

**Bright Sheng:
H'un (Lacerations) and other works**

New World 80407-2

The music of the Chinese-American composer Bright Sheng sometimes floats like delicate fragrances on a breeze and sometimes screams and writhes in actual or remembered agony. This is music, to paraphrase William Blake, of innocence and of experience. The innocence and experience are not simply those of a boy growing up amid the terrors of China's Cultural Revolution—they are also components of a well-trained composer's creative equipment: the beloved folk music of a land left behind and the complex, vast, and challenging vocabulary and grammar available in a newer but in some ways exhausted, Western world.

Sheng, born on December 6, 1955, in Shanghai, has used experience profoundly well, yet those roots of innocence remain sturdy and productive within his work. His musical roots began with his first piano lessons at the age of five and were nourished by his father's records collection, which included Western music. When the records and piano were confiscated during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, Sheng kept up his practicing by sneaking into locked piano rooms in his junior high school.

When he was fifteen, Sheng graduated from junior high school and, instead of being assigned to work in the fields along with most people his age, he auditioned and was sent to play piano and percussion for a folk dance and song group in Chinghai Province, on the border between China and Tibet. This gave him his first chance to study and collect Chinese folk music. Sheng also had to conduct and make arrangements for the small orchestra, and that, he says, “got me into composition.”

In 1978, with the Cultural Revolution a nightmare of the recent past, Sheng became one of the first to be admitted to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where he earned his composition degree. Moving to New York City in 1982, he continued his composition studies at Queens College of the City University of New York with George Perle and Hugo Weisgall, at Columbia University with Chou Wen-Chung, Jack Beeson and Mario Davidovsky, and with his mentor Leonard Bernstein. With these formidable musicians guiding him, Sheng could hardly avoid developing a well-founded sophistication to go along with his folk heritage. Innocence and experience were combining nicely, even if individual works during his American years have sometimes learned in one direction or the other.

H'un: In Memoriam 1966-1976 is emphatically an angry and grieving cry of historical experience. This essay was composed in 1987, the year Sheng became an American citizen. It was commissioned by the 92nd Street Y in New York City and was first performed there on April 16, 1988, by the Y's resident orchestra, the New York Chamber Symphony, conducted by Gerard Schwarz.

The word H'un, pronounced like the tribe of Attila, is translated by the composer as "lacerations." The first measure, with its upward run of flutes, clarinets, and harp and its thump of drums, gong, tambourine, piano, and plucked strings, is just one of many recurring jolts. A flute wailing on a downward ninth, violins and violas strangling on semitone chords, and sustained conflicts between careening strings and pounding *ostinati* in the rest of the orchestra are among the further evocations of unspecified agonies. Later, the strings join in the pounding, while woodwinds cut loose with their own waywardness. When the piece concludes—with two faint clarinets, short percussion taps, and long silences—great tension remains.

In addition to strings, *H'un* calls for the standard woodwinds in pairs, with equally standard doubling on piccolos, bass clarinets, and contrabassoon, along with three horns; two trumpets and two trombones; piano; harp; and more than a dozen percussion instruments, both Occidental and Oriental, distributed between two players.

The Stream Flows, for solo violin, was commissioned by the Foundation for Chinese Arts in Boston, for Nai-Yuan Hu, who presented the premiere on October 20, 1990, in Jordan Hall, Boston. The first of the two sections is based on a Chinese folk song of the same title. A preface to the score conveys Sheng's hope that the violin evokes the "timbre and the tone quality of a female folk singer." The second section is a "fast country dance based on a three-note motive." The piece is dedicated to Hugo Weisgall, himself a notable user of (Jewish) folk material.

A vocal version of "The Stream Flows" appears with its text as the third of *Three Chinese Love Songs* for voice, viola, and piano. There are differences in key, decoration, and of course musical activity between the two versions, but the nostalgic mood remains. The first two songs, with the second being the liveliest of the set, are elaborately and subtly ornamented for the voice.

These songs were written to be part of Tanglewood's celebration of Leonard Bernstein's 70th birthday, and were first performed there on August 26, 1988 by soprano Lisa Saffer, violist Burton Fine, and pianist Yehudi Wyner.

My Song, a four-movement piano suite, was written in 1988 for Peter Serkin; it is characterized by an evenhanded balance between Eastern and Western influences. "It was the first piece in which I was trying to search for tonality," Sheng says, in the sense of "the working out of harmony." Having referred to China as his "motherland" and the United States as his present "fatherland," the composer goes on to explain this suite's worked-out harmony as a consideration of both the "mother-tone" of Chinese music and the "fathertone," his term for Western music. The first movement is a highly ornamented dancelike prelude, mainly in D flat. The second is a swirling fantasy on a folk tune; the third, a slightly less frenetic but gradually thornier harmonic treatment of an original melody by Sheng. The slow finale, marked "Nostalgia," is very quiet, very spare, and Sheng—still in touch with innocence and experience—became homesick as he was writing it. —*Leighton Kerner*

Leighton Kerner is the classical music critic for The Village Voice.

Three Chinese Love Songs

I. Blue Flower

Jing Xiarn Xiarn (Na Ge) Lan Xiarn Xiarn,
Lan (Ge) Ying Ying (Di) Tsai,
Seng Ha Yi Ge Lan Hua Hua,
Si Si Di Gnai Si Rarn.

•••

Golden thread and blue thread,
They are so pretty,
Just like the beautiful girl,
Her name is Blue Flower.

II. At The Hillside Where Horses are Running

Pao Ma (Liu Liu Di) San Sang,
Yi Duo (Liu Liu Di) Yun (Yo)
Duan Duan (Liu Liu Di) Zao Zai
Kang-Ding (Liu Liu Di) Tseng (Yo).

