

Exploring the sound worlds of Chen Yi and Karen Tanaka, one immediately hears some common elements: their fastidious craftsmanship; the timbres, textures, and harmonies chosen with such care that each piece feels like a three-dimensional sculpture rather than a painting. Both were born in the Far East and show an approach to composition that is organic rather than reliant on imposed forms. Oh yes—and they’re both women. However, the differences between the sonic explorations of the two composers are much greater than the commonalities. Whereas in Chen’s music rhythmic pulse is always an important element, in Tanaka’s music there is a timelessness, an eternal, meditative aspect. And while each composer speaks in her unique voice, we can hear echoes of their respective roots in China and Japan as well as the Western composers whose influences they acknowledge. Those Western composers were themselves influenced by Asian music and concepts they had encountered, completing the circle.

Chen Yi (b. 1953) is part of a distinguished generation of Chinese composers who have immigrated to the United States. A common element in the biographies of Chen Yi, as well as composers Zhou Long, Tan Dun, Ge Gan-ru, Bright Sheng, and Jing Jing Luo, is study with the Columbia University professor Chou Wen-chung. A native of China himself, Chou was a pupil and a close associate of Edgard Varèse. Varèse, who defined music as “organized sound,” did not himself study Asian music, but his approach to timbre and texture is very close to Chinese aesthetic values. In his article “Asian Music and Western Composition” in the *Dictionary of Contemporary Music*, Chou writes:

Varèse’s concept of music as “organized sound” and of sound as “living matter” . . . is again a modern Western parallel of a pervasive Chinese concept: that each single tone is a musical entity in itself . . . This concept, often shrouded in poetic and mystic metaphors, is fundamental to many Asian musical cultures. It is manifest in the great emphasis placed on the production and control of tones, often involving an elaborate vocabulary of articulations, modifications in timbre, inflections in pitch, fluctuations in intensity, vibratos, and tremolos¹

Chou Wen-chung and his student-colleagues all share this aesthetic, which treats timbre as a musical element equal to melody, harmony, rhythm, and form. One is struck in Chen Yi’s music by the vibrancy and importance of tremolos, pitch inflections, and articulations, while concurrently realizing that they are always in the service of the music, not there merely as “effects.”

Another biographical commonality of this generation of Chinese-American composers is much less pleasant, though equally important. All lived through Mao Zedong’s “Cultural Revolution”; most were forcibly moved into the countryside to be “re-educated” and do manual labor. In Chen’s case, in 1968 (at the age of fifteen) she was separated from her intellectual family of doctors and musicians, who were dispersed to five different parts of China. However, during this grim period the resourceful Chen absorbed the folk music and culture of the Chinese countryside, realizing that her true compositional voice would come from what she calls a “natural hybrid” between Eastern and Western musics. Two years later, she was able to return to Guangzhou, becoming concertmaster of the Beijing Opera company there, thus adding another important element—the theatricality of Chinese opera—to her musical palette. The three works on this disc, while all recognizably Chen’s voice, show how broad the spectrum of her palette is.

Night Thoughts for flute, cello, and piano (2004) takes as its inspiration the ancient Chinese poem of the same name written by the great Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai (also known in Western culture as Li Po). Li Bai's poetry has served as an inspiration to several composers, not the least of whom was Gustav Mahler, who set several of his poems in *Das Lied von der Erde*. Chen Yi has provided her own translation of *Night Thoughts*:

On couch bright moon shone,
Thought frost on the ground,
Raised head facing bright moon,
Lowered head dreaming of home.

A mostly quiet, ruminating piece, the music is spare and elusive; there is a pestering motif (that thing that keeps you awake at night), and scurrying, fleeting phrases. Almost no tones are heard "plain": instead, they are modified with tremolos, trills, glissandos, arpeggios, fluttertonguing, portamento, and bends, or grace notes, elements also pervasive in traditional Chinese music. Even the piano texture is spare; the few vertical sonorities are arpeggiated. Just a bit past the midway point, the flute recalls a wistful tune from the past, but as with all dreams, it is fleeting and soon transforms itself into something else. The tune is picked up by the cello, then traded back and forth a bit with the flute, before disappearing completely into some chromatic vapor trails and trills. *Night Thoughts* was co-commissioned by the Virginia Arts Festival, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, La Jolla SummerFest, and Chamber Music Northwest in Portland, Oregon, supported by the Meet The Composer's Commissioning/USA program, and is dedicated to Heather Hitchens. It was premiered on April 28, 2004, by Deborah Cross, Keith Robinson, and André-Michel Schub, at the Virginia Arts Festival.

