

Kui Dong is a composer of remarkable imagination and ability whose work combines the resources of Western-style modernism, which she learned in the United States, with some of the musical traditions and practices of her native China. Born and raised in Beijing, she was tutored in music as a child by her mother, a singer and voice teacher. She was nine years old when Mao Tse Tung died, his cultural revolution ended, and the ban on Western music in China was lifted. Being so young, she wasn't personally affected by the policies of Mao's regime, but she remembers the suffering of others, especially the suffering of her two older sisters.

At that time, musicians whose training in the Western tradition had been curtailed under Mao enrolled at schools such as the elite Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing to make up for the time they had lost. Several of them, like the composers Zhou Long, Chen Yi, and Tan Dun, moved to the United States in the mid-nineteen-eighties to continue their studies with the Chinese-American composer Chou Wen-Chung at Columbia University, and then to begin their careers here. A few years later, after receiving B.A. and M.A. degrees in composition and theory from the Beijing Conservatory, Kui Dong also chose to leave China.

In a spirit of adventure sanctioned by her mother, and because she was curious about the rest of the world, she came to the United States, thinking it might be more open and less bound to its own traditions than either China or Europe. She arrived here in 1991 on a full scholarship for graduate study at Stanford University, and immediately began to discover a wide range of new music that was unknown in China, where Stravinsky, Bartók, and Prokofiev still represented twentieth-century modernism. At first puzzled by much of what she was now hearing (and living in a country whose culture she still professes not to understand), Dong began in her own work to incorporate something of the manner and methods of traditional Chinese music, grafting them onto the advanced Western techniques she was encountering. That approach has continued to be important for her development as a composer, and it permeates the music on this recording.

The most recent piece included in this anthology of her work during the past ten years is *Earth, Water, Wood, Metal, Fire* (2001), commissioned and performed here by Sarah Cahill, a West Coast pianist well known for her interest in new music. It is a colorful and demanding suite of movements, evoking the five basic elements traditionally believed in China to make up the material world. The composer says that a collection of her keyboard improvisations, selected and reshaped, provided her with most of the music for this piece. She feels that the piano's resources have been so richly explored by now, that to achieve freshness and originality, the spontaneity of free improvisation can be a help in the compositional process.

The first thing we hear in "Earth" is a dense, bright, whirring sound of swiftly repeated chord clusters. This passage ends with a long, held high E followed by a nimbly cascading chain of ornamented sixteenth notes. Several textures combine and coalesce in this brief, brilliant toccata, whose clarity, playfulness, and elegant precision are hallmarks of Dong's musical personality. The next movement, "Water," is more contemplative, becalmed by the hollow-sounding open fifths that pervade the music like a gentle harmonic anchor. Interlocking patterns with intricately shifting rhythms create a dazzling shimmer of liquid sound high in the treble range, drawing itself out at length before subsiding into a final group of repeated notes.

The third movement, "Wood," alters the piano tone to produce a drum-like, thudding resonance by having pencils inserted between several of the piano strings. Using mostly the lower half of the keyboard, this piece is essentially rhythmic in its thrust. As for the next movement, "Metal," in order to suggest the timbres of Chinese plucked instruments such as the five-stringed *qin* and the *zheng* triangle beaters have been placed among the strings. They contribute some exotic effects, like the opening low roar and hiss, reminiscent of Henry Cowell's *The Banshee*. Also, fragmentary patterns of pentatonic melody create an additional flavor of Chinese music.

"Fire" is the longest, most difficult, and complex piece in the set, a sort of grand finale combining several textures from the previous movements and adding passages of syncopated, block chords played by both hands across a wide range of the keyboard. The composition ends cyclically, with chord clusters similar to those that began the first movement ("Earth"), and the same sustained high E for its final note. Asked if all the repeated patterns in this music showed the influence of minimalism, the composer replied that minimalism has been around for so long, you can't really escape its influence.

Several of Dong's compositions have gained significant acclaim, including *Pangu's Song* (1998), for alto flute/flute and percussion, a winner in the 2001 International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) competition. This piece is a showcase for the flute, comprising a group of freely evolving episodes using the alto flute's low G, B, and D notes as a recurring motive. Slides, flutter-tonguing, multiphonics, virtuosic ornamentation, and rapid changes of register enhance the solo part as it vividly interacts with some colorful percussion writing. The opening alto flute solo is answered by a variable ostinato for vibraphone, which recurs in several of the ensuing episodes as a kind of pentatonically-inflected refrain, often in dialogue with the flute, helping further to bind the sections together.

