The result of a rich confluence of many different cultural threads, a vivid and open imagination, and a rigorous intellect, Lei Liang’s music has a dimensionality to it that’s quite remarkable. Of course acoustic, often luxuriantly so, it somehow also evokes tactility, it sounds like something that could be touched; it evokes shape and color, it sounds like something that could be seen. There are still other layers of significance, especially language and the drama of narrative action, its great sonic variety possibly conjuring character and scene, emotions and ideas different for each performer and listener. Through myriad avenues of potential perception, Lei Liang’s music reaches out and embraces its audience, its intricacies and complexities part and parcel of its naturalness and its direct but highly nuanced communicative voice.

Born in Tianjin and raised in Beijing, Lei Liang was exposed both to Western Classical music through piano lessons at an early age and a wealth of Chinese minority folk music via a trove of archival recordings and an instrumental collection at the Research Institute of Music, where his mother worked. His seemingly effortless blending of Chinese and Western elements may date from his childhood, when he could make no distinction between the different traditions. Western music became the focus of his study. He won honors at a number of different piano competitions and by late childhood had already published piano music that became a mandatory part of the competition repertoire of the Xinghai National Piano Competition. Following the political unrest surrounding the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, Liang was convinced by his family to continue his studies in the United States. He settled first in Austin, Texas, before moving to Boston to study composition at the New England Conservatory and Harvard University, where he was a Junior Fellow in the Society of Fellows and earned his Ph.D. He worked with such teachers as Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Chaya Czernowin, Robert Cogan, and Mario Davidovsky. He also attended the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik at Darmstadt. In 2007 he joined the composition faculty of the University of California, San Diego, where he has taught ever since.

In spite of growing up in Beijing, it wasn’t until after moving to the U.S. that Liang really began to examine consciously what it meant to “be” Chinese. Having learned only the simplified Chinese characters, he set about studying traditional Chinese in order to understand the nuances of the texts he began to read—treatises on painting, Buddhist sutras, and the works of Taoist philosophers, as well as Chinese history. He sought out English-language and Taiwanese histories to flesh out what he had learned while in China, and he also delved deeply into the study of traditional Chinese music. At Harvard he sought out leading Chinese experts on various aspects of the country’s culture. This scholarship, both broadly and specifically, is infused permanently into his music, and has led him continually to seek beyond his own expectations and limitations. Many of his works directly invoke the physical and visual gestures of Chinese painting and calligraphy. He has also used technology to study the physical properties of sound, to better understand the unheard inner life of music.

By dint of the quality and range of his compositional output as well as his engaging personality, Liang has developed a number of rich relationships with performers around the world, although some of his most important collaborators are his colleagues at UC San Diego, including the pianist Aleck Karis, soprano Susan Narucki, percussionist/conductor Steven Schick, and the double bassist Mark Dresser. Schick and Dresser were dedicatees of works on this disc.

Verge Quartet originated as a work for eighteen solo strings commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, whose string players premiered it under Magnus Lindberg’s direction in 2009.
Liang made the string quartet version on commission for the 30th anniversary of the Shanghai Quartet, which premiered it at the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C., in April 2015. The version for string quartet manages to intensify and focus the more diffuse gestures of the original; in practice the piece is very idiomatically for string quartet. The work’s content is referential both musically and autobiographically, resulting in its intensely emotional and varied affect. The title “Verge” refers to Liang and his wife, the harpsichordist Takae Ohnishi, being on the threshold of having their son, Albert Shin Liang. Anticipation, worry, but also tenderness seem to pervade the piece, which the composer calls a “musical amulet” for Albert, the first part of whose name in German/French note-names—A, B (B-flat), E, D (re)—is inscribed in its harmonic and melodic content. Also autobiographical is the presence of music the composer encountered in his own extensive research in Asian folk traditions, specifically Mongolian heterophony, in which independent but related lines intertwine (converging and diverging, as the composer points out) to form a dynamic, vibrant melodic whole. To attempt to identify a dominant voice in this texture (which is explicitly prevalent near the end of Verge Quartet) misunderstands the indivisibility of the music.