Just as Béla Bartók took the raw materials of East European music and alchemically forged them into works such as *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, so does Chen Yi transform the traditional music of China into her own very individual aesthetic in works such as *Wu Yu*. Commissioned and premiered by Boston Musica Viva on March 15, 2002, in Boston, directed by Richard Pittman, *Wu Yu* is a sextet for flute, clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), bassoon, violin, cello, and percussion (vibraphone, bongo, Japanese high woodblock, cymbal, two Chinese gongs, tom-tom, and bass drum), in two movements. The composer explains, "Wu Yu was a ritual rain dance in ancient China, which includes song and dance performed with ox tails in hands. In the first movement *Praying for Rain*, I use the flute, clarinet, and bassoon to play in heterophonic style, imitating the tunes played by a group of *suona* players in the village ceremony (the double-reed instrument *suona* is a shawm, made with wood), while using other instruments to create *sheng*-like sustained chords (the Chinese traditional instrument *sheng* is a free-reed mouth organ, made with a gourd). The music starts slowly and gets faster and faster toward the coda. In the second movement, *Shifan Gong-and-drum*, I imitate a whole group of Chinese traditional percussion instruments played in the folk-ensemble music Shifan gong-and-drum in Southeast China, which is often used in ceremonies and village gatherings."

However straightforward this explanation may appear, the actual sound of the music is anything but that. In the first movement, the violin, cello, and percussion deftly weave gossamer lines that seem entirely unrelated to the intricate heterophonic melodies in the winds, yet everything somehow meshes. A ritualistic piece, the music begins declaratively, becoming gradually more intense as the tempo increases, until at the end the music is twice as fast as the beginning. Chen bases the structure for this movement, both at the larger and smaller levels, on the golden ratio, also used in Bartók's work. The second movement, marked "energetically," begins with a lively chromatic sixteenth-note passage in the clarinet that is picked up in the flute (actually the piccolo in this recording). The sixteenth notes are nearly omnipresent throughout the entire movement, being passed by the performers from one instrument to another, like jugglers or acrobats.

We also sense something a bit diabolical here, not least because of the sonic echoes of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* in the interplay of violin and percussion.

If we know one thing about Chen Yi from listening to her music, it is that she must be a dynamo. Energy pulses through her music like a direct current of electricity. The composition . . . *as like a raging fire* . . . (2002) is another exemplar of this trait. Approximately ten minutes in length and described by the composer as a representation of a “raging fire both external and internal,” the music is nearly a perpetual-motion machine, with only two eighth-note rests in the near-center of the work to serve as oxygen holes for the performers and the audience. In a modified ABA form, the music flickers, crackles, and burns through chromatic passages, trills, portamentos, tremolos, and string pizzicato, before giving way to strange and ghostly string harmonics, then gradually refueling and raging once again. Commissioned with a grant from Meet The Composer's Commissioning/USA program and premiered February 24, 2002, in Philadelphia by Network for New Music conducted by Jennifer Higdon, . . . *as like a raging fire* . . . is composed for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano.

From fire to ice: the music we hear of Karen Tanaka (b. 1961) on this disc contemplates the space-time continuum, the frozen landscape of Norway, and an imaginary garden. Tanaka's musical influences are, like Chen's, from both the East and the West, but they are as different as—well, as different as China is from Japan. Important Japanese elements in Tanaka's music are a sense of timelessness as found in Zen Buddhist aesthetics, an appreciation of noise and manipulated sound, and concepts of “stretched time” and “deformed space,” which can also be found in the Japanese Noh theater. Yet, Tanaka's Western musical influences are also very much linked with these same aesthetic values. In 1986 she left Japan to study in Paris with the spectralist composer Tristan Murail and to work at the IRCAM institute, where research on acoustics, sound design, and perception and cognition is conducted and integrated with musical composition. Founded by Pierre Boulez, the “pedigree” of IRCAM and its concerns can be traced back through the French composers Olivier Messiaen and Claude Debussy, both of whom were fundamentally influenced by the Asian music they heard. Tanaka also adopts elements from spectralist thought, which Tristan Murail has described as being an attitude toward composition rather than a set of techniques, the attitude being that “music is ultimately sound evolving in time.” Thus the feeling of being “out of time” and away from Earth's gravitational pull that we sense in listening to Tanaka's music was forged equally from Japanese and French aesthetics. In the compositions heard on this disc, the instruments are subtly amplified to add slight reverberation and enlarge and “deform” the instrumental timbres and sonic space.

