

THE FLOATING BOX

A Story in Chinatown

Jason Kao Hwang, composer

Catherine Filloux, librettist

Cast

Eva (Yee-Wa)

Mother

Father's ghost

Student Voices

Sandia Ang

Ryu-Kyung Kim

Zheng Zhou

Charlee Chiv, Scott Chan, Mona Chiang, Wai Ching Ho, Henry Yuk

Musicians

Juan Carlos Rivas

Min Xiao Fen

Diana Herold

Patti Monson

William Schimmel

Michiyo Suzuki

Satoshi Takeishi

Tomas Ulrich

Wang Guowei

conductor

pipa (Chinese lute)

vibraphone, percussion

piccolo, flute, alto flute

accordion

B-flat clarinet, bass clarinet

percussion

cello

gaohu, erhu, zhonghu (Chinese two-stringed violins)

TRACK LISTING

Disc One (61:18)

1. Prologue 2:44

Scene 1. *The Women of the Grave*

2. Burial rites 1:46

3. "Break" (Eva) 6:37

4. "I will stay here" (Eva) 4:38

Scene 2. *Ghost in the Classroom*

5. "When I first came here by boat" (Eva) 7:01

Scene 3. *Broken Pieces*

6. "Your paper, ah-mah" (Eva) 3:11

7. "I know this song" (Mother) 2:16

8. "What are you waiting for?" (Eva) 3:00

Scene 4. *First Words, First Drink*

9. "Where are you going, Eva?" (Father) 4:29

10. "Didn't you ever wish you could stop?" (Eva) 5:52

11. "So this is a kiss" (Eva/Mother) 1:19

12. "Our first meal of the day" (Father) 3:59

13. "Yee-Wa, will you return the boxes" (Mother) 3:13

Scene 5. *The Red Box*

14. Floating, floating (Eva/Mother/Father) 4:58

15. "Like he did? Like he did?" (Eva) 1:59

Scene 6. *No Name*

16. "Gusty winds" (Mother) :35

17. "Who will return the boxes to the factory?" (Mother) 3:23

Disc Two (40:47)

Scene 7. *You Opened Your Mouth, A Fish Came Out!*

1. "What are you waiting for?" (Mother) 1:08
2. "Yee-Wa?" (Mother) 1:33
3. "So dry" (Mother) 1:19
4. "They told me I could not practice" (Father) 1:42
5. "My boss goes to the ship's rail" (Father) 3:12
6. "I retrieve it" (Father) 7:08
7. "My father?" (Eva) 3:59
8. "Searching" (Eva) 1:49

Scene 8. *Across the Seas*

9. "Alone" (Mother/Father/Eva) 1:54
10. "When we first arrived, Yee-Wa" (Mother) 1:43
11. "Why did you never tell me?" (Eva) 2:00

Scene 9. *Weeds*

12. "Why, bah-bah?" (Eva) 1:32
13. "You threw chrysanthemums?" (Father) 3:38
14. "When your heart stopped?" (Eva) 1:36

Scene 10. *Eva*

15. "Does your heart still beat" (Eva) 3:09
16. "Floating, surging" (Mother) 3:06

Jason Kao Hwang's ensemble The Far East Side Band, which features his work as a composer and violinist, has released two recordings, *Caverns* and *Urban Archeology*, and has performed at the Asia Society, the Beijing International Jazz Festival, the Chicago Asian-American Jazz Festival, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, the Whitney Museum, the Freer Gallery, the Vision Festival, the World Music Institute (NYC), Jazz Spektakel Wuppertal (Germany), Jazzgalerie Nickelsdorf Konfrontationen (Austria), the duMaurier Ltd. International Jazz Festival (Vancouver), the International Festival Musique Actuelle (Victoriaville), and on many other stages.

His composition *Flight of Whispers*, commissioned and performed by Music for Homemade Instruments, was released on *eXchange: China*, an anthology of music by Chinese-American composers. He has two other well received recordings to his credit, *Unfolding Stone* and *Commitment*. His scores commissioned by the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company have been premiered at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and Baruch College.

Mr. Hwang has received support from Meet the Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the New York Community Trust, the Mary Flagler Carey Trust Foundation, the Greenwall Foundation, the Puffin Foundation, the Margaret Jory Fairbanks Foundation, and the Fund for U.S. Artists at International Festivals and Exhibitions.

As a violinist, he has performed on recordings that include Anthony Braxton's *Sextet (Istanbul) 1996* (Braxton House) and *Octet (New York) 1995* (Braxton House), Dominic Duval's *The Navigator* (Leo), Henry Threadgill's *Come Save the Day* (Columbia/Sony) and *Too Much Sugar for a Dime* (Axiom), Reggie Workman's *Altered States* (Leo), and Butch Morris's *Dust to Dust* and *Testament: A Conduction Collection* (New World Records). Over the years, he has performed with numerous artists including Vladimir Tarasov, Borah Bergman, Taylor Ho Bynum, Tatsu Aoki, Francis Wong, William Parker, Sirone, and Dr. Makanda Ken MacIntyre.

Currently, Mr. Hwang is a member of The Gift (with William Hooker and Roy Campbell), Ravish Momin's Trio Tarana, and the Pheroan Aklaff Ensemble. This past July he performed with Mabou Mines in *Animal Magnetism* at the Malta Festival in Poland. He recently performed with Trio Tarana at the Taipei Arts Festival in Taiwan.

Mr. Hwang teaches "Asian-American Music," a course he originated for New York University. During his Meet the Composer New Residency, his high school students at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas created a CD of music, oral histories, and poems that was featured on WNYC's *Morning Edition*. Mr. Hwang has led teacher development workshops for both Young Audiences of New York and Midori and Friends.