Apart from the Mongolian aspects, Verge Quartet is not explicitly “Asian” in its sounds. Nonetheless, as in many of his works, Liang uses a number of detailed techniques for the Western string instruments that evoke such traditional Chinese instruments as the bowed erhu and the plucked-string qín and pipa. The latter’s idiom, for example, is suggested by the viola’s triple-stop pizzicato strumming right at the start, which adds energy to the sustained, atmospheric opening. Bartók pizzicatos, snapping the instruments’ strings against the fingerboard, create a raw earthiness. The second section with its staccatissimo running sixteenth-notes is both nervous and tough, ending with a wiry ponticello (played near the bridge) taking the cello from pitch to noise. The nearly timeless scrim of transparency that ensues is broken up by the occasional thrum of beats—illustrations, in fact, of the baby’s own heartbeat—before the return of the Mongolian-flavored heterophonic music in which all four instruments participate. The closing moments are a breathlessly thrilling summation capped by the cello’s heartbeat that continues, in our ears, well beyond the end of the piece.

Liang’s collaborative association with the percussionist Steven Schick goes back several years; they are both faculty members at UC San Diego and have worked together a number of times as composer and performer. Liang’s awareness of Schick’s brilliant musicianship, seemingly boundless stylistic range, and joy of performing led him to write Trans, a piece that explores not only Schick’s startling virtuosity but also his communicative ability, calling for a dismantling of the performer/audience dichotomy and providing the audience with a means to become a part of the performance. Trans was commissioned by Schick himself, and its premiere performance was the culminating work of two days of concerts celebrating his sixtieth birthday at the Miller Theatre in New York City in February 2014. In a live performance, members of the audience are provided with pairs of small rocks (or other objects) to strike together, creating a sonic “cloud” that can be interpreted as rain or other natural sounds. These audience actions are instigated by the percussionist (a nod to Schick’s noted conducting skills), and the duration of such episodes can vary from performance to performance, resulting in an open, flexible form. Liang innovates in writing the solo part in three staves not to designate instruments but states of expression, respectively “outwardly expressive,” “inwardly contemplative,” and “immovable space (at the same time fully engaged and detached).” Schick called the audience part “the fourth state of expression—the public space.” Needless to say, navigating these states of mind deftly is a
matter of great technical and expressive control to create a counterpoint of physical and spiritual strata, as suggested by the composer’s reinterpretation of the title as “transience—transmute—transcribe—transfigure—transform—trance.”

Choice of instruments is left up to the performer, although the specificity of particular composed gestures (sustained ringing versus staccato bursts, for example) puts practical limitations on those choices. The piece begins with the audience’s “sonic cloud,” to which the soloist reacts in his three planes of activity. Sonic contrasts, such as those between the sustained cymbal rolls (“waves”) and the arpeggios of wood blocks, create clear levels of hearing in some passages; in others the attempt is made to blur and dissolve the boundaries between performative approaches. Over longer spans, the piece contrasts swaths of slow time with episodes of precise and compulsive rhythm; the oppositions of wood, rock, membrane, and metallic timbres; pitched or semi-pitched sounds versus noise, with gradations bridging extremes. The result is a piece not only open and flexible in linear form but in dimensional form, its acoustic edges porously blending with the wider world.

_The moon is following us_ was commissioned by the College of William and Mary’s Ewell Concert Series in Virginia. Pianist Yin Zheng, a native of Shanghai and master of a variety of styles, now living in the U.S., gave the premiere in April 2015; it is performed here by Liang’s UC San Diego colleague Aleck Karis. Two threads of the composer’s musical history come together here: his early compositional career as a child writing acclaimed small works for piano, and his deep interest in the immense Chinese folk-music tradition. _The moon is following us_ is based on a folk song Liang learned growing up in Beijing, “High mountain and plain,” but the title of the piano piece is from an observation by his son Albert and conjures an intimate connection between the generations. Liang has revealed, too, that a four-part canon (right at 8:15 in this recording) in the piece is a group portrait of his father, his son, himself, and the moon. Although _The moon is following us_ is, on some level, an impressionistic fantasy on a Chinese melody, as usual with Liang there is more to it: The gestures and form of the piece are a result of an acoustic analysis of the melody’s cumulative harmonic resonance, which is magnified and projected outward into new shapes. (As an analogy, think of a painting based on an extreme magnification of a photograph.) Clear, albeit harmonically intensified, statements of the original melody are juxtaposed with more abstract figures by turns frenetic and calm.