In the work *Invisible Curve* (1996, revised 1999) for flute, violin, viola, cello, and piano, we find ourselves in the vast regions of the cosmos. The composer writes: “The title *Invisible Curve* was inspired by books and articles about the introduction to general relativity that I read prior to composing. Space-time can be curved and warped by the presence of a body, like the Earth, and this distortion accounts for gravity. In *Invisible Curve*, my intention was to project the images of the curves in space-time with sound. The fine curves drawn by each note would be analogous to the curve of the whole structure.” Appropriately marked *Lontano*, the piece begins with a long, low C-sharp on the cello that is shaped by dynamics and timbre, changing pitch only some forty measures later. The other instruments slowly drift in, sometimes sharing their pitches with each other, the music gradually increasing in density but deliberately avoiding a rhythmic pulse. Toward the midpoint of the piece, when the violin, viola, and piano finally indulge themselves in a rapid chromatic passage, the cello anchor changes to a low C, again maintaining its pitch for many measures. Then the cello disappears, leaving the other instruments adrift, the piano sounding sonar signals, until the cello reappears, back on its original low C-sharp, gradually bringing the piece to its close. *Invisible Curve* was commissioned by Shigenori Kudo. It was first performed in Yokohama by Shigenori Kudo, flute, Blagoya Demceviski, violin, François Schmitt, viola, Jean-Marie Trottereau, cello, and Jeffrey Grice, piano, on June 30, 1996.

From the cosmos to Earth, but to a place on Earth where the two seem to meet: *Frozen Horizon* (1998), scored for amplified ensemble of flute, percussion (suspended cymbals, vibraphone, crotales), two violins, viola, cello, and double bass, portrays the landscape of Harstad—a town on a small island in northern Norway at the 68th parallel above the Arctic Circle, where the sun does not rise during the winter but where the Northern Lights are often visible. The composer describes the landscape: “Beyond the icy earth’s surface, the frozen sea spreads towards a curved boundary line between the sea and the dark sky. Time passes slowly there.” Another “invisible curve” has been found.

As with the landscape itself, the music changes slowly and subtly, carefully exploring one step at a time through undulating, echoing passages in the strings and flute. Like ripples in water, the musical phrases gradually expand to the outer reaches of the instruments’ ranges before dissipating. Exactly halfway the vibraphone and crotales make a welcome appearance (the Northern Lights!), shimmering and glimmering in ostinato figures over long-held string tones. These hallucinatory lights gradually fade into suspended cymbal rolls, and there is a brief reminiscence of the piece’s beginnings before the music fades away. *Frozen Horizon* was commissioned by the Mirck Art Forum. It was first performed by the BIT20 Ensemble conducted by Ingar Bergby at the Bergen International Festival in Norway on May 22, 1998.