Catherine Filloux's recent plays include *The Beauty Inside* (InterAct Theatre Company, Philadelphia and New Georges, New York City, 2005); *Eyes of the Heart* (National Asian-American Theatre Co., NYC, 2004); *Silence of God* (Contemporary American Theater Festival commission, 2002 season); *Mary and Myra* (CATF, 2000 season, and Todd Mountain Theater Project, New York, 2002); *Arthur's War* (commission from Theatreworks/USA, NYC, 2002); *Photographs from S-21*, a short play that has toured the world; and *Escuela del Mundo* (commission produced by Ohio State University, Columbus, 2005). Her new play, *Lenkin's House*, was produced at Kamerni Theatre in Sarajevo in January, 2005. *The Beauty Inside* was translated into Arabic for a workshop produced in Rabat, Morocco, at the Higher Institute of Drama (ISADAC) in winter 2004, directed by Messaoud Bouhcine. Filloux's other plays have been produced in New York City and around the United States. She has been commissioned by Cambodian Living Arts for an opera libretto with Cambodian composer Him Sophy, which is to be premiered in 2006. Among her awards are The Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays' Roger L. Stevens award, the Eric Kocher Playwrights Award (National Playwrights Conference, O'Neill Theater Center), Fulbright Senior Specialist (Cambodia and Morocco), James Thurber Playwright-in-Residence, Asian Cultural Council Artist's Residency Grant in Asia, winner of the Nausicaa Franco-American Play Contest, Rockefeller MAP Fund (for *Floating Box*), and a four-time Heideman Award Finalist, Actors Theatre of Louisville. She has developed an oral history project, *A Circle of Grace*, with the Cambodian Women's Group at St. Rita's Refugee Center in the Bronx, New York. She also developed the play *Eyes of the Heart* for Lifetime Television. Filloux's plays are published by Smith & Kraus, Playscripts, Inc., Vintage, and Dramatic Publishing. Her articles have been published in *Manoa: In the Shadow of Angkor* and *The Drama Review*. She received her M.F.A. in Dramatic Writing from Tisch School of the Arts at New York University and her French Baccalaureate with honors in Toulon, France. She is a member of New Dramatists, and lives in New York City with her husband, John Daggett, an actor.

Sandia Ang, soprano, a native of China, enjoys an active career as both an operatic performer and as a recitalist in the United States and Asia. She has appeared in several world premieres: at the Kennedy Center, as the Doctor in Noa Ain's *Angels' Voices*; in New York, as Miss Daly in Murray Boren's *The Dead*; and in Hong Kong, originating the role of the Nightingale in Wing-Fai Law's *The Emperor and the Nightingale*. Ms. Ang was recently seen as Mimi in *La Bohème* at the Amato Opera. She has also sung Nedda in *Pagliacci*, Micaela in *Carmen*, Pamina in *The Magic Flute*, and the Countess in *Le Nozze di Figaro*. She appeared as Lady Thiang in *The King and I* at The Paper Mill Playhouse, the Westchester Broadway Theatre, and the North Carolina Theatre. Because Ms. Ang loves to introduce Chinese music to her audiences, Chinese art and folk songs are always presented in her concert programs.

Ryu-Kyung Kim, mezzo-soprano, has appeared with the Baltimore Opera, the Caramoor Opera Festival, the Santa Fe Opera, the Virginia Opera, the El Paso Opera, the Cleveland Opera, the Gotham Chamber Opera, and the Pacific Music Festival (Japan), and with the Sapporo Symphony Orchestra (Japan) and the Washington, D.C., Festival Symphony Orchestra. Her repertoire includes Cherubino in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Idamante in *Idomeneo*, Angelina in *La Cenerentola*, Carmen, Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly*, Emilia in *Otello*, Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*; as well as Mozart's *Requiem*, Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* and *Mass in C Major*, and Bach's *Magnificat*, among others. She has been a prizewinner in the Oratorio Society of New York Competition, the Liederkrantz Foundation Voice Competition (NY), and the Annapolis Opera Competition, and received a special judge's award in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Philadelphia District Auditions. Ms. Kim is a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music (M.M./B.M.), and holds an Artist's Diploma in Opera from The Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia.

Zheng Zhou, baritone, has appeared with major opera companies and orchestras in a wide range of repertoire, from Mozart, Donizetti, and Verdi to Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Orff. Mr. Zhou has sung with the Metropolitan Opera, the San Francisco Opera, the New York City Opera, the Tulsa Opera, and Opera Teatro Real in Madrid; the San Francisco Symphony, Boston Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, New Mexico Symphony, Colorado Symphony, the China National Symphony, the Shanghai Symphony, the Cathedral Choral Society of Washington, D.C., and at the Tanglewood Festival. Among the operatic roles he has performed are Enrico in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Ford in *Falstaff*, Rodrigo in *Don Carlo*, Germont in *La Traviata*, and the Count in *Le Nozze di Figaro*. His orchestral repertoire includes Orff's *Carmina Burana*, the Brahms *Requiem*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Handel's *Messiah*, Frère Laurent in Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, and Vaughan Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem* and *Sea Symphony*, all performed at Carnegie Hall.

Maestro **Juan Carlos Rivas** has, since his 1998 debut, been an active conductor in both North and South America. Recent engagements include a production of *Aida* in his native Colombia, following in the footsteps of Toscanini by making his Verdi debut with only one day's notice. Also in Colombia, Maestro Rivas has conducted new productions of *Die Zauberflöte*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *L'Elisir d'amore* and *La fille du Régiment*, as well as numerous symphonic programs with the Opera Orchestra of Colombia and the Bogotá Philharmonic. While a Fulbright Scholar at Mannes College of Music, Maestro Rivas founded the Fulbright Ensemble and conducted Music from China at Merkin Concert Hall. At the Caramoor International Music Festival in New York, he has conducted *Don Pasquale* and the American premiere of Francesco Conti's *Don Chisciotte in Sierra Morena* with the Orchestra of St. Luke's.