_Inkscape_ for percussion quartet and piano was a consortium commission for the Boston Conservatory Percussion Ensemble, the Manhattan School of Music Percussion Ensemble, and Third Coast Percussion, funded by the Chinese Fine Arts Society. Samuel Solomon conducted the Boston Conservatory Percussion Ensemble and pianist Yukiko Takagi in the world premiere in Boston in October 2014. This is one of several works in which Liang engages with the idea of Chinese traditional mark-making, either that of calligraphy or painting. Here the metaphor is explicit. The composer writes, “In traditional Asian ink paintings, we often discuss two complementary aspects: brush and ink. Piano, in this composition, serves as the ‘brush,’ and the percussion quartet, the ‘ink.’ Following earlier works such as _Brush-Stroke_, _Aural Hypothesis_, and _Harp Concerto_, _Inkscape_ continues to explore the relationship between ink painting, calligraphy, and music.” The correspondence between physical gesture and line/mark in visual art and physical gesture and sound in music is a strongly poetic one: Each is an instance of action resulting in an expressive object (a sound being no less an object for all its transience). In contemplating the relationships among these art forms, Liang follows in the path of an important predecessor, Chou Wen-chung.
Piano-as-brush indicates the percussion’s sounds are a result or continuation of the keyboard’s actions, but the piano, too, is a percussion instrument whose standard performance is extended via in-strings techniques, including an E-bow (a magnetic device that sets the strings in vibration without touching them), a slide bar (like a guitar slide), mallets, and (!) Styrofoam packing peanuts. This brings the piano’s possibilities much closer to those of the diverse percussion section, which ranges from mallet instruments (xylophone, marimba, vibraphone) through semi-pitched wood and metal instruments to pitchless drums and rasps. The piano’s figures are contoured via pitch, but their chromatic quality denies them much sense of what might be considered melody; their character is essentially timbral. Elements of theatricality evident in a live performance, such as the complexity of the pianist’s techniques, the physicality and spatial deployment of the percussionists, and even certain gestures, such as the whipping of a thin branch through the air (the first sound in the piece) add to the visual dimension but can be readily imagined in this recording, which makes the spatial relationships among the instruments clear. The landscape of the piece is defined by the exchange of ideas between the piano and the quartet, and although the piece is carefully notated, the sense remains that each action/reaction combination is improvisational. There is a playfulness about many of these interchanges that lends the piece a sense of buoyancy and joy.

Liang wrote *Luminous*, the biggest work in this collection, for the double bassist Mark Dresser, an innovative performer who has modified his instrument with electronic pickups to catch nuances of sound via amplification. A virtuosic improviser, Dresser inspired the composer to write a piece that, for the time being, only he could play. *Luminous* was commissioned by Robert Amory as part of his TenFourteen Project for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, with funding by the Jebediah Foundation. Steven Schick led the world premiere in March 2014 in Berkeley, California, with Dresser as soloist. The composer writes, “The instrument’s rich spectra embody ‘voices’ that encompass extreme opposites—lightness and darkness, angels and ghosts, paradise and inferno—unified by a singular vibrating body. The composition explores these voices in a few large sections, starting with bowing on one string that produces multiphonics, double-stop bowing, and pizzicati. It concludes with the threading technique (attaching the bow from beneath the string), which allows the performer to bow multiple strings simultaneously. The last section is subtitled ‘The Answer Questioned’ as an homage to Charles Ives and György Kurtág.”

Ives in his multiplicity, Kurtág in his precise delicacy and sense of play; These seemingly opposite characters are complementary in Liang’s piece. As with the piano in *Inkscape* and the strings in *Verge Quartet*, the bass’s very identity expands to become a variety of percussion instruments, an electronic instrument, an unclassifiable growl. The instruments of the ensemble are a kind of resonance-chamber, every now and then a single timbre breaking free to establish a clear, albeit brief, independence, such as the drum solo at the midpoint of the piece. Ultimately the group is one large, multifaceted meta-instrument that sends the double bass sounds out into the world, refracted and magnified. Liang seeds the piece with cadenzas for the soloist, allowing Dresser to expound freely upon the techniques of each preceding section.