As Robert Pogue Harrison states in his 2008 book *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, “Sometimes the most intense journeys—the most visionary journeys—take place while one stays put, in moments of stillness unscorched by ‘passion’s heat.’”³ Tanaka’s *Water and Stone* (1999) allows us to linger in the stillness of her garden and take such a visionary journey. This work is not a depiction of any specific garden. Rather, as the composer notes it “suggests various reflections of light when water flows over different colored stones, and also various phases of water itself.” Tanaka’s description cannot help but remind us of such French Impressionist painters as Monet (a connoisseur of Japanese prints), attempting to capture on canvas the constantly changing play of light in his garden in Giverny. In a musical analogue, tones are introduced by one instrument, then shared with or passed to another, constantly changing their timbral coloration. As in Tanaka’s other works, the cello and contrabass supply long pedal tones (Tanaka credits her playing the organ in church with a special fondness for long low tones in her music), while the harp embroiders the sonic tapestry with delicate repeated figures. The music sparkles and flows in ways we don’t anticipate but that our ears always welcome. The final section brings the ostinato idea to the forefront with the addition of the vibraphone—as listeners we are invited to enjoy this moment of reflection, and we are glad to do just that in this unapologetically gorgeous piece. Scored for an amplified ensemble of clarinet, two percussionists (both playing vibraphones and crotales), harp, violin, viola, cello, and five-string double bass, *Water and Stone* was commissioned by Radio France and first performed in Paris by the Ensemble TM+ conducted by Laurent Cuniot on March 4, 2000.

—Marilyn Bliss

Marilyn Bliss is a composer, writer, and editor, and is president of New York Women Composers.

Recipient of the prestigious Charles Ives Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, **Chen Yi** has served as a Distinguished Professor in Music Composition at the Conservatory of the University of Missouri-Kansas City since 1998. Born in 1953 in Guangzhou, China, Ms. Chen has received music degrees from the Beijing Central Conservatory and Columbia University in the City of New York (DMA). Ms. Chen's major composition teachers included Professors Chou Wen-chung, Mario Davidovsky, Wu Zu-qiang and Alexander Goehr.

Ms. Chen has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the Lieberson Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has received major commissions from the Koussevitzky, Fromm, Ford, and Rockefeller foundations, the National Endowment for the Arts, Chamber Music America, the San Francisco Arts Commission, and Carnegie Hall. Commissioning ensembles and soloists include the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Mira Wang along with the Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden, and the Orchestra of St. Luke's, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Seattle Symphony, Yo-Yo Ma and the Pacific Symphony, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Women's Philharmonic, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, Philadelphia Classical Symphony, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Tokyo-born composer **Karen Tanaka** studied composition with Akira Miyoshi and piano with Nobuko Amada at Toho Gakuen School of Music. She then moved to Paris in 1986 to study composition with Tristan Murail and work at IRCAM as an intern. In 1987 she was awarded the Gaudeamus Prize at the International Music Week in Amsterdam. She studied with Luciano Berio in Florence in 1990-91 with funds from the Nadia Boulanger Foundation and a Japanese Government Scholarship. She has been co-artistic director of the Yatsugatake Kogen Music Festival, previously directed by Toru Takemitsu. In 2005 she was awarded the Bekku Prize.

Since 2000, she has had significant premieres including five orchestral works: *Guardian Angel* for the Brooklyn Philharmonic, *Departure* for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, *Lost Sanctuary* for the NHK Symphony Orchestra, *Rose Absolute* commissioned by the Michael Vyner Trust for the NHK Symphony Orchestra conducted by Esa Pekka Salonen, and *Urban Prayer* for Joan Jeanrenaud (cello) and the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra conducted by Kent Nagano. The performance of *Guardian Angel* by the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl in July 2002 brought her music to the attention of the large audience in Los Angeles.

The Azure Ensemble has been a contemporary music presence in New York City and nationally since 1999. With a special emphasis on the music of living women composers, the Ensemble has an extensive commissioning history. The diverse instrumentation of the ensemble offers the flexibility to program unique compositions. The Azure Ensemble works directly with composers in order to effectively communicate their musical concepts. Commissions and premieres include works by Gabriela Lena Frank, Stella Sung, Yuriko Häse Kojima, Anne LeBaron, Zhou Long, Alexandra du Bois, Judith Shatin, Tristan Keuris, Marilyn Bliss, David Stock, Jacqueline Jeeyoung Kim, Alan Frederick Shockley, Alice Shields, Cynthia Folio, and Pablo Ortiz.

The Azure Ensemble has performed in such diverse venues as Merkin Concert Hall in New York City, the International Computer Music Conference at Tulane University in New Orleans, and on tour with the Arcady Music Festival in Maine. Other performances of the Ensemble have included presentations by the Kosciuszko Foundation of New York City, broadcast live on WQXR, the Morris Museum in New Jersey, New York University, and Temple University in Philadelphia.

