

Daniel Asia/Symphonies Nos. 2 and 3
New World Records 80447-2

American composers coming of age between about 1950 and 1980 could, for the first time in their nation's history, be optimistic about eating three square meals a day for the rest of their lives. No longer need freelancing be the unsteady source of their incomes: Conservatories and colleges across the country were hiring composers to train students in the expanding techniques and materials of contemporary music. This gave the composers a secure base from which they themselves could explore those new techniques as deeply as they wished.

So composers in the academy were free to grapple with the challenges of serialism, indeterminacy, and other innovations. Unfortunately, the resulting abstract and highly complex scores were largely resisted by the general public, which could hardly keep up with the rapid innovations in this and seemingly every other artistic and technical field. By the 1980s many academy-based musicians began to seek a rapprochement with the public. And so some of those composers who came of age in the Fifties, Sixties, or Seventies have recently been translating their rich but often inscrutable academic vocabulary into the vernacular. Some, though, have been seeking a musical *lingua franca* all along.

Daniel Asia has held a stylistic middle ground, from his earliest works in the mid-1970s. Although Asia has held faculty positions since his late twenties, the academic label does not stick to him. He has not made a conscious effort to be hip--by the standards on either side of academe's ivy-clad wall.

Born in Seattle in 1953, Asia attended the Yale School of Music, studying composition and conducting with Jacob Druckman, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Arthur Weisberg. After receiving his Master of Music degree in 1977, Asia became the founder, co-music director and conductor of the New York contemporary chamber ensemble Musical Elements. In 1981 he joined the faculty of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, where he remained until 1986. Following two years as visiting lecturer at London's City University, Asia assumed his current position as associate professor of composition and head of the composition department of the University of Arizona in Tucson.

As a working composer, Daniel Asia has received a number of highly competitive grants and fellowships and high-visibility commissions. A selective list of the latter includes the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; Phoenix Symphony/Meet the Composer, Inc.; the American Composers Orchestra, both alone and in conjunction with the Seattle Symphony; the Koussevitsky Music Foundation for the chamber ensemble Domus; the Fromm Music Foundation; the D'Addario Music Foundation for guitarist Benjamin Verdery; and bass-baritone John Shirley-Quirk and oboist Sara Watkins. Asia has to his credit a United Kingdom Fulbright Arts Award fellowship, a Guggenheim fellowship, the Fulbright/DAAD for study in Germany (where he studied with Isang Yun), four NEA composer's grants, an M. B. Rockefeller Grant, McDowell Colony and Tanglewood (where he studied with Gunther Schuller) fellowships, and ASCAP and BMI prizes. In 1991, he was named composer in residence with the Phoenix Symphony under the auspices of the Meet the Composer Orchestra Residencies Program. That relationship will continue even though the formal two-year residency has ended. 2

None of this gives any indication of what sort of music Asia writes. His style has changed gradually but significantly over the course of some forty works, many of them large-scale. But throughout, Asia has maintained his own voice.

From his earliest works in the 1970s--pieces written "on spec" mainly for piano, electronic tape, or small chamber ensemble--Asia has synthesized the energy and rhythms of American popular music and jazz with the structures and procedures of avant-garde art music. Initially, it was almost as if Miles Davis were jamming with Anton Webern, and Webern managed to take control of the session. In pieces like the 1975 String Quartet No. 1 and the 1978 *Sand II* for mezzo-soprano and small ensemble, Asia's writing is tense, dense, and concentrated, often requiring spatial notation and extended performance techniques.

As he gained conducting experience working with Musical Elements, and as commissions started coming in from performers during the late 1970s, Asia began to realize that flamboyant technical difficulties could reduce performers' expressive potential. This is because so much rehearsal time is devoted to getting the notes, rhythms, and balances right that there's little time to work on expressive matters. So after a few last virtuosic flourishes in the early 1980s (including the 1981 *Rivalries* for chamber orchestra and the original 1982 version of *Ossabaw Island Dream* for mezzo-soprano and chamber orchestra), Asia sought greater clarity in his musical language. This gradual change not only allowed performers greater interpretive leeway than before, but also provided audiences easier access to the scores on first hearing. Such works as the 1983 *Marimba Music* and the uncompromising 1987 *Scherzo Sonata* for piano still require exceptionally high performance standards, but they also allow for poetry and nuance.

Asia's structures were becoming better-defined, less free-form; to achieve this, he slowed the onslaught of musical information, and the result seemed less note-spangled and short-breathed. In 1989, a piano quartet and *Two Sacred Songs* for guitar, soprano, flute, and cello clearly demonstrated that Asia's inspiration was coming less from the severe midcentury European avant-garde and more from American composers--senior figures such as Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, and contemporaries including the late Stephen Albert.

