

The work of Cambodian-American composer Chinary Ung represents one of the more successful attempts to accomplish a musical integration of East and West, resulting in a style that is uniquely his own. To a large extent this has been his goal from the beginning of his career. In general, Ung's music is resplendent with lush romantic harmonies, rhythmic complexities, and lyrical melodic passages, an amalgamation that, together with his own idiosyncratic compositional technique, has evolved over the course of time. He has developed an individual language out of his own specific "images," which are reflections of certain life episodes, natural objects, and personal philosophy. One finds in Ung's music a unique musical "ambiance" and "color," a heightened sensitivity to "the characteristics of tones and phrases and the spiritual implications of how it affects listeners." He has remarked, "If East is yellow and West is blue, then my music is green." Except for a self-imposed hiatus (1974–1985) during which time he was preoccupied with catastrophic events in Cambodia, Ung has been composing consistently since 1970 and for a brief period was fitting into the prevailing post-Webern mode of composition. During that break he began an exhaustive study of the music of his native land and the integration of Asian and Western ideas. From 1985 on he has been seeking to refine his authentic creative voice. The four pieces on this recording, all written during the 1990s, represent Ung's postmodern style. They tend to be more eclectic and esoteric than his previous compositions, often with interlocking subject matter and musical similarities.

Spiral VI is the sixth work in succession that follows a metaphorical spiral through a multiple series of manipulations if the two versions of *Grand Spiral* (for symphonic band and later for orchestra) are counted as two separate pieces. It is scored for violin, clarinet, cello, and piano, and was commissioned by Harold Newman for the Aeolian Chamber Players in 1992. It had its world premiere that same year by this group in Strasbourg, Germany. Each of Ung's spiral pieces is similar in that they all have individual notes or phrases that are constantly being reworked, but each is unique and, according to where they fall in the color spectrum (blue-yellow), display different shades of "green." Both Asian and Western elements are readily discernible in *Spiral VI*, probably one of Ung's best examples of achieving a true integration of these ideas. *Spiral VI* begins with a rapid series of intervals outlining a diminished seventh, establishing a firm ground on C-sharp. This pattern is heard once more toward the end with a softer perfect fifth interval and a cadence on G. From the initial C-sharp the piece moves forward through a progression of pitches, enunciated by the piano, that function as harmonic spheres. It is no accident that this progression outlines a diminished fifth, an interval used repeatedly in *Spiral VI*. A soulful violin solo that briefly recalls pre-atonal Schoenberg (*Verklärte Nacht* comes to mind) winds sinuously over a veiled heterophonic texture and is eventually picked up by both the clarinet and cello. There are just enough exotic sonorities to add an interesting contrast to the traditional Western notation. Most of these effects occur in the violin and piano. For example, the piano player is directed to "scrape" the ground string on several occasions. Playing near or over the bridge, occasional note bending, and the use of high harmonic glissandos are part of this exotic mix. *Spiral VI* is constantly changing, expanding, or contracting, and has been described as having a "floating" feeling despite its precise rhythmic notation.

Seven Mirrors is a challenging solo piano work that is comprised of seven short virtuosic movements, each of a different character, but all linked either musically or thematically. Written in 1997, it was commissioned by the Meet the Composer Commissioning Program, and was premiered by Kathleen Supové in San Diego in September of 1997. Familiar piano gestures reflect postmodern characteristics that prevailed in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and each movement is assigned a fanciful title that "describes" the nature of the music. The work may be classified as "programmatic," but only in the sense that the music for each movement fits the given title. There is no "program" as such. The rhythmic notation of *Seven Mirrors* is basically Western. Asian influences include coloristic effects and extremes in register and timing, as well as mystical titles based on the works of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore and the thirteenth-century mystic Jelaluddin Rumi. Ung had been living with this poetry for a number of years before writing *Seven Mirrors* and the titles for several movements were taken directly from the poems involved. The titles for movements three and five, "*Roar, lion of the heart. . .*," and "*. . . space between the fish and the moon,*" are from Rumi's *The Essential Rumi*. Movement four, "*laughter passes over the earth,*" quotes from *Song Offerings* by Tagore.