After the first couple of episodes, the soloist exchanges the alto for a soprano flute, projecting a brighter, more intense sound. Now the percussion takes on an active role, using temple blocks and tom-toms. For a while the flute becomes more percussive too, in some exciting give-and-take across the whole ensemble. A more lyrical interlude gives way to the final, most elaborate section, beginning with the flute in its lowest register, instructed to "growl" its flutter-tongued theme, supported by a soft bass drum roll. A rapidly ascending run leads the flute to the piece's highest point, in dialogue with the drums, marked *quasi cadenza*. A few sudden downward runs and a brief percussion solo are followed by a flurry of repeated notes and a final upward flourish for the flute.

The earliest work recorded here is *Blue Melody*, for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, composed in 1993. It is the clearest example of Dong's use of heterophony, a kind of unsynchronized imitation that can sound almost improvisatory. It is a characteristic of Chinese traditional music, where counterpoint is less exact and rigorous than is typical in the West. The work's title refers to an occasion during the composer's student days, when she and her classmates were collecting Chinese folk songs in the countryside. Some women wearing blue funeral attire were seated together, singing. One woman began a song, and the others joined in at random, singing approximately the same melody. The beauty of the sound, and the unplanned naturalness of the musical result were strongly appealing. This mood of quiet contemplation may have influenced the beginning of *Blue Melody*.

The piece starts slowly, with a two-note motive, F-sharp and then G-sharp, a step higher, played by the cello. Gradually each of the instruments is introduced playing this motive differently, with ornamental additions, or textural variants, or with a different rhythmic character. They enter seemingly at random, overlapping each other until, after a brief climax, the impulse that brought them together wanes and the instruments scatter and disperse. This opening episode is the kernel of the piece, from which comes a series of imaginative variations, sometimes expansive and melodic, sometimes terse and compressed, or dense with ornamental figuration.

About halfway through the music's eight-minute length is the richest and longest variation. The cello, joined by the violin and then the flute, engage in a long-breathed, independent, contrapuntal passage that is more like real polyphony than heterophony. Meanwhile the other instruments accompany them with tiny cells of figuration based on the opening stepwise motive. The cadence at the end of this episode is lengthy and elaborately drawn out. In sharp contrast to all of this linearity, there is one syncopated chordal episode that recurs periodically. The last of its appearances serves as the piece's climax, a tutti passage played *fff* that leads to the final variation, where a subdued recollection of the opening statement concludes the piece on a chain of repeated F-sharps in the flute and piano.

Kui Dong has also worked extensively with electronically generated sound, and *Crossing* (1999–2000), commissioned by New Radio Performance, Inc. and the Meet the Composer/USA Commissioning Award program, is a recent example. The first of its three movements opens "with a mass of slow, floating, and low frequency sine waves." This first movement has a hazily introductory feeling, setting the stage, as it were, for the rest of the piece. Since the composition was conceived as part of a project in which "diversity" was a guidepost, the composer semi-humorously staged a head-on culture clash in the second movement. After an opening section of percussion-based rhythms, a sudden onslaught of Western-style industrial noises and assorted mechanized-sounding chaos takes over, fading at the end into the sounds of an electric guitar and drum set. The last movement is reflective, evoking childhood memories, and the composer's own voice is heard singing a song she learned as a little girl.

Three Voices (1998) is thoroughly Chinese in its instrumentation. The *zheng* (a kind of zither), the *erhu* (a Chinese violin), and the *xiao* (a bamboo flute), make up the ensemble. Their individual timbres are so unlike each other that each one has been given a somewhat soloistic role in this unusual trio. The piece opens with an episode featuring the brightly agile *xiao*, accompanied by the other instruments. Then, the intensely expressive, almost vocal sound of the *erhu* dominates the texture. The third episode is a solo for the *zheng*, full of chords in different registers. Next, there is a slow, sustained duet

for xiao and erhu in their upper ranges, with a few long-held notes intertwining ornamentally amid heterophonic imitation.