All the while, certain elements of Asia's style have remained consistent. There's a preference for whole-tone sonorities, which can swing easily from ambiguous atonality to decisive diatonicism. Asia describes all his music as "quasi-tonal," at least in the sense that each composition tends to work back around to the harmonic region in which it began. There's also an impressionistic transparency of scoring; even in passages of great harmonic density, Asia's earliest chamber scores are marked by intricate timbral interplay. Finally, there's the rhythmic element: Asia's meters have become less complex, but they have retained a certain zeal and bravado.

Asia became a symphonist on commission. He wrote his first in 1987 for the Seattle Symphony Orchestra (which gave its premier in 1990) and the American Composers Orchestra. The symphony was derived from five of the seven movements of the *Scherzo Sonata*.

Symphony No. 2 followed in 1988-90. It, too, was fashioned partly from an earlier piece, the 1988 *Celebration* for baritone, chorus, brass quintet, and organ, written for a Massachusetts synagogue. The second symphony was commissioned by the Syde family of Tucson in memory of Saul Syde's contributions to the local Jewish community,

and received its premier by the Tucson Symphony Orchestra under Robert Bernhardt on April 30-May 1, 1992. The work carries a double subtitle: 3 "Celebration Symphony" and "In Memoriam Leonard Bernstein." Aside from three earlier pieces for cantorial use, this is Asia's most explicit musical expression of his deeply felt sense of Judaism. Inspired by the texts rather than the music of Jewish liturgy, the symphony's Jewishness derives more from mood than from reference to specific modes or cantorial melodies.

In the first movement, *Ma Tovv* ("Your love is great; answer me with true deliverance"--a sort of warmup text occurring early in a Jewish prayer service), a peaceful, melismatic melody gently passes from one orchestral section to another. Each statement culminates in a brief climactic refrain for full orchestra. The reverent second movement, *Ashrenu* ("Therefore it is our duty to thank and praise you"), features a soaring cello solo over a choir-like orchestral accompaniment. The meter shifts from 2/4 to 3/4 from bar to bar, producing a somewhat hesitant, improvisatory effect. The third movement is *L'kha Adonai* ("Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the splendor"). It is in three sections, corresponding successively to the concepts of "greatness," "power," and "splendor," each building to a greater intensity than the last. Beneath the often chantlike music lie percussion ostinatos that may remind some listeners of John Adams; in any case, they anticipate a major characteristic of Asia's Third Symphony.

Symphony No. 2 continues with *Hine El Yeshuati* ("Behold, God is my deliverance; I am confident and unafraid"). This movement is quietly penitential, rising only briefly to more extroverted affirmation. It's a good example of Asia's characteristic mottlings of delicate tone colors. The final movement, *Halleluyah* ("Praise God in the Highest!") contains the symphony's fastest, even most boisterous, music. Here Asia revisits and reworks some of the rhythmic mottos and melodic threads found in the earlier movements. This grandly affirmative finale is unmistakably American in its bounding rhythmic vitality. And yet that feeling is tempered by the awareness, represented by the ghost of a Hasidic tune layered under Messiaen-like bird calls in the piano and flutes, that for the Jewish people unbridled affirmation is not possible in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

After fulfilling a commission for the American Composers Orchestra (*Black Light*, 1990), Asia next turned his attention simultaneously to two projects. One was a third symphony, to be written for the Phoenix Symphony under the Meet the Composer program. (The Phoenix Symphony has since requested and scheduled a fourth symphony from Asia.) The other project was a piece for the Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra--a large aggregation, judging from the quadruple wind scoring and lavish percussion in the result, 1991's *At the Far Edge*. This twelve-minute piece was derived from the same sketches Asia was intending for the new symphony. The latter work was completed in 1992 and first performed on May 6, 7, and 8 of that year by the Phoenix Symphony, conducted by James Sedares. As it turns out, the first forty-four bars of Symphony No. 3 are actually the Largo introduction to *At the Far Edge*. The bulk of *At the Far Edge*, given a new introduction, returns as the symphony's final movement. The earlier piece also contains much of the thematic and rhythmic material found in the symphony's first two movements. More than ever, Asia here adopts the broad, open accent of the most popular American art music--the somewhat jazzy rhythms of Bernstein, the soaring string

effects of Bernstein and Copland, the throbbing brass utterances over bass drum rolls of Adams.

Following the introduction, the first movement, marked *Maestoso*, presents two theme groups. The first, in Asia's words, is "a slow-moving melody in the brass and lower strings, with filigreed writing on top. A subsidiary thematic area is lighter and more delicate. With harp arpeggios in the background, the upper strings with flute and piccolo sing a tune, which is interrupted by hints of the first section." The two ideas then become layered so closely that they seem almost like a single subject. The second theme group is then expressed by the orchestra's wind section. The movement ends after foreshadowings of the second movement's main melody and a waltz-like fragment of the third movement.