*Luminous* begins with a combination of strummed bass with scratched cymbal, sustained bass harmonics in suspended time and very slowly changing harmony, eventually moving toward thin, wiry, metallic harmonics activating harmonic spectra. In the next section, heavy glissandos alternate with quasi-improvised pizzicato and left-hand fingerboard tapping, leading to a harmonic surge in the ensemble and the aforementioned drum solo. A section of fingerboard hammer-on figures (both hands) triggers playful, quick outbursts in the ensemble, with a scream
in the bass clarinet announcing that section’s bass cadenza. The soloist takes a break for the next part, the ensemble engaging in a pointillistic playground. This gives way to “The Answer Questioned—Homage to Ives & Kurtág,” a dialog between quiet, ethereal ensemble and “interrupting” bass soloist, an exploration of harmony in multi-stops that serves as the last image, the last, perhaps defiant, word.

—Robert Kirzinger

Composer and writer Robert Kirzinger lives in Boston, Massachusetts, where since 1998 he has been on the staff of the Boston Symphony Orchestra as an annotator, lecturer, and editor.

Chinese-born American composer Lei Liang (b. 1972) is the winner of the Rome Prize, the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and awards from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music Recording Program, a Koussevitzky Foundation commission, and a Creative Capital award. His concerto for saxophone and orchestra Xiaoxiang was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2015. Liang was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic and Alan Gilbert for the inaugural concert of the CONTACT! new-music series. Other commissions and performances come from the Fromm Music Foundation, Meet the Composer, Chamber Music America, MAP Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, the Taipei Chinese Orchestra, the Scharoun Ensemble of the Berlin Philharmonic, the Arditti Quartet, the Shanghai Quartet, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the New York New Music Ensemble, and pipa virtuoso Wu Man. Liang’s six portrait discs are released on Naxos, New World, Mode, Encounter, and Bridge Records.

As a scholar and conservationist of cultural traditions, he has edited and co-edited three books and editions, and published more than twenty articles. From 2013–2016, he served as Composer-in-Residence at the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology where his multimedia works preserve and reimagine cultural heritage through combining scientific research and advanced technology.

Lei Liang studied composition with Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Robert Cogan, Chaya Czernowin, and Mario Davidovsky, and received degrees from the New England Conservatory of Music (B.M. and M.M.) and Harvard University (Ph.D.). A Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum, he has held fellowships from the Harvard Society of Fellows and the Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowships. Liang serves as Professor of Music and chair of the composition area at the University of California, San Diego. His catalog of more than seventy compositions is published exclusively by Schott Music Corporation (New York). www.lei-liang.com

Mark Dresser is a Grammy-nominated bass player, improviser, and composer. He has recorded more than one hundred-thirty CDs, including three solo works. From 1985 to 1994, he was a member of Anthony Braxton’s Quartet. He has performed and recorded with Ray Anderson, Jane Ira Bloom, Tim Berne, Anthony Davis, Dave Douglas, Osvaldo Golijov, Gerry Hemingway, Bob Ostertag, Joe Lovano, Roger Reynolds, Henry Threadgill, Dawn Upshaw, and John Zorn. He has performed and recorded his music for trio, quintet, and septet. He is a Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego where his research interests include telematic music performance. He is a 2015 Doris Duke Impact Award winner.
Aleck Karis has performed recitals, chamber music, and concertos across the Americas, Europe, Japan, and China. As the pianist of Speculum Musicae he has participated in over a hundred premieres and performed at major American and European festivals. His appearances with orchestra have ranged from concertos by Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin to those of Stravinsky, Messiaen, and Carter. His eight solo discs include Chopin/Carter/Schumann, Mozart, Stravinsky, Cage, Glass, late Chopin, Feldman/Webern/Wolpe, and Poulenc. He has studied with William Daghlian, Artur Balsam, and Beveridge Webster, and is a Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego.

