoka's "Triangle of Resistance" (Innova) – touch on different corners of this deeply expressive hybrid style.

Mr. Wu and Mr. Wang, who were born in China and live in Berlin and Paris, respectively, are both also instrumentalists: Mr. Wu is a master of the sheng, a Chinese mouth organ, and also plays the mandolin-like liuqin and the morin khuur, a Mongolian fiddle; Mr. Wang contributes a Western twang on the jaw harp, the reedy sound of the hulusi as well as percussion.

The 13 imaginative tone poems here are full of surprising sounds, even for listeners familiar with Chinese music. Extended techniques, like those that Western players use to create fresh timbres on orchestral instruments, make parts of the sweetly melancholy "The Chant of Stars" sound electronic. In "Sismic [sic] Echo," the tactile jaw harp tones, rumbling beat, reedy themes and oscillating sheng figure bring otherworldly tone colors to music that would not be out of place in a 1950s detective film.

Four "Overtone" dances – one for each season – are mini-dramas that, if not as overtly pictorial as Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," nevertheless evoke images of, say, wintery iciness and a springtime woodland awakening. And though most of this music is harmonically Western, a few pieces – "Dragon Dance," "Morning Prayer" and "Five Leaf Clover" – are built on pentatonic themes that give the music a folkish inflection.

The Wu-Wang collaboration is light-spirited and pleasant, overall, with occasional forays into meditative introspection. "Triangle of Resistance" is pointedly the opposite. An American experimental composer of Japanese descent, Ms. Masaoka devotes most of the recording to the three-movement title work, an emotionally raw

evocation of Japanese-Americans' experience in internment camps during World War II. Ms. Masaoka did not experience this – she was born in 1958 – but her mother, at age 13, was sent to such a camp, and she passed along her memories.

Scored for string quartet, synthesizers, an array of Japanese percussion instruments and Ms. Masaoka's own instrument, the koto, and conducted by Richard Carrick, the work thrusts the listener brusquely and un sentimentally into the world of the detainee. In "The Long Road," the opening movement, chaotic string writing – alternately siren-like, fragmentary and eerie – is set against heavy, irregular percussion figures and a synthesizer that briefly sounds like an idling engine, but makes its way to an oddly courtly, but de-tuned, melancholy quartet passage.

Ms. Masaoka deftly avoids doing anything long enough for the listener to feel comfortable with it. Her central movement, "The Clattering of Life," combines scored and improvisatory sections to suggest texture and tensions of life in close confinement. Only in the finale, "Survival," does the slowly climbing quartet writing suggest hope, though not certainty.

This may seem exactly the right time for a work about xenophobia and its human toll (not that there is a wrong time). As a coda, of sorts, Ms. Masaoka also offers "Four Moons of Pluto," a brooding, otherworldly but ultimately consonant score for solo bass, powerfully rendered by James Ilgenfritz. Whether or not she intended it, Ms. Masaoka's message seems to be that there may be peace and contentment out there somewhere, but not on this earth.

Mr. Kozinn writes about music for the Journal.

Credit: By Allan Kozinn

DETAILS

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