Contrast comes with the ruminative, woodwind-oriented *Adagio*. This is initially gentle, reflective, nostalgic music, but when the strings briefly come to the fore they introduce some underlying tension. Later, trumpets and trombones abetted by percussion periodically attempt to reintroduce some strongly rhythmic material from the first movement. They finally succeed in producing a brief midpoint climax, after which the mood returns to that of the beginning, fading into an unsettled conclusion.

The big, ebullient *Allegro* follows, here giving the impression of summing up and reordering what has come before, rather than serving as its source. Indeed, it sums up and reorders much that has come before in the composer's career. Here is Asia's characteristically delicate, sparkling scoring in the percussion-and-wind interludes, surrounded by outbursts of sheer exuberance. But now all this speeds through what Asia calls "various tonal plateaus." This means that any listener brought up on the barely-tethered tonalities of Wagner or Debussy should feel comfortable enough to surrender to this music's unfettered, physical joy. ----James Reel

James Reel is the classical music critic for *The Arizona Daily Star*, a columnist for *Fanfare*, and the author of *The Timid Soul's Guide to Classical Music*.

Discography

Miles Mix. Shtay. (Electronic tape.) *Rivalries*. Oberlin Contemporary Ensemble, Daniel Asia conducting. *Sand II*. Mary Feinsinger, mezzo-soprano; *Reconnaissance*, Daniel Asia conducting. String Quartet No. 1. Rymour Quartet. Albany Troy 106. *Plum/Dream Sequence II*. Robert Dick, flutes. Attacca BABEL 9158-1.

The Phoenix Symphony began its first season in 1947 with four concerts and seventy-seven musicians under the baton of Principal Conductor John Barnett. The concert series grew to six under his successor Robert Lawrence. In 1978 Theo Alcantara was named Principal Conductor and Music Director and the Orchestra achieved major status under his direction. In 1989 after Maestro Alcantara's resignation, James Sedares was named Principal Conductor. The Phoenix Symphony's debut recording was an all-Copland program, followed by a recording of music by Bernard Herrmann and William Schuman. This is their first recording for New World Records.

James Sedares is Music Director and Principal Conductor of The Phoenix Symphony. He studied in St. Louis where his mentors included conductor Jerzy Semkow and the late

Walter Susskind. From there Sedares was appointed Associate Conductor and then Musical Advisor of the San Antonio Symphony. In 1986 Maestro Sedares joined The Phoenix Symphony as Resident Conductor and became its Music Director in 1989. He has also been guest conductor with the symphony orchestras of St. Louis, Denver, Louisville, and internationally, London, New Zealand, Ljubljana (Slovenia), and Mexico.

Produced and engineered by Michael Fine

Technical assistance: Andy R. Seagle

Symphony #2 recorded May 8 and 9, 1993 and Symphony #3 recorded May 9, 1993 in Symphony Hall, Phoenix, AZ.

Cover art: c 1992 Emily Wilson. The Last Believer. Wood, paint, aluminum, and prismacolor, 31" x 34" x 2". Courtesy: Still-Zinsel Contemporary, New Orleans.

Cover design: Bob Defrin

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This project was supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency that supports the visual, literary, and performing arts to benefit all Americans.

MEET THE COMPOSER

The Meet The Composer Orchestra Residency Program, created by John Duffy, Director and President of Meet The Composer, was initiated in 1982 to foster the creation and performance of orchestral music by American composers. Through the program, composers are placed in residence with major symphony orchestras nationwide. Resident composers write a major work to be premiered and recorded by the host orchestra, organize concerts of new music, review scores, and work with the music director in the programming of contemporary music. The Orchestra Residency Program is made possible with major grants from: The Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Hewlett Foundation, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, the Eleanor Naylor Dana Charitable Trust, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The Phoenix Symphony gratefully acknowledges additional underwriting of this recording by the Solheim Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and Francis Goelet.

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Symphony No. 3 (1991) (40:37)

(publ. by Theodore Presser Co.)

1 Maestoso (13:41)

2 Adagio (15:48)

3 Allegro (11:04)

Symphony No. 2 "Celebration Symphony" (1990)

(publ. by Theodore Presser Co.)

4 Ma Tovv (5:14)
5 Ashrenu (2:50)
6 L'kha Adonai (5:16)
7 Hine El Yeshuati (4:53)
8 Halleluyah (7:32)

James Sedares and Michael Fine appear courtesy of KOCH International Classics.

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