Li Jia (Liu Liu Di) Dai Jie
Ren Tsai (Liu Liu Di) Hao (Yo);
Zang Jia (Liu Liu Di) Dai Guo
Kan Sang (Liu Liu Di) Ta (Yo).

•••

At the hillside where horses are running,
Right above it is the beautiful cloud
Which shines over
The city of Kang-Ding.

So pretty is
The girl from Lee's family;
So much in love with her is
The boy from Zang's family.

III. The Stream Flows

(Ei) Yue Liang Chu Lai Liang Wang Wang;
Xiang Qi Wo Di A Ge Zai Sheng Shan,
Ge Xiang Yue Liang Tian Shang Zou,
Shan Xia Xiao He Tang Shui Qing Yo Yo.

(Ei) Yue Liang Chu Lai Zhao Ban Po,
Wang Jian Yue Liang Xiang Qi Wo Di A Ge.
Yi Zheng Qing Feng Chui Shang Po,
Ge A, Ni Ke Ting Jian A Mei Jiao A Ge?

•••

The rising moon shines brightly;
It reminds me of my love in the mountains.
Like the moon, you walk in the sky,
As the crystal stream flows down the mountain.

The rising moon shines brightly,
It reminds me of my love in the mountains.
A clear breeze blows up the hill,
My love, do you hear me calling you?

—Transliteration and translation by Bright Sheng

LUCIA LIN made her debut as soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the age of eleven. Since then she has appeared with numerous orchestras including the Saint Louis Symphony, the Boston Pops, and the Festivalorchester in Graz, Austria. A prizewinner in the 1990 International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, Lin has won many awards, including the Music Teacher's National Association Competition. She appears frequently in solo recitals, and as a chamber musician has performed with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players and at the Taos Festival. For three seasons, Lin served as assistant concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

PAUL NEUBAUER has appeared as soloist with many major orchestras, including the New York and Los Angeles Philharmonics, the Bavarian State Radio Orchestra, the English Chamber Orchestra, and the Saint Louis and San Francisco Symphonies. As a chamber musician he has performed with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Neubauer has received numerous prizes, including the Avery Fisher Career Grant. The youngest principal string player in the New York Philharmonic's history, he served as principal violist from 1984 to 1989. Neubauer has recorded for RCA Red Seal, Sony Classical, Delos, Arabesque, and Omega.

THE NEW YORK CHAMBER SYMPHONY is the resident orchestra of the 92nd Street Y, New York City—famed cultural center. Founded in 1976 by Gerard Schwarz, the 46-member ensemble is comprised of leading New York area musicians. Many of its members maintain active solo and chamber music careers in addition to teaching at institutions such as The Juilliard School, Yale University, and the Curtis Institute. The NYCS has established a reputation for its commitment to the 20th century repertoire, including the works of the American symphonists Howard Hanson, David Diamond, and Walter Piston. The NYCS has recorded for Delos, EMI/Angel, and Nonesuch.

GERARD SCHWARZ is one of America's premier conductors, with home bases on both coasts. In addition to his position as music director of the NYCS, he is also the music director of New York City's Mostly Mozart Festival. In New Jersey he has served as principal conductor of the Waterloo Festival since 1976. On the West Coast, Schwarz is the music director of the Seattle Symphony and was music director of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra for eight years. He has made numerous recordings with the NYCS and has also recorded for Pro-Arte, Atlantic, and RCA Red Seal.

LISA SAFFER is known for her performances of both the standard repertoire and contemporary works. In concert, she has appeared with the London Sinfonietta, the Resident Orkest at the Concertgebouw, the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, the Cleveland and Florida Orchestras, the Baltimore, Dallas, Richmond (Virginia), and Utah Symphonies, and the Rochester Philharmonic. In opera, Saffer has recently performed leading roles with the Netherlands Opera and the New York City Opera. She has recorded a solo album, *Arias for Cuzzoni*, and the Handel works *Resurrezione* and *Agrippina*, all conducted by Nicholas McGegan for Harmonia Mundi.

PETER SERKIN is one of today's most esteemed pianists. Equally acclaimed for his frequent solo appearances with numerous major symphony orchestras, as a recitalist, chamber musician and recording artist, Serkin performs a wide range of repertoire from baroque to contemporary. In 1983 he became the first pianist to receive the Premio Internazionale Accademia Musicale Chigiana in recognition of outstanding artistic achievement. Serkin can be heard performing solo works by Stravinsky, Wolpe, and Lieberson on New World Records 80344-2. He has also recorded for Pro Arte, Deutsche Grammophon, RCA, Columbia, and Vanguard.

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All compositions © Bright Sheng

H'un recorded at the Manhattan Center on November 20, 1991. *My Song*, *Three Chinese Love Songs*, and *The Stream Flows* recorded at the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Auditorium, New York City, on September 17, 1990, April 4, and May 23, 1991 respectively.

1. *H'un* (Lacerations): In Memoriam 1966-1976 (21:24)
The New York Chamber Symphony
Gerard Schwarz, conductor

The Stream Flows
2. I = 54 (5:06)
3. II = 104-108 (4:40)
Lucia Lin, violin

Three Chinese Love Songs
4. Blue Flower (1:35)
5. At the Hillside Where Horses Are Running (1:33)
6. The Stream Flows (3:40)
Lisa Saffer, soprano
Paul Neubauer, viola
Bright Sheng, piano

My Song
7. I = 54 (2:50)
8. II = 72 (2:03)
9. III = 112-116 (2:14)
10. IV = 66 ("Nostalgia") (2:40)
Peter Serkin, piano

Lisa Saffer appears courtesy of Harmonia Mundi.
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