Ung continued the relationship between the poetry of Rumi and Tagore and his music in the massive 1998 tone poem, *Rising Light*. In *Seven Mirrors* Ung is at his best in exploiting the limits and possibilities of a single instrument—the piano. An earlier work, *Khse Buon* (1980), accomplished a similar feat with the solo cello. The central movement, the fourth, was the first to be written. Starting a composition somewhere other than at the beginning is typical of Ung, who frequently begins a piece in the "middle" and works forward or backward in a circular motion. In keeping with the title, "*laughter passes over the earth,*" the music is animated and ripples with dancing piano figures. A plaintive pentatonic melody, played *cantabile*, is heard midway through the first movement, providing a contrast to the grand piano gestures. Another pentatonic melody, marked *Largo*, is introduced at the close of movement three and is repeated at the end of movement seven. The music of *Seven Mirrors* is contemplative and creates the illusion of time standing still. Short phrases are separated by timed fermatas

and rests that occur after energetic bursts of sound that range in dynamics from *piano* to *sforzando*. Barlines occur only at the end of movement seven before the final *Largo* section already mentioned. In this twelve-measure section there are five different meter signatures. Even though *Seven Mirrors* is not specifically a “spiral” work, it nevertheless contains the spiral concept of layers of sound recurring in multiple repetitions.

Arguably Ung’s most difficult work and certainly one of the most radical is the 1996 composition, ***Grand Alap***, for one amplified cello player and one percussionist. Commissioned by Maya Beiser and Steven Schick for the Meet the Composer/Reader’s Digest program, it had its world premiere on November 6, 1996, in Sacramento at the Festival of New American Music by the commissioning performers. Ung directed that the cellist should be female and the percussionist male, and that each would have the added responsibility of singing as well as playing. (Note: The performers in this recording are both males.) The term *alap* represents the opening section of an Indian raga, based primarily on the elaboration of improvisational materials that sets the pattern for what will follow. *Grand Alap* is an excellent example of the *sakshar* type of *alap*, or one that has words. Ung had incorporated similar words in *Spiral II*, a 1989 trio for mezzo-soprano, tuba, and piano. In that work he also used nonsensical words (phonemes), and syllables from the Pali/Sanskrit language that evoked surrounding spirits for permission to proceed with the work. The practice of using words and syllables to communicate with departed spirits is an established tradition in much of the music of Southeast Asia. (Ung’s 1999 work for a cappella chorus, *Radiant Samadhi*, also uses texts from the Khmer and Pali languages.) *Grand Alap*’s subtitle, “A Window in the Sky,” is inspired by a verse from Tagore’s *Song Offerings*. (It is also the title of the first movement of *Seven Mirrors*.) According to program notes by Susan Ung, it “refers to the recent discovery of hundreds of newly found galaxies, and perhaps relates to the expository quality of the work and its expansiveness.” (This work was written six years after the Hubble telescope was placed in orbit, undoubtedly the source of much of Ung’s inspiration.) The formation of *Grand Alap* is in line with Ung’s chief method of composing, the exploitation of mental images that precede every work. In this case it is the image of a necklace that contains many beads, each a separate and distinct entity, but all strung together in a circular shape. Some of these individual “gems” or fragments represent concepts or emotional states, and others represent specific individuals. *Grand Alap* has a fascinating array of sonic effects, both in the instrumental and vocal parts. More than thirteen different percussion instruments are in constant motion under the amplified cello passages, providing continuity and unity to the work. As noted, the players are required to “sing” while they play, sometimes alone and at other times together. These instructions are extremely hard to execute and scores are needed for performance.