Min Xiao-Fen was a pipa (Chinese lute) soloist for the Nanjing National Music Orchestra. Known for her virtuosity and fluid style, she has received acclaim for her classical, new music, and jazz performances. She has been a featured soloist with the New York City Opera, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the vocal ensemble Chanticleer, the San Diego Symphony, and the BBC Concert Orchestra. Min has performed solo concerts at the Utrecht International Lute Festival, the Vienna Music Festival, and the Brussels Lute Festival. She has worked with composers John Zorn, Philip Glass, Tan Dun, and many others. She was invited by Jazz at Lincoln Center to play a solo set of Thelonious Monk's music and was also invited by The Preservation Hall Jazz Band to play as a guest. Her piece "The Loneliest Monk" was commissioned and played with House Blend at The Kitchen. Min is also a founder of Blue Pipa, Inc. (www.bluepipa.org).

Diana Herold, percussionist, received her two graduate degrees from the New England Conservatory and Rice University. Adept at performing both improvised and non-improvised music, Diana has worked with such composers and musicians as Yo-Yo Ma, Lou Harrison, Paul McCandless, and Buddy DeFranco. She has performed as a featured soloist and percussionist with several larger new-music groups and orchestras including the Discovery Orchestra, Music From China, the BMI Orchestra, the Jason Kao Hwang Chamber Ensemble, the Locrian Chamber Ensemble, and the Brooklyn and Long Island Philharmonic orchestras. She has her own Off-Broadway show, and often works as a substitute on Broadway shows. Her performances have taken her throughout Europe, Central America, the United States, and Canada (where she attended the Banff Centre for the Arts). She can be heard on recordings with jazz bassoonist Michael Rabinowitz, They Might Be Giants, Tony Trischka, and the Jazz Composers Alliance with Sam Rivers.

Patti Monson is a flutist for the New York new-music ensemble Sequitur, the Curiously Strong Wind Quintet, and Flute Force, and is currently on the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music as director of the contemporary ensemble Tactus. A frequent guest artist on many recital series dedicated to new music, Patti has been invited to give master classes on contemporary repertoire and extended sounds at universities and conservatories around the world. She is responsible for the commissions of several new flute works under the title *Chamber Music for Solo Flute*, a collection of pieces that are multi-voiced, in many different ways, for one flutist. Her new recording *High Art* was recently released on the Albany Records label and is the second disc in a series dedicated to these commissions. Other recordings are available on the CRI, Koch, Sony Classical, Albany, and Nonesuch labels.

Dr. William Schimmel earned his Doctorate of Music from Juilliard. A composer, author, lecturer, philosopher, and virtuoso accordionist, he performs in a wide variety of styles from classical to pop and has appeared with many major symphony orchestras and recorded with such noted performers as Sting and Tom Waits, whose celebrated remark, "Bill Schimmel doesn't play the accordion—he *is* an accordion," has entered accordion legend. An authority

on Kurt Weill, Dr. Schimmel has recorded virtually all of Weill's music that employs the accordion. He is a prolific composer, ranging from the concert stage to Broadway theater, and is founder of the renowned Tango Project. In 1992 he was named "Best Accordionist" by *Keyboard* magazine and recognized as the figure who has done the most to elevate the accordion's otherwise tawdry image.

Clarinetist **Michiyo Suzuki**, a native of Japan, began her musical studies with piano at age three, violin at age six, and clarinet at age thirteen. As a recitalist and chamber musician She has performed extensively in her own country as well as in Europe and the United States. Ms. Suzuki studied with Charles Neidich and made her Carnegie Hall debut in 1996. She is currently a member of Absolute Ensemble. Ms. Suzuki can be heard on several recordings including *Absolute Ensemble*, *Absolute Mix*, *Architectonics* (CCn'C), *Absolution*, *Fix* (Enja), *Xenakis Live in New York*, *Iannissimo* (Vandenburg), and is a featured soloist on *9 Stellar Pieces* by Robert Martin (Furious Artisans).

Satoshi Takeishi, sound artist, drummer, percussionist, and arranger, is a native of Mito, Japan. He studied music at Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. While at Berklee he developed an interest in the music of South America and went to live in Colombia, where he worked with the composer and arranger Francisco Zumaque on Macumbia, a mixture of classical music and jazz. With this group he also performed a series of concerts with the Bogotá Symphony Orchestra honoring the music of the most popular composer in Colombia, Lucho Bermudes. In 1986 he returned to the United States and studied and performed with the Armenian-American oud master Joe Zeytoonian. Since moving to New York City in 1991 he has performed and recorded with many musicians such as Ray Barretto, Carlos "Patato" Valdes, Eliane Elias, Marc Johnson, Eddie Gomez, Randy Brecker, Dave Liebman, Anthony Braxton, Mark Murphy, Herbie Mann, and many others.

Cellist-composer **Tomas Ulrich** received music degrees from Boston University and the Manhattan School of Music. Mr. Ulrich has performed and recorded with such diverse artists as Anthony Davis, Joe Lovano, Gerry Hemingway, Derek Bailey, Anthony Braxton, Simon Shaheen, Herb Robertson, Dominic Duval, Ben Allison, Kevin Norton, Ted Nash, Uri Caine, Dave Douglas, Mark Whitecage, Mark Feldman, Jason Hwang, Gregor Huebner, and Ivo Perelman. He is also a member of the Diller-Quaile String Quartet, which premiered his Quintet for Trumpet and Strings (featuring guest soloist Herb Robertson) in May of 1996. He has written music for theater, film, and instrumental performance and has concertized in Europe, Japan, South America, Canada, and throughout the United States. Mr. Ulrich can be heard on more than fifty CDs in a wide variety of musical styles and settings.