After this comes a change of mood: a perky dance-like section at a faster pace, led by the zheng, which moves into a lively discourse for all three instruments. During a period of maximum activity the music reaches a climax marked *fff*, the zheng drops out, and the piece concludes with a quiet recollection of the earlier xiao/erhu duet. At the very end, the zheng returns briefly for the final cadence. Built around contrasts of color and texture, *Three Voices* is probably the simplest and most easily accessible piece on this recording.

If there is an overriding consistency to several of these pieces, it is not only in the contrast of East and West, as expressed by the Chinese instruments of *Three Voices*, and the style of dissonant, disjunct, Western modernism they are playing, or by the jarringly opposed sounds in the last two movements of *Crossing*. It is also in the nature of Dong's ensemble writing, as heard in the three chamber works. She shows great sensitivity to the way the instruments interact, presenting the listener with a fluid, eventful texture open to many possibilities. There is a richness of ornament and a spontaneity of detail in her music that are often surprising and delightful to hear.

She also has a way of bringing out idiomatic nuances of timbre and instrumental technique, especially for the flute and the trio of Chinese instruments, that seems to capture their essential natures. Indeed, her sense of color is one of her great strengths. Formally, her music often proceeds one gesture at a time. She presents an engaging musical opening and then finds a suitable response, which leads to another gesture and another response until a moment of change or contrast is called for, which may result in a climax or a passage of dissolution. This is a very intuitive approach to shaping a piece of music, which in Dong's case works very well. Her free use of heterophony helps the process along, and also her use of variation technique, as in *Blue Melody*. In general, the music moves forward in a chain of short, connected episodes, like the set of solos which begins *Three Voices*. Toward the end of a composition a climactic point is reached, followed by a brief final passage often recalling an earlier episode.

Several of these pieces have a tonal feeling derived from the mixture of diatonic and pentatonic scale patterns which the composer blends in various ways, as in "Fire," from *Earth, Water, Wood, Metal, Fire*. The other movements in this cycle are governed by a set of consistent intervallic relationships. "Earth" and "Water" are centered on fifths, "Wood" circles around a sixth (F-sharp and D), and "Metal" is built on a stack of thirds. This kind of intervallic unity lends a special and different harmonic flavor to each of the movements. Meanwhile in other pieces there seems to be a more eclectic quality to Dong's treatment of harmony. Her usual manner is not to have any ideological or systematic way of proceeding. Her consistencies of form and the improvisatory-sounding openness of her textures are matters of style rather than willful intention. She will use whatever means she can to solve the problem at hand in the best way she is able, pursuant to her esthetic judgment. As a result, these pieces possess an unmistakable individuality and directness. She also plans her compositions well in advance of starting to write any of the notes. This may account for the strong onward motion and secure sense of timing, as well as a certain temperamental detachment that runs through her music.

Like several of her fellow expatriates, Kui Dong has brought a fresh and welcome perspective to contemporary music in the United States. Ethnic and popular music from around the world have long been part of the national mix, but art music in this country has traditionally looked inward or toward Europe for new impulses and ideas. The influx of gifted, well-trained composers from other cultures is just beginning to change that perception, and the present recording may help to broaden it a little bit further.

—Jules Langert

Jules Langert is a composer and former teacher residing in Oakland, California, and currently employed as a concert reviewer by the online publication San Francisco Classical Voice.

Kui Dong was born in Beijing in 1966 and first studied harmony and composition with the composer Liu Zhuang. She went on to receive B.A. and M.A. degrees in theory and composition from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, where she studied with Wu Zuqiang and Du Mingxin. In 1991 she moved to the United States. In 1997, she received her doctoral degree in composition from Stanford University, where her teachers included Leland Smith in composition and John Chowning and Chris Chafe in computer music. Since 2003, she has been an Associate Professor of Music at Dartmouth College.

Kui Dong's compositions span diverse genres and styles and include ballet, orchestral and chamber works, choral music, electro-acoustic music, film scores, and multi-media art. While at the Central Conservatory in Beijing, she studied Western classical and early-twentieth-century music, and Chinese classical and folk music, and produced a number of chamber and orchestral compositions as well as music for television commercials and film soundtracks.