The work begins with a series of thrown-bow perfect-fifth intervals that are repeated at the beginning and midway through the coda. An unusual special effect is the low guttural slide on the syllable “ah” by the percussion player, who “inhales” slowly while suspending the syllable for several seconds. By contrast, there are high falsetto effects sung by the cello player. Despite many unusual sounds, *Grand Alap* is a remarkably melodic piece. Lyrical pentatonic modes, found mostly in the cello part, are passed along to the pitched percussion instruments and occasionally to voices. Of special note is Ung’s interpretation of various individual or emotional states. At one point the performers are “entering a trance,” and for a while the percussion player is asked to play as though transported to an unearthly realm. At the segment marked “angel voice” there are indeed “angelic” sounds, mostly in the voice and marimba. At the “departure of the angel,” toward the end, there is an obvious sense of finality. One other device in *Grand Alap* that is worth mentioning is the concept of “broken line” that Ung has used to some degree in all of his works, heard most clearly in the 1970 composition, *Tall Wind*. In this concept the flow of speech is interrupted either by rests or by suspension of the phrase. Even though the continuity is assured by the instrumental background, the vocal fragments are strung out in a manner that emphasizes a broken line.

In 1990, one year after Ung won the prestigious Grawemeyer award for his orchestral composition *Inner Voices* (written in 1986), he completed his fourth spiral work, ***Grand Spiral***, for symphonic band. A year later, in 1991, he produced an orchestral version, subtitled, “Desert Flowers Bloom.” The symphonic band version, premiered in Phoenix in the spring of 1991, was hailed as going beyond *Inner Voices* in terms of the development of its musical fragments. Composing a work of this magnitude was something of a risk for Ung, especially since this was only his second attempt at writing for multiple instruments. Furthermore, the demand for creditable symphonic band music is limited and bands worthy of playing it are few and far between. Other composers (notably Karel Husa) have made similar attempts and have gone on to create orchestral versions. It might have seemed that adapting band instruments to the orchestra would be a formidable task, particularly in view of the occasional jazz idioms—at times Gershwin-like—with mellow solo passages assigned to the saxophones. But Ung proved to be equal to the task.

Grand Spiral (“Desert Flowers Bloom”) had its world premiere at the Asian Music Festival by the Sendai Philharmonic Orchestra (Japan) in 1992. The orchestral score is Western (with woodwind augmentation) with an enormous contingent

of percussion instruments, most of which are now used extensively in Western orchestras, but which provided Ung ample resources for successfully combining East and West. Whereas fragments of *Inner Voices*, based on the image of a multicolored, multifaceted quilt were pieced together in layered form, fragments of *Grand Spiral* are more carefully worked out from the standpoint of how they affect the harmonic structure of the work. In the words of the composer, the source of inspiration for *Grand Spiral* was “the image of a translucent piece of sculpture that is constantly moving and rotating in the desert while reflecting sunlight as perhaps a prism would.” He has described the compositional process of both *Inner Voices* and *Grand Spiral* as “superimposed layering.” The post-impressionist aspect of *Grand Spiral* should come as no surprise since Debussy was one of Ung’s early heroes of composition. And how does it spiral? It flows over different tonal centers, where melodies and harmonies cascade continually over each other, ever changing shapes and colors, ever being reinvented. This work shows Ung to be a consummate orchestrator, with an uncanny sense of how to combine instrumental colors in order to produce his desired result.