Wang Guowei, *huqin* (Chinese two-stringed violins), earned a degree from the Shanghai Conservatory and was erhu soloist and concertmaster of the Shanghai Traditional Orchestra. He gained national prominence by garnering prestigious awards including the "ART Cup" at the 1989 International Chinese Instrumental Music Competition and received accolades for his performances at the fifteenth annual Shanghai Spring Music Festival. Wang Guowei joined Music From China in 1996 as Artistic Director and erhu soloist. He has also performed with the Virginia Symphony, New Music Consort, the Camerata at Peabody Conservatory, the Four Nations Ensemble, the Ethos Percussion Group, and the Cassatt and Shanghai String Quartets. Wang Guowei has performed with Ornette Coleman at London's Barbican Centre, with Butch Morris at the 47th International Contemporary Music Festival in Venice, and with cellist Yo-Yo Ma at the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art. Mr. Wang teaches erhu at Wesleyan University and is Music Director of the Wesleyan Chinese Music Ensemble.

Director/writer **Jean Randich** specializes in new works, music theater, opera, and re-envisioned classics. Recent credits include Sophocles' *Antigone*, Len Jenkin's *Kraken*, Catherine Filloux's *Silence of God*, Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money*, Art Spiegelman and Phillip Johnston's *Drawn to Death*, Karen Hartman's *Girl Under Grain* (winner, Best Drama, New York International Fringe Festival, 2000), and Jonathan Larson's *J.P. Morgan Saves the Nation*. Ms. Randich has also directed productions in Germany and Norway. She is the co-author of a musical adaptation of a silent film, *The Unknown*, which was featured in the Public Theater's 2004 New Work Now Festival. Ms. Randich is the recipient of the NEA/TCG Director Fellowship and a Fox Foundation Fellowship. She holds a B.A. from Brown University (magna cum laude), a Masters from Brown University in creative writing, and an M.F.A. in directing from the Yale School of Drama.

Linda Cho, costume designer, was the 2004 Lucille Lortel Award Nominee for Outstanding Costume Design at The Public Theater for *Two Noble Kinsmen*. She has designed numerous plays, operas, and dance/theater works Off-

Broadway and at regional theaters across the country, including works at the New York Theater Workshop, the Blue Light Theatre (*Princess Turandot*, Drama Desk Nomination), The Vineyard, CSC, the Atlantic Theatre Company, The Old Globe, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Dallas Theater Center, Pittsburgh Public Theater, Huntington Theatre, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Westport Country Playhouse, the Long Wharf Theatre, Goodspeed Opera House, Philadelphia Theatre Company, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, and the Virginia Opera. She has a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Yale School of Drama and is the recipient of the 2003 Craig Noel Award for Excellence in Theatre in San Diego for her work on the Old Globe's acclaimed production of *Pericles* directed by Darko Tresnjak.

Alexander Dodge, scenic designer, was born in Bern, Switzerland. His opera credits include *The Armourer* (Munich-Gärtnerplatz), *Lohengrin* (Budapest), *The Flying Dutchman* (Würzburg), *The Consul* (University of Michigan), and the upcoming *Il Trittico* (Berlin-Deutsche Oper). His theater credits include *Hedda Gabler* on Broadway; Off-Broadway, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (2003 Lucille Lortel Award), *Chaucer in Rome* (Lincoln Center Theater), *The Downtown Plays* (Tribeca Theater Festival), *Force Continuum*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (Atlantic Theatre Company), and *The Rivals* (The Acting Company). His regional credits include productions at Arena Stage, the Berkshire Theatre Festival, Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, Dallas Theater Center, Huntington Theatre, Geffen Playhouse, Stratford Festival of Canada, Triad Stage, Williamstown Theatre Festival, and Yale Repertory Theatre. Mr. Dodge is a graduate of the Yale School of Drama and lives in Manhattan.

Lighting and projection designer **Clifton Taylor's** major international commissions include work for L'Opera de Lorraine in France, Maggio Danza in Florence, Italy, Ballet do Rio de Janeiro, Scottish National Ballet, Les Grandes Ballets Canadiens, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, and Sardono Dance Theatre of Indonesia. His work in New York spans twenty years and includes everything from experimental companies to Broadway. His credits include the Asia Society, MCC Theater, American Ballet Theatre, the San Francisco Ballet, Alvin Ailey, Lar Lubovitch, the Houston Ballet, and the International Flamenco Festival. In 2002, he was awarded a major grant from the Asian Cultural Council to develop and teach an extended course in theatrical design at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Mr. Taylor resides in New York City.

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Jason Kao Hwang (born 1957) is the son of Chinese parents who immigrated to the Midwest in the 1940s while the anti-Asian exclusion laws were still in force. Hwang studied classical violin as a child in Waukegan, Illinois, and did not encounter many other Asians until he moved to New York at the age of eighteen to study film at New York University. The East Village in the late 1970s offered the newcomer a vivid cultural palette, including the legendary jazz club the Tin Palace, the Ladies Fort, St. Mark's Church, and the Basement Workshop, a community-based Asian-American arts organization. At the Workshop, he met key figures in the emerging Asian-American cultural movement, including the poets Fay Chiang, Richard Oyama, Teru Kanazawa, and Helen Wong. Hwang also met the extraordinary jazz composer/arranger/saxophonist/flute player Will Connell, Jr., a member of the Horace Tapscott Arkestra. Connell's generous mentoring provided Hwang with a lifeline to the bracing world of free jazz, revolutionary politics, and aesthetic experimentation. In 1981, Connell and Hwang formed the quartet Commitment with drummer Takeshi Zen Matsuura and bassist William Parker. Hwang's remarkable ear for a multitude of genres and styles was thus formed in the crucible of the heady New York music scene in the 1970s and early 1980s, and honed over the subsequent twenty-five years while working with such musical luminaries as Butch Morris, Reggie Workman, Anthony Braxton, Billy Bang, Sirone, Henry Threadgill, Ronald Shannon Jackson, Jerome Cooper, and Dr. Makanda Ken McIntyre.