Conductor, educator, writer Michael Lewanski is a champion of new music and older repertoire alike. His work seeks to create progressively deeper connections between audiences, musicians, and the music that is part of their culture and history. He is conductor of Ensemble Dal Niente and Professor of Instrumental Ensembles at the DePaul University School of Music. He is a frequent guest conductor and recording artist. A native of Savannah, Georgia, he began conducting at age thirteen. At sixteen, he studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory with Ilya Musin. He attended Yale University and subsequently studied with Cliff Colnot and Lucas Vis.

For forty years, percussionist, conductor, and author Steven Schick has championed contemporary music by commissioning or premiering more than one-hundred-fifty new works. Schick is Music Director of the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus and Artistic Director of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. He was Music Director of the 2015 Ojai Festival. His guest-conducting schedule includes appearances with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Ensemble Modern and the Asko/Schönberg Ensemble. Steven Schick is Distinguished Professor of Music and holds the Reed Family Presidential Chair at the University of California, San Diego.

Pianist Daniel Schlosberg collaborates frequently with eighth blackbird and Third Coast Percussion. He has given the world premiere of Augusta Read Thomas’s Starlight Ribbons, and the U.S. premiere of Kaija Saariaho’s Calices for violin and piano. He was also a founding member of Yarn/Wire. He enjoys a multifaceted relationship with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, having appeared as a featured soloist and in numerous chamber music concerts. He has recorded for the Albany, Bridge, Centaur, and Nimbus labels. He has been on the faculty at the University of Notre Dame since 2005. He is also Director of the Baltimore Lieder Weekend, held each October.

 Winners of the First Prize and the Amadeus Prize at the London International String Quartet Competition, the Formosa Quartet (Jasmine Lin, Wayne Lee, violins; Che-Yen Chen, viola; Deborah Pae, cello) has given critically acclaimed performances at the Ravinia Festival, the Caramoor Festival, the Library of Congress, the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center, the National Concert Hall in Taipei, and Wigmore Hall in London. Formed in 2002 when the four founding members came together for a concert tour of Taiwan, the Formosa Quartet is deeply committed to championing Taiwanese music and promoting the arts in the land of its heritage.
Founded in 2009, the **Palimpsest Ensemble** is UC San Diego’s resident ensemble dedicated to works of modern music. With repertoire ranging from masterworks of the 20th century to new works of today’s most significant composers, its members are drawn chiefly from the graduate program in Contemporary Music Performance at the University of California, San Diego, with guest artists from the Southern California musical community. The Palimpsest Ensemble commissions and premieres new works by graduate composers at UC San Diego. Its programs and projects are led by UC San Diego faculty members Aleck Karis, Susan Narucki, Steven Schick, and Rand Steiger.

The Palimpsest Ensemble: Erik Carlson, violin; Batya MacAdam-Somer, viola; Tyler J. Borden, cello; Samuel Dunscombe, clarinet; Nicolee Kuester, horn; Christopher Clarino, percussion; Aleck Karis, piano; Steven Schick, conductor

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www.thirdcoastpercussion.com

**SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY**
- *Bamboo Lights*. Bridge Records 9425.
- *Verge/Tremors of a Memory Chord*. Naxos 8572839.

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Producer: Lei Liang
Verge Quartet: Josef Kucera, Andrew Munsey, engineers. Recorded April 19, 2016, at Conrad Prebys Concert Hall, UC San Diego.


The moon is following us: Tom Erbe, engineer. Recorded March 13, 2016 at Conrad Prebys Concert Hall, UC San Diego.


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Dedicated to Robert Amory, with friendship, admiration and affection. — Lei Liang

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), In Memoriam

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LEI LIANG (b. 1972)

*LUMINOUS*

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   Formosa Quartet

   Steven Schick, percussion

   Aleck Karis, piano

4. *Inkscape* (2014) 14:00
   Third Coast Percussion; Daniel Schlosberg, piano; Michael Lewanski, conductor

   Mark Dresser, contrabass solo; Palimpsest Ensemble; Steven Schick, conductor

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