Grand Spiral is introduced by a group of fifths announced by woodwinds with percussion reinforcement over an extended E-flat pedal. The first of many pentatonic melodies appears in the woodwind section and is soon picked up by various other instruments, principally the viola and horns. The E-flat tonality continues through much of the work, with melodies and fragments of melodies being spiraled in a myriad of ways. The listener can’t help but identify several of Ung’s characteristic motives, heard frequently, that serve as unifying threads running throughout the length of the piece. Sliding trombones, atmospheric trumpets, and blue notes add a hint of jazz. In what may be described as a coda, there is an abrupt change of key center to C-sharp in a quiet, introspective ending with “bell-like” piano figures prominently displayed in alternation with quiet woodwind passages. The piece characteristically fades away into oblivion. Aside from the *Triple Concerto*, *Antiphonal Spirals*, and *Rising Light*, which amassed multiple instrumental, vocal, and virtuoso piano forces, Ung has not ventured into symphonic-style compositions since writing *Grand Spiral*. This doesn’t reflect on his ability to create large works; it speaks volumes about his philosophy, “to explore my inner rhythms and feelings before I say (something) directly.” *Grand Spiral* was dedicated by Ung to the Cambodian people. —John Kays

John Kays holds a M. Music in composition and a Ph.D. in musicology. He is currently a part-time instructor at the University of Louisville.

Chinary Ung, composer and musician, was born in Takeo, Cambodia, in 1942. When he came to the United States in 1964, he was the first Cambodian to study music at the Manhattan School of Music in New York City, where he received a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in clarinet. He later turned his studies toward composition and became a student of the Chinese-American composer Chou Wen-chung, who had been a student and trusted assistant of Edgard Varèse. Ung became the first composer to receive a doctoral degree with distinction from Columbia University (1974), and went on to teach composition at Northern Illinois University, Connecticut College, the University of Pennsylvania, and Arizona State University. From 1980–1985 he was the president of the Khmer Studies Institute in the United States. He is presently Professor of Composition at the University of California at San Diego, where he has been since 1995.

While he was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, Ung was commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra to write the tone poem *Inner Voices*, and in 1989 became the first American to win the coveted international Grawemeyer Award for this work. He has received many honors for his compositions, including those from The American Academy of Arts and Letters, the John F. Kennedy/Friedheim Award (First Prize), the Meet the Composer/Reader’s Digest Commissioning Program, The National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim, Koussevitsky, Ford, Rockefeller, and Barlow Foundations. He also received first prize in the Mayor of Sendai Award (Japan) for his music. Ung’s recent commissions include a chamber work for Da Capo Chamber Players, *Oracle*, which was premiered in November of 2004, as well as forthcoming works commissioned by Southwest Chamber Music, The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the San Diego Symphony.

For his work toward the preservation of traditional Cambodian music, Chinary Ung has received cultural preservation awards from numerous Cambodian-American communities. The Asian Cultural Council in New York City has supported several visits to Cambodia to promote Ung’s efforts to support and improve various educational programs there. He is currently an adviser for the new Killing Fields Memorial and the Cambodian-American Heritage Museum of Chicago, and he has recently participated as an international member of a committee appointed by the Royal Academy, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to play a major part in an unprecedented Cambodian-Thai Cultural Committee.

Ung has received performances of his work by the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Louisville, Pittsburgh, and National symphony orchestras, as well as the American Composers Orchestra and the symphonies of Tokyo, Sydney, and Basel,

Switzerland. His compositions have been recorded on the CRI, New World, Argo, and oodiscs labels, and he has also annotated a collection of traditional Cambodian music on the Folkways label. His work *Spiral* (for cello, piano, and percussion) is featured in *The Enjoyment of Music* (edited by Joseph Machlis and Kristine Forney, 8th edition, W.W. Norton & Co.), a popular teaching guide for music teachers and students across the country. His music is published exclusively by C.F. Peters Corporation.

The **La Jolla Symphony & Chorus** is a nonprofit musical performing group dedicated to inspiring San Diego with the joy of music. The 110-person orchestra and 130-person chorus perform groundbreaking orchestral and choral music along with traditional favorites from the classical repertoire. They are also dedicated to bringing music education to the public schools of San Diego, providing emerging young musicians with financial support and professional performance experience and continuing to enhance the quality of their own players through master classes and workshops.