For many listeners who know Hwang's music through his brilliant work as a downtown experimental jazz violinist with Commitment, Glass Shadows, and The Far East Side Band, *The Floating Box, A Story in Chinatown* comes as a revelation. His feeling for the chamber orchestra's possibilities—captured on this recording by conductor Juan Carlos Rivas—and his exquisite vocal writing for the central three characters lead one to expect a composer grounded in years of training in composition at a music conservatory. Yet Hwang's intense sense of drama, evident in the opera's compelling musical narrative, is deeply rooted in his experience as a filmmaker—his poetic documentary film *Afterbirth* (1984) is a must-see—and as the composer of music for many films, including J. T. Takagi and Chris Choy's *Homes Apart, Korea* (1991), Rene Tajima's *All Men Are Created Equal* (1993), Sue Williams's *Born Under the Red Flag* (1997), and Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997), for which he composed the source music.

The musical ideas and dramatic themes in *The Floating Box* resonate with Hwang's 1996 opera-poem *Immigrant of the*

Womb, presented at Dance Theater Workshop. After working as a sideman in Henry Threadgill's oratorio *Run Silent, Run Deep* in 1992, and Anthony Braxton's *Trillium R, Shala Feels for the Poor*, in 1997, Hwang was inspired to compose an operatic work of his own. He wrote the libretto for this work, which interlaces stories from his family history, including his mother's wartime experiences, his parents' immigration, and his father's health after surviving a major stroke, with images from the Boxer Rebellion in China and the freighter *The Golden Venture* that ran aground in Queens. Like *The Floating Box*, *Immigrant of the Womb* addresses a family's isolation and fortitude—in the composer's words, "confronting my historical, cultural, and emotional inheritance while evoking transcendent potentials." For the ensemble of *Immigrant of the Womb*, comprised of soprano, baritone, flute, bass clarinet, tuba, percussion, vibraphone, pipa, zheng (zither), harp, violin, viola, and cello, Hwang composed an orchestral score that provides a rich sonic cloak for the poetic narrative. *Immigrant of the Womb* is a milestone in Hwang's oeuvre in its seamless weaving together of a notated score with improvisation, both by the orchestra and by Hwang himself, who performed several improvised solos on violin.

With *The Floating Box*, which was premiered in October 2001 at the Asia Society in New York City, Hwang and librettist Catherine Filloux have fashioned a richly textured musical work that movingly captures the struggles, disappointments, dreams, and hopes in the lives of many immigrants. Filloux's striking ability to compose a nuanced and sensitive portrait of the lives of Eva and her parents can certainly be attributed to her own experience as the bilingual child of immigrants. Also a playwright, Filloux has written extensively about Cambodia and other countries, including her parents' native France and Algeria. Her play *Eyes of the Heart* won the 1999 Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays, and she developed an oral history project, *A Circle of Grace*, with Khmer women in the Bronx. *The Floating Box* was supported by a three-year Meet the Composer/New Residencies grant in partnership with the Asia Society, Museum of Chinese in the Americas, and Music From China.

The story of Eva/Yee-Wa, a young Chinese-American woman living with her mother, is the story of many diasporic peoples who have sought a better life in new, often harsh surroundings. The poetry of Filloux's libretto fuses perfectly with Hwang's eclectic score, beautifully capturing the complex, intimate relationships among these three characters.

The Floating Box is also the story of many who call New York their home. Set in New York's Chinatown in the 1980s, the opera traces the intertwined emotional strands in the lives of Eva and her parents. The cramped apartment in which Eva and her mother eke out an existence contains hints of another, unspoken life, one suggested by a red box of photographs on the family altar and a recording of Eva father's playing the erhu. The family's efforts to make a living—Eva teaches English to immigrants and the father works as a cook on a cruise ship—underscore the hardships that many new arrivals experience while living in an East Coast metropolis.

Eva's sometimes difficult relationship with her mother and the mystery about her father's past as a famous erhu musician in China create a dramatic tension that carries the story to its climax. The opera's poignant conclusion allows Eva and her mother to acknowledge the past and to share their love for each other as they accept and embrace the possibilities in "a life for us here."

The Floating Box is a collaborative work, born of the composer's and librettist's artistic imaginations and founded upon an extensive community research project in which Hwang and Filloux collected more than forty hours of oral histories of immigrants to New York City. Listening to the powerful stories of family, friends, colleagues, artists, and other community members, they assembled a diverse collection of experiences and memories into a composite story that sympathetically recounts the personal histories of many people. Hwang taught music to a group of high school students at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, and, under the auspices of the Asia Society, taught music to grade school children at P.S. 102, a public school in Queens, New York, with a substantial Asian student body. Both of these teaching experiences provided further inspiration for the opera.