Dong has received numerous honors, including the ALEA III 1994 International Composition Prize (*Blue Melody*), First Prizes at Beijing's National Collegiate Art Song, National Dance and Music, and First Piano Work (Third Prize, no first prize given) competitions, and awards from ASCAP, ISCM, Italy's International Music Competitions of the Val Tidone, the Djerassi Foundation, Bellagio (Rockefeller Foundation), the Asia-Pacific National Fund, and Ars Electronica. She has been commissioned by the Central Ballet Group of China, Bay Area pianist Sarah Cahill, the Core Ensemble, Piedmont Choir, New Radio Performance, Inc., the Dale Warland Singers/Jerome Foundation, The Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, and the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress, and has also received a Meet the Composer/USA Commissioning Award. Her work has received performances by the Symphony Orchestra of the Central Ballet of China, the Windsor Symphony Orchestra, Symphony Orchestra of the Musical Theatre-Studio, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the New York New Music Ensemble, Composers, Inc., ALEA III, Music from China and the Beijing Dance Institute, Earplay New Music Ensemble, Volti, Chamber Ensemble of ISCM, the Core Ensemble, l'ensemble Artedie, Piedmont Choir, Melody of China, Citywinds, soloists of Orchestre National de France, the Pinkas-Hirsch Piano Duo and by pianist Sarah Cahill. Dong's work has also been presented in such notable music festivals as Other Minds, France's Bourges International Festival of Electronic Music and the Paris China Year Music Festival, Spoleto USA, Beijing International Chamber Music Week, June in Buffalo, the Pacific Rim and American New Music Festivals, Helsinki's Soundbox 2.0 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Edinburgh's "Soundings . . ." and others in Finland, China, Argentina, Canada, Germany, Australia, and the United States. She occasionally performs free improvisation with Christian Wolff, Larry Polansky, and other musicians.

Sarah Cahill, piano, specializes in commissioning and premiering new works as well as delving into the American historical avant-garde. Compositions dedicated to her include John Adams's *China Gates*, Pauline Oliveros's *Quintuplets Play Pen*, and Evan Ziporyn's *Pondok*, and she has premiered pieces by Lou Harrison, Terry Riley, Ingram Marshall, Julia Wolfe, Ursula Mamlok, George Lewis, Leo Ornstein, and many others. Cahill's albums of works by Ravel, Henry Cowell, and Ruth Crawford and Johanna Beyer are on the New Albion label, for which she will also record music by Leo Ornstein, Evan Ziporyn, and Ingram Marshall. She has also recorded George Lewis's *Endless Shout* for the Tzadik label, Ursula Mamlok's *Three Bagatelles* on CRI, and works by Larry Polansky and Michael Byron for Artifact and Cold Blue, respectively.

The **San Francisco Contemporary Music Players (SFCMP)**, now under the musical leadership of David Milnes, is one of the leading groups dedicated to the performance of music written by today's composers. Known for programming that is international in scope and stylistically diverse, the ensemble has performed more than a thousand pieces, including more than one hundred sixty-five U.S. and world premieres. It has commissioned more than sixty new pieces from such well-known composers as John Adams, John Cage, Chen Yi, James Newton, and Julia Wolfe. The group is an eight-time winner of the national ASCAP/Chamber Music America Award for Adventurous Programming of Contemporary Music. In addition to its subscription series at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, SFCMP has toured widely throughout California with performances at such prestigious concert series as San Francisco Performances, Cal Performances, the Stern Grove Festival, Los Angeles' Monday Evening Concerts, and the Ojai Festival. SFCMP made its European debut at the Cheltenham Festival in 1986 and its East Coast debut at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., in 2001.

Olly Wilson, conductor, has a richly varied musical background that includes not only the traditional composition and academic disciplines, but also his professional experience as a jazz and orchestral musician, his work in electronic media, and studies of African music in West Africa itself. His catalogue includes orchestral and chamber works, as well as works for electronic media. He has taught on the faculties of Florida A&M University and the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and is currently Professor of Music at the University of California at Berkeley, where he has taught since 1970. In 1995, Wilson was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Tod Brody teaches flute and chamber music at the University of California, Davis, where he also performs with the Empyrean Ensemble. Brody is the principal flutist for the Sacramento Opera and California Musical Theater, and also appears frequently in such ensembles as the San Francisco Opera and Ballet orchestras. With the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, Empyrean Ensemble, and Earplay, Brody has performed numerous world premieres and has been extensively recorded. In addition to his work as a teacher and performer, Brody serves composers and new music as director of the San Francisco Bay Area Chapter of the American Composers Forum. He first performed with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players in 1997.