Harvey Sollberger is the conductor for SONOR, the faculty new-music ensemble of the University of California, San Diego, for SIRIUS, the graduate student new-music ensemble, and the La Jolla Symphony Orchestra. He co-founded (with Charles Wuorinen) the Group for Contemporary Music in New York and directed that ensemble for 27 years. Before joining the UCSD faculty, Sollberger taught at Columbia University, the Manhattan School of Music, and Indiana University.

Gloria Cheng, piano, is widely recognized as one of today's most persuasive interpreters of new music. Composers who have written for her include John Adams, Pierre Boulez, David Raksin, Terry Riley, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and Chinary Ung. She has appeared as a soloist and chamber artist at major festivals worldwide, including the Kuhmo Chamber Music Festival in Finland, Ojai, and Aspen. In her close association with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and its New Music Group, Cheng has collaborated with John Adams, Elliott Carter, György Ligeti, Witold Lutoslawski, and Esa-Pekka Salonen. Cheng's solo recordings include music by Messiaen on Koch, and works of Adams and Riley on Telarc.

Meade Crane has established himself as one of the most sought-after ensemble and contemporary pianists in the Northwest. His activities range from solo and contemporary ensemble performance to studio recording and teaching of piano and composition. An honors graduate of the Peabody Conservatory and the Interlochen Arts Academy, his principal teachers were Fernando Laires and Leon Fleisher. He has performed to audience and critical acclaim throughout the United States. He is currently pursuing the Doctor of Musical Arts degree at the University of Washington.

Ella Marie Gray, violin, began her career in New York as a member of the Kronos Quartet. Upon returning to her native Seattle she became a member of the Pacific Northwest Ballet Orchestra and the New Performance Group and frequently performs with the Seattle Symphony and the Seattle Opera. She is a founding member of the Rainier String Quartet, and has been a faculty member at Western Washington University, Seattle University, and Cornish College of the Arts. She has concertized throughout the country, and participated in the New Hampshire, Cabrillo, Tidewater, Olympic, and Waterloo Music Festivals.

Walter Gray, cello, a founding member of the Kronos Quartet, is currently a member of the Seattle Symphony and the Rainier String Quartet. Walter studied at the Curtis Institute of Music, and has been a member of the Artist Faculty at the University of North Texas, Western Washington University, and Cornish College of the Arts. He has concertized throughout the United States, been featured as a performer and producer on numerous recordings, and participated in the Waterloo, Mostly Mozart, Mount Gretna, Olympic, Cabrillo, and Tidewater Music Festivals.

Sean Osborn, clarinet, has traveled through the United States and Europe as a soloist and chamber musician, and traveled the world during his eleven years with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. He has also performed as principal clarinet with the New York Philharmonic, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Seattle Symphony, and the American Symphony Orchestra. He is a graduate of both the Interlochen Arts Academy and the Curtis Institute of Music, and has participated in the Marlboro, Aspen, Colorado, and Keystone festivals.

Rob Tucker attended the Peabody Institute and University of Southern California. As an orchestral percussionist, he can be heard frequently with the Seattle Symphony, the Seattle Opera and the Pacific Northwest Ballet Orchestras, as well as on numerous major motion picture soundtracks. He is a founding member of two chamber music groups, The Pacific Rims Percussion Quartet and Quake.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Grand Spiral (for symphonic band). Arizona State University Symphonic Band, Richard E. Strange conducting. CRI 710.
Inner Voices. American Composers Orchestra, Dennis Russell Davies conducting. Argo 444 560-2.
Khse Buon. Marc Johnson, cello. CRI 710.
Mohori. B. Martin, soprano; Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, A. Weisberg conducting. CRI 710.
Spiral II. J.M. Sellheim, soprano; R. Hamilton, piano; D. Perantoni, tuba; A. Weisberg conducting. CRI 710.
Spiral I. F. Bronstein, piano; E. Mohr, cello; M. Parola, percussion. New World Records 80412-2.
Tall Wind. J. Heller, soprano; K. Underwood, flute; R. Atherholt, oboe; D. Starobin, guitar; C. Finckel, cello; A. Weisberg conducting. CRI 710.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