The historian Robin D.G. Kelley's concept of polyculturalism, the simultaneous existence of multiple cultural lineages in a single work, presents a fitting framework within which to hear Hwang's evocative score. The opera employs both Chinese and Western instruments in an ensemble of eight players: piccolo/flute/alto flute; B-flat clarinet/bass clarinet; vibraphone; pipa (Chinese lute); accordion; percussion, including Tibetan chimes and singing bowls, whirling air tubes, Chinese tom toms, and a Buddhist fan drum; gaohu/erhu/zhonghu (a family of two-stringed Chinese violins categorized as *huqin*); and cello. In Hwang's skilled hands, these instruments together forge a rich amalgam of sound—

in the composer's words, "complex suspensions rather than homogenous solutions." The precision with which Hwang mines each instrument's sonic possibilities and the imaginative ways with which he draws upon subsets of the full ensemble result in a vibrant musical narrative that propels the drama forward to its conclusion. The kaleidoscopic range of musical styles employed, from atonality to blues to Broadway to Chinese opera to chromaticism, impressionism to jazz to pop, establishes *The Floating Box* as the work of an artist who is completely comfortable bridging multiple musical worlds.

The *Prologue* immediately establishes the polycultural sound world of the opera. It showcases the brilliant playing of all eight instrumentalists, who present the listener with the full timbral and emotional palette of the opera. The bold, blues-inspired opening dominated by the three voices soon gives way to more pointillistic instrumental passages, and then to the haunting, lyrical moments that spotlight the Chinese instruments. The erhu introduces the father's memorable theme, and the pipa signals the mother's calming presence. The use of the accordion is a particularly effective musical touch, one that bestows an unexpected source of coherence in a very wide-ranging work.

The delicate opening of *The Women of the Grave*, in which each instrument gracefully passes the melodic line along to the next to spin a silken web of sound, establishes the quiet pathos of the lives of Eva and her mother. The two women stand together at the grave of Eva's father, until a single word sung by Eva—"Break"—punctures the sonic texture painstakingly created by the instrumental ensemble. The emotional distance between the two women is evident in Eva's attempts to engage her mother, who remains silent until the duet between them ("I will stay here" / "Stay here"), an intimate weaving of these two voices that suggests the women's potential closeness.

The rhythmic activity that initiates *Ghost in the Classroom* swiftly changes the scene to one of youthful playfulness. Eva teaches English in Chinatown and is flustered by her father's appearance as a ghost. The vibraphone's anxious ostinato provides the backdrop for his entry into the classroom. The stop/start quality of the scene and the percussion's groove interposed with the pipa and *huqin* vividly suggests Eva's awkwardness in moving between China and America, between ghosts and the living.

The atonal opening of *Broken Pieces*, established in an expressive duet between the cello and alto flute, returns to the somber world of Eva and her mother's apartment, and touchingly depicts Eva's mother's attempts to learn English by repeating the weather report. (My father, who emigrated from Japan to Cleveland in 1963, learned English from *The Jack Benny Hour*.) The erhu dominates the scene with music that the mother has played "all my life" but which Eva hates, deeming it "too depressing." The pipa emphasizes the mother's quiet resilience as she dreams of life as a bird "flying, flying way above / To China."

The lushly dark sound world that opens *First Words, First Drink* captures the otherworldliness of this scene, in which the father reappears, dressed as a cook. The mood is initially established through a chromatic musical scaffolding, one that gradually shifts into jazz-inflected pizzicato by the cello. Eva then employs in rapid succession an array of musical styles—blues, Chinese opera, pop/Broadway, and experimental/avant-garde—while singing "Didn't you ever wish, Abah? / That your hands / Cutting, cleaning, chopping / Didn't you ever wish you could stop?" This amalgam of styles suggests the complex blend of Eva's own cultural makeup. The scene is then transformed through a doubling of the tempo to mark a childhood memory in which Eva learns to say a simple sentence and discovers what a kiss is—sadly, not from her parents, but from her approving teacher. The music alternately moves from swing and funky passages to more tentative, frozen moments with sparse accompaniment.

The Red Box highlights the three richly nuanced voices singing "Floating, floating bodies all alone / Floating in my sleep." In this scene, Eva plays with the cutout figures in the red box on the altar. The solitude of which Eva and her mother sing ("Alone, alone / Floating alone") is contradicted musically in a brief, touching duet. Together they imagine a "happy family / sewn at the seams" that enjoys dim sum at a restaurant. Eva's frustration with their life culminates in her angry declaration to her mother, "You are everything I hate," a sentence that goes uncomprehended because it is in English.

Having quit her job, Eva remains at home, suffering from depression. The spurts of sixteenth-notes in the accordion, vibraphone, clarinet, flute, and pipa initiate a fresh, modernist, almost-Stravinskian sound. In this scene, *No Name*, the mother emerges as the backbone of the family: In an extended a cappella solo, she encourages Eva to teach, and

supported by the full ensemble, joyfully sings about the eggs that will go into egg drop soup.

In the climactic scene *You Opened Your Mouth, A Fish Came Out*, the mystery of the father's life on the ship and the fate of his erhu are finally revealed. The percussion infuses this scene with particular dramatic power, building up to the moment in which the father's boss tosses the erhu from the ship into the ocean because the sound "disturbs the passengers" and the father dives in after it. The impossibility of reconciling the father's work as a cook on the ship and his rare talent as an artist is painfully revealed, as the father ruefully declares that "There is no life / For my music, here." Yet the parents' hope that their child will succeed where they did not—a common dream in many immigrants' lives—is also brought forth, as Eva finally realizes her father's sacrifice and wondrously recalls her father's words, "You can be anything! / Anything at all! / What you dream," fittingly sung in a jazz-inflected passage with resonances of that quintessentially American composer George Gershwin in the clarinet phrase, followed by the pipa/Mother's firm underscoring of Eva's final statement of "What you dream."

