

Lei Liang is a Chinese-born American composer whose work can be situated within the lineage of the new wave of Chinese composers (such as Chen Yi, Zhou Long, Tan Dun, Bright Sheng), yet whose vivid musical imagination and philosophical interests place him in a league of his own. The distinctiveness of his compositional approach, first and foremost, can be noted in Liang's avoidance of exoticized Chinese elements: one would not find stylized quotations of familiar folk songs or clichéd treatment of instruments. Born into the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and denied access to older traditions of art forms in China, Liang considers himself raised in a cultural and spiritual “ground zero.” Once he came to America as a high-school student, Liang made painstaking efforts to acquire knowledge of Chinese traditional culture by studying and copying classics, sutras, and treatises on paintings by hand. Liang describes this effort as a way to “break down a modern Great Wall” that separates him from his own heritage. Furthermore, Liang's displacement from his homeland has led him to intensify his search for a deeper cultural connection to Asian musical practice and aesthetics at large, as his interests cover the Beijing opera, *guqin* (Chinese zither), and Inner Mongolian music, as well as music of other parts of Asia. In searching for an appropriate framework for transforming these resources, he often embarks on a sonic exploration of a philosophical concept or idea to create music that contains multiple surfaces and trajectories for the listener to decipher.

In this CD album entitled *Milou*, Liang offers a labyrinth of sounds in musical space, deploying various modernist and avant-garde procedures (post-serial techniques involving canons, indeterminacy, extended techniques for acoustic instruments, spectral analysis) to express music as a form of ritual—its rich layers of meanings to be experienced and deciphered through the act of listening and reflection. Particularly important to his compositional orientation is the transference of an image or movement from one medium to another. One could say that each piece in this album transforms a nature-based or calligraphic image into organized musical sounds, which impart to the listener an expressive idea with shifting points of reference. It is as if Liang provides a point of entry, inviting the listener to construct his/her own path through the labyrinth.

*Milou* refers to the garden built for Emperor Yang of Sui (569–618 AD), who ordered his architects to design a “labyrinth palace”; inside many hidden doors that led to secret chambers, the Emperor would lose (*mi*) himself in the experience of pleasure and beauty. Building on this metaphor, Liang's music similarly offers an imaginary landscape with hidden doors and secret chambers. Following his previous CD release, *Brush-Stroke*, Liang continues to expand the timbral resources of Western instruments, creating sounds that conjure up vivid images and cultural references. One hidden door reveals how the composer skillfully *camouflages* sounds—an utterance that sounds like a Beijing opera singer's voice is produced by an alto saxophone's mouthpiece, what sounds like a Buddhist monk's rumble is produced by a trombone with Harmon mute, and so forth. A secret chamber inside these doors reveals Liang's disciplined construction of musical materials in the modernist vein; the rhythmic permutation of vocables and the rhythmic proportions and pitch materials in *Milou* were generated by a matrix, and rhythmic and temporal canons pervade the structure of many other pieces at the detailed level. Opening yet another door, the intuitive side of Liang's creative impulse manifests itself; inspired by nature imagery or the visual movement of brushstrokes in Chinese paintings, his music captures the ephemeral, spatial movement in sound that emulates a shadow cast by a moonlit lake or fluid shapes that appear and disappear on water. His music calls to attention the paradoxical relationship posed by the transience and remembrance of beauty.

Inside his musical labyrinth, the listener also comes face to face with Liang's deep and passionate exploration of the human psyche in embracing modern political history in China. In 1989, Liang, then a teenager, participated in the mass demonstrations and witnessed the bloodshed of the Tiananmen Square protest. And to this day, he grapples with the memories of what he witnessed, the faces of those who sacrificed their lives. Following *Memories of Xiaoxiang* for solo saxophone and tape, he composed *Yuan* in paying homage to China's history of violence and injustice—a piece that builds up to the wailing lamentation of human cries—expressed through a saxophone quartet. Anthropologist Victor Turner introduces the notion of *liminality* as an experience of crossing a threshold between two existential planes, leading to the dissolution of identity in ritual practice. There are moments when Liang similarly creates a ritual experience that transports us to this liminal place, where we are taken to the furthest threshold of consciousness in our response to sound and what it entails. His sounds transcend their own source in projecting refracted elements of human consciousness as a collective voice.

In *Milou* (1996–99) for saxophones, voices, percussion, electric guitar, piano and harpsichord, we are lured into Emperor Yang's dream world through the opening alto saxophone line that simulates a Beijing opera singer's poetic recitation, complete with delicate ornaments and wailing intonations of a dignified female (*qingyi*) role. Then the cascading entries of saxophones provide a resonant and subtly changing harmonic field, out of which theatrical gestures such as a growling