Susan Glaser, director of The Azure Ensemble, has brought contemporary works to her recitals worldwide. She has performed in such concert halls as London's Wigmore Hall, Toho Gakuen in Tokyo, the Field Room of Ireland's National Concert Hall, the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, Alice Tully Hall, and Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. She has collaborated with the Lark Quartet at Merkin Concert Hall.

Ms. Glaser has presented solo recordings on the Koch International Classics label, all of which feature contemporary music. An accomplished piccolo player, Ms. Glaser has recorded one of the few existing discs of contemporary piccolo music. Her performances and recordings have been broadcast in national syndication for National Public Radio's Performance Today, "Center Stage at Wolftrap," BBC London, CBC Toronto, WGBH Boston, KFDC San Francisco, WFMT Chicago, and WQXR and WNYC in New York.

Ms. Glaser holds a doctorate from The Juilliard School. Her principal teachers have been Julius Baker, Geoffrey Gilbert, Walfrid Kujala, and Peter Lloyd, and she has been the recipient of a Fulbright grant. In addition to the master classes she gives nationally and abroad as a Powell Artist, she is currently on the faculty of New York University.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Chen Yi

Eleanor's Gift. Paul Tobias, cello; Virginia Symphony; JoAnn Falletta, conductor. Albany Records 648.

Momentum. Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Lan Shui, conductor. Bis 1352.

The Music of Chen Yi. Bay Area Women's Philharmonic, Chanticleer, JoAnn Falletta, conductor. New Albion Records NA 090.

Sparkle. New Music Consort, Music from China, Manhattan String Quartet, New York New Music Ensemble. New World/CRI NWCR 804.

Karen Tanaka

Prismes. Malmö Symphony Orchestra, Jun'ichi Hirokami, conductor. Bis 490.

The Song of Songs. Joan Jeanrenaud, cello. New Albion 120.

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All works recorded at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York City: *Frozen Horizon* and *Water and Stone*, June 16, 2008; *Wu Yu*, October 9, 2008; *Invisible Curve* and . . . *as like a raging fire . . .*, October 11, 2008; *Night Thoughts*, October 12, 2008.

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Chen Yi

Wu Yu (2002)

1. *I* 8:34

2. *II* 5:45

Susan Glaser, flute; Pavel Vinnitsky, clarinet; Marc Goldberg, bassoon; Airi Yoshioka, violin; Pitnarry Shin, cello; Ingrid Gordon, percussion; William Purvis, conductor

Karen Tanaka

3. *Frozen Horizon* (1998) 8:24

Susan Glaser, flute; Airi Yoshioka, violin; Conrad Harris, violin; Karen Ritscher, viola; Pitnarry Shin, cello; Gail Kruvand-Moye, contrabass; Michael Lipsey, percussion; Matthew Gold, percussion; Gerald Steichen, conductor

Karen Tanaka

4. *Water and Stone* (1999) 9:29

Airi Yoshioka, violin; Karen Ritscher, viola; Pitnarry Shin, cello; Gail Kruvand-Moye, contrabass; Esther Lamneck, clarinet; Michael Lipsey, percussion; Matthew Gold, percussion; Jessica Zhou, harp; Gerald Steichen, conductor

Chen Yi

5. *Night Thoughts* (2004) 9:21

Susan Glaser, flute; Pitnarry Shin, cello; Christopher Oldfather, piano

Karen Tanaka

6. *Invisible Curve* (1996, rev. 1999) 10:49

Susan Glaser, flute; Airi Yoshioka, violin; Karen Ritscher, viola; Pitnarry Shin, cello; Christopher Oldfather, piano; William Purvis, conductor

Chen Yi

7. . . . *as like a raging fire . . .* (2002) 8:29

Susan Glaser, flute; Airi Yoshioka, violin; Pavel Vinnitsky, clarinet; Pitnarry Shin, cello; Christopher Oldfather, piano; William Purvis, conductor

TT: 61:20

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¹ *Dictionary of Contemporary Music*, John Vinton, ed. (Dutton, 1974)

² Joshua Fineberg, "Spectral Music: History and Techniques," *Contemporary Music Review* 19, no. 2, 2000.

³ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).