In *Across the Seas*, the accordion's and flute's Debussy-like sextuplets evoke the roiling waters in which Eva and her parents are "surging / surging / floating / floating" after which they will "Wake up in the morning! We don't know / Where we're from." The mixture of musical styles employed—blues, impressionism, bossa nova—suggests the diverse forces pulling at these three people.

In *Weeds*, the father encourages Eva to accept his death. By throwing weeds rather than chrysanthemums onto his grave, she will "bring him down / To the ground," allowing him to rest. Eva's recognition that the erhu is an integral part of her father's identity is necessary to her maturation and eventual reconciliation with her mother. The evocative sonic space created by the whirling tubes and by the sound of unpitched air from the clarinet and accordion provides an inspired musical backdrop to Eva's discovery from her father of "silence / Space / in all sound."

In the final scene, *Eva*, the question that went unanswered in the last scene ("Does the heart still beat?") is answered by the mother, who acknowledges that "yes, it still beats" and then caresses her daughter. The jazz- and blues-inflected endings of some vocal phrases ("Your heart beats with me," sung by Eva, and "EVA!" sung by the mother), suggest that the cultural roots in both women are now intertwined, as the mother is finally able to call Eva by her American name rather than her Chinese name, and the family begins to bridge the past and the present.

—Ellie M. Hisama

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A Note by Composer Jason Kao Hwang

The Floating Box, A Story in Chinatown was the culmination of my three-year Meet the Composer / New Residencies grant which I received in partnership with the Asia Society (as lead organization), Museum of Chinese in the Americas, and Music From China, in 1998. For New Residencies, a composer, collaborating with presenting, social services, and performing arts organizations, creates music and educational programs to "celebrate the spirit and heritage of specific communities."

For this opera, to *create* music of the community, librettist Catherine Filloux and I *listened* to the community by recording more than forty hours of oral histories. These oral histories, including the family stories of both the composer and librettist, provided the documentary detail and emotional dynamics of an original libretto. Through this creative process, the fulfillment of a public commission became highly personal missions for artists seeking to understand their own lives in correspondence with community history.

Because personal histories are usually kept private, we interviewed people whom we knew or who were introduced to us. Our oral histories, usually recorded at the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, were of friends, colleagues, artists, family members, and community leaders. Most of the interviews were in English. For the Chinese speakers, Susan Cheng, the Executive Director of Music From China, and my wife, Genevieve, both of whom grew up in Chinatown, served as translators. (My parents came to America in the 1940s and I, born outside of Chicago, do not speak Chinese.) We are grateful to our subjects who courageously shared their lives with us. It was not always easy. For several, their testimonies were highly emotional and cathartic. Through this process, *The Floating Box* supports a traditional concern

of the Asian-American community to express the experiences of real Asian Americans, in defiance of the general public's appetite for the exotic and/or stereotyped images of them.

From my perspective as a "downtown jazz composer/violinist," improvisation and through-notated music, tonality, atonality, and "noise" are equally expressive tools for carving pathways to unique emotional territories. For *The Floating Box* I considered this spectrum, including the abundant territory between classifications. Modalities were chosen to allow the truest expression of the narrative, scene to scene, and moment to moment. In conclusion, though little improvisation was employed in *The Floating Box*, the energy, freedom, and individualism of improvisation is at the heart of this composition.

My conception for the score began with the assembly of raw sonic materials: orchestration. No matter what chord or phrase, the orchestra would manifest the physical and psychological landscape of the story, Chinatown, Asian America. The orchestra of *The Floating Box* imagines a tangible reality possessing a visceral language locating identity, history, and place.

For most, the initial auditory perception of Chinese instruments is a socialized response to an unknown experience. In the context of Western instruments, Chinese instruments form complex suspensions rather than homogenous solutions. From simple curiosity, Chinese timbres take the spotlight, without trying. For example, when the pipa (Chinese lute) plays a tremolo in unison with the vibraphone, it is the pipa that dominates the sonic character.

However, soon after this "first confrontation," listeners allow timbral differences to co-exist with timbral affinities, with equality. With a democratic acceptance of new sounds, the *huqin* (family of Chinese two-stringed violins including the gaohu, erhu, and zhonghu) and accordion, both possessing hybrid string/reed qualities, form the timbral fulcrum of the music. At one end, the *huqin*, accordion, and cello unite as a lush string section. At the opposite, the *huqin*, accordion, flute, and bass clarinet unite as an abundant reed section. Through a multiplicity of instrumental combinations, the score tilts upon this fulcrum, sweeping through infinite gradations of color to vividly manifest the physical and psychological place of Chinatown.

Each instrumental sound elicits images associated with that instrument's history. Sound is not simply sound. With this awareness, when the accordion plays with the erhu, pipa, and Chinese opera percussion, an additional poetic dimension resonates.

Through this alchemy of timbre and instrumental history, sonic double-entendres occur. For example, during the climax of the Father's aria in Scene 7, he sings, "There is no life for my music, here," as the *xiao luo* (opera gong) pulsates stridently. The reference to Chinese opera is obvious. With equal immediacy, the *xiao luo* also sounds like an alarm emphatically warning of danger. Both images of this single sound simultaneously express the Father's anguish.

The *huqin* and pipa also serve literal functions for the opera. The Father was a *huqin* master who gave up his music after coming to America. The erhu plays his lyrical theme. More subtly, the stark tones of the pipa provide the leitmotiv for the Mother's isolation.

Finally, non-cultural, programmatic, physical sounds are created by the orchestra's "noise" palette. For example, soft, unpitched *ponticello* tones from the erhu and cello exhale with the air tones of the reeds and the percussion's "whirling tubes" (swimming pool hose). The totality creates the hollow wind that accompanies the dialogue between Eva and her Father's ghost at the conclusion of Scene 8.