DeRemer, Leigh Ann, editor. "Chinary Ung." *Contemporary Musicians* 46. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson-Gale Press, 2004, p. 212.
Kays, John. "Chinary Ung." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 2001, p. 71.
Kays, John. *The Music of Chinary Ung: A Synthesis of Asian Aesthetics and Western Technique*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Kentucky/University of Louisville, 2000.
Tsang, David. "Chinary Ung." *Contemporary Composers*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1992.

Producer: Chinary Ung

Engineer: Josef Kucera, Chief engineer, Warren Music Studios, University of California, San Diego

Digital mastering: Josef Kucera, Warren Music Studios, University of California, San Diego; Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC

Grand Alap, *Seven Mirrors*, and *Spiral VI* were recorded November 15, 2002, at Warren Music Studios, Department of Music, University of California, San Diego. *Grand Spiral* was recorded in concert June 9, 2002, in the Mandeville Auditorium, University of California, San Diego.

Cover photograph: Angkor Wat, Siem Reap, Cambodia. © Jon Ortner

Angkor Wat is the most important monument of the Khmer civilization and the largest temple in the world. Built by Suryavarman II, who unified Cambodia more than a thousand years ago, it is widely regarded as one of the most magnificent buildings ever created. It was constructed as a physical representation of the Hindu cosmos, honored Vishnu, and served as a royal mausoleum. Since the twelfth century, Angkor has been worshiped as a Buddhist shrine.

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

This recording was made possible by grants from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, the Office of Graduate Studies and Research and the Academic Senate of the University of California, San Diego, and the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

FOR NEW WORLD RECORDS:

Herman E. Krawitz, President; Paul M. Tai, Director of Artists and Repertory; Lisa Kahlden, Director of Information Technology; Virginia Hayward, Administrative Associate; Mojisola Oké, Bookkeeper; Dan Parratt, Production Associate.

RECORDED ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN MUSIC, INC., BOARD OF TRUSTEES:

Richard Aspinwall; Milton Babbitt; John Lee Carroll; Emanuel Gerard; David Hamilton; Rita Hauser; Herman E. Krawitz; Robert Marx; Arthur Moorhead; Elizabeth Ostrow; Cynthia Parker; Larry Polansky; Don Roberts; Marilyn Shapiro; Patrick Smith; Frank Stanton.

Francis Goelet (1926–1998), Chairman

© & © 2005 Recorded Anthology of American Music, Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in U.S.A.

CHINARY UNG (b. 1942)

SEVEN MIRRORS

80619-2

1. *Spiral VI* (1992) 10:03

Quake: Ella Marie Gray, violin; Walter Gray, cello; Sean Osborn, clarinet; Meade Crane, piano

Seven Mirrors (1997) 21:06

2. A Window in the Sky 2:38

3. Dotted Path 2:03

4. Roar, Lion of the Heart 3:13

5. Laughter Passes Over the Earth 3:27

6. Space Between the Fish and the Moon 3:12

7. Tattooing Space-Time 3:50

8. Flying Mirrors 2:43

Gloria Cheng, piano

9. *Grand Alap* (1996) 15:21

Walter Gray, cello; Rob Tucker, percussion

10. *Grand Spiral* ("*Desert Flowers Bloom*") (1991) 13:58

La Jolla Symphony, Harvey Sollberger, conductor

All compositions published by C.F. Peters Corp.

**NO PART OF THIS RECORDING MAY BE COPIED OR REPRODUCED WITHOUT WRITTEN
PERMISSION OF R.A.A.M., INC.**

**NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685
Website: www.newworldrecords.org
email: info@newworldrecords.org**

LINER NOTES © Recorded Anthology of American Music, Inc.