Daniel Kennedy, percussionist, has been performing with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players since 1993. He holds a master's degree from California Institute of the Arts, and a doctoral degree from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Kennedy has given premiere performances around the United States, Europe, and Japan, and has explored and performed the music of many cultures, including India, the Middle East, and Indonesia. He has been the founding member of several contemporary music ensembles, and has performed with such groups as the New York New Music Ensemble, Earplay, and the Empyrean Ensemble. He is currently on the faculty at California State University, Sacramento, where he is Instructor of Percussion and Artistic Director of the Festival of New American Music.

Chen Tao, *di* (bamboo flute), a well-known Chinese woodwind musician, is the founder and director of Melody of Dragon, Inc., and the artistic director and conductor of the Chinese Music Ensemble of New York. He has performed with many ensembles and has collaborated with the BBC Philharmonic, the Orchestre National de Lyon, the National Symphony Orchestra of Portugal, and the Flemish Radio Orchestra. His playing can be heard on the soundtracks of several Hollywood movies, including *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Corrupter* (with the New York Philharmonic), and the PBS documentaries *Under the Red Flag*, *the Voice of China*, and *Becoming American*. He has also performed and recorded modern compositions by such well-known composers as Tan Dun, Zhou Long, Chen Yi, Kui Dong, Joan La Barbara, Carter Burwell, Bun-Ching Lam, and Qu Xiao-song.

Hong Wang, *er-hu* (Chinese fiddle), a music educator, composer, and performing artist, utilizes his extensive knowledge of Chinese folk music and its traditional instruments in a busy schedule of diverse activities. Under the sponsorships of the European Foundation for Chinese Music Research, the Kaochi Cultural Exchange Association, the Germany Peace University and other world music festivals, he has performed and lectured in The Netherlands, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and Germany. His recordings of Chinese music are available on both audio and videotapes. Telemark, Sony Classical 0-8, Sega, Wind Records (Taiwan), Young Imaginations, and Hansheng Cultural Productions have included him in CD-ROMs and CDs about music featuring Chinese traditional music. Hong Wang serves as artistic director of Melody of China.

Ann Yao, *zheng* (Chinese zither), graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where she studied with Sun Wenyan and He Bao-quan. In 1982 she toured the United States with the Shanghai Music Group, and two years later she participated in the Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles with the Central Traditional Ensemble of Beijing. Ann Yao moved to the United States in 1985 and has since appeared as *zheng* soloist and worked with Music From China, the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra, and the New Music Consort, among others. She has premiered works by Zhou Long, Chen Yi, Tan Dun, Kui Dong, and James Mobberley. She currently works at Epcot of Walt Disney World as a soloist of *sixian* (stringed instruments).

Producers: Adam Frey (*Pangu's Song*, *Blue Melody*), Kui Dong (*Earth, Water, Wood, Metal, Fire; Three Voices*)

Engineers: Robert Shumaker (*Earth, Water, Wood, Metal, Fire; Pangu's Song*, *Blue Melody*), Paul Vazquez (*Three Voices*)

Production Asst: John McGinn (*Pangu's Song*, *Blue Melody*)

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KUI DONG (b. 1966)

PANGU'S SONG

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Earth, Water, Wood, Metal, Fire (2001) 20:55

1. Earth 2:25
2. Water 5:18
3. Wood 2:54
4. Metal 3:19
5. Fire 6:59

Sara Cahill, piano

6. *Pangu's Song* (1998) 9:06

Tod Brody, flute; Daniel Kennedy, percussion

7. *Blue Melody* (1993) 7:44

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players: Barbara Chaffe, flute; William Wohlmacher, clarinet; Roy Malan, violin; Stephen Harrison, cello; Karen Rosenak, piano; Olly Wilson, conductor

Crossing (1999–2000) 22:02

(electronic/computer tape music)

8. Movement I 6:43

9. Movement II 9:03

10. Movement III 6:16

11. *Three Voices* (1998) 8:42

Hong Wang, *er-hu* (Chinese fiddle); Ann Yao, *zheng* (Chinese zither); Chen Tao, *di* (Chinese bamboo flute)

All compositions published by the composer.

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