The score's occasional employment of genre vernacular is clearly defined. Recognizing these references is like seeing familiar objects within an abstract painting. These genre quotations flow into the music, an ocean of emotional and cultural upheaval upon which this family must stay afloat and navigate. This small Chinatown apartment is a fortress failing to withstand the kaleidoscopic forces of American culture. Music breaches the apartment's cracks and barriers, and is transformed to define a complex location of cultural conflict. For example, in Scene 8, all three characters sing "Wake up in the morning! We don't know where we're from, or where we'll go," with music that shifts mercurially from blues to Broadway oom-pah to bossa nova in a span of twelve measures.

Genre references are also heard within vocal melismas. If the initial note is considered radiant light, melismas are the shadows cast. These sonic shadows are expressions of emotional essence and markers of identity. In Scene 1, Eva sings the word “Break” at her Father’s grave with a mournful melisma arching downwards, saturated with American blues. In Scene 9, the Father lovingly sings “Throw some weeds” to Eva with a melisma draped ornately upon a G pentatonic scale, in a rhythm reminiscent of Chinese opera.

On December 28, 2002, a year after *The Floating Box* premiered at the Asia Society, my father passed away after decades of illness. At that time, still exhausted by the rigors of the production, I had not listened to this music for many months. But during the funeral and the months of grieving, every moment of *The Floating Box* filled my mind’s ear. I realize now that I had composed this opera to keep Father alive and well; and it has.

A Note by Librettist Catherine Filloux

During 1998 and 1999, in New York City’s Chinatown, composer Jason Kao Hwang and I recorded more than forty hours of oral histories to develop our opera. At the Museum of Chinese in the Americas where we did many of the interviews, there is a “composite portrait” of a Chinatown family (see front booklet cover). We learned that this composite photo was donated to the museum by a local photo studio going out of business. Cynthia Lee, the museum curator, writes, “The photo is in fact a collage of faces amateurishly pasted in. . . . It appears to speak poignantly of hope—hope for the reunion of a family separated. . . .” These photo collages were common among immigrants of different places. This “found object” served as one of the inspirations for our opera.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the opera takes place in Chinatown, New York, in the 1980s.

Prologue. *Eva tries to sneak a look in the red box, a family heirloom, on the altar. The mother takes the box away and secretly removes a cutout photo of Eva's father.*

Scene 1. The Women of the Grave. *Eva and her mother perform burial rites at her father's grave.*

Scene 2. Ghost in the Classroom. *Eva is teaching English to immigrants, when the ghost of her father enters the classroom.*

Scene 3. Broken Pieces. *Eva takes care of her mother in their apartment. The mother speaks only Chinese, although she repeats words in English from the radio weather report. The mother replays an old record of traditional erhu music.*

Scene 4. First Words, First Drink. *Eva tries to flee with her suitcase but the ghost of her father blocks her path. When he hands her a glass of water, she reverts to childhood, learning how to speak her first words of English and reliving her father's playful lesson about water. Losing herself in past memories, Eva quits her teaching job and stays home.*

Scene 5. The Red Box. *Eva sneaks open the red box and, like a young girl, plays with the cutout figures of family photos. Frustrated by the family's isolation, Eva tries to throw the box out the window. Her mother stops her and Eva rebels.*

Scene 6. No Name. *Eva sinks into depression, not speaking, not eating or leaving the apartment. The mother tries to rouse Eva back to life.*

Scene 7. You Opened Your Mouth, A Fish Came Out! *The mother tries to find a way to reach Eva, revealing that Eva's father was a famous erhu musician in China. He is the musician playing on the record. In America he worked as a cook on a cruise ship. The young father appears and relives the story of his erhu being thrown overboard by his boss. Eva feels deceived that she knew nothing of her parents' past.*

Scene 8. Across the Seas. *Eva's mother confesses that she worked downstairs in a photo studio when they first arrived. Eva asks what her parents want from her.*

Scene 9. Weeds. *Eva approaches the ghost of her father and he encourages her to "throw some weeds" on his grave.*

Scene 10. Eva. *Eva's mother stacks up the boxes of piecework to return to the factory. Eva feels her mother's love and they kiss for the first time. Eva begins to teach her mother English from the weather report, and Eva's mother finally says Eva's American name.*

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Mixing Engineer: Leslie Lavalenet

Assistant Engineers: Brian Montgomery, Ross Peterson, Anthony Ruotolo

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Dedicated in Loving Memory to My Father
Dr. Kao Hwang
1916–2002

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THE FLOATING BOX
A STORY IN CHINATOWN
A Chamber Opera

Music by JASON KAO HWANG (b. 1957)
Librettist CATHERINE FILLOUX

80626-2 (2CDs)

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Prologue, Scenes 1–6 (61:28)

DISC 2
Scenes 7–10 (40:37)

Sandia Ang, soprano, *Eva (Yee-Wa)*
Ryu-Kyung Kim, mezzo-soprano, *Mother*
Zheng Zhou, baritone, *Father's ghost*
Charlee Chiv, Scott Chan, Mona Chiang, Wai Ching Ho, Henry Yuk, *student voices*

Juan Carlos Rivas, conductor
Min Xiao Fen, pipa; Diana Herold, vibraphone, percussion; Patti Monson, piccolo, flute, alto flute; William Schimmel, accordion; Michiyo Suzuki, B-flat clarinet, bass clarinet; Satoshi Takeishi, percussion; Tomas Ulrich, cello; Wang Guowei, *gao*, *erhu*, *zhonghu* (Chinese two-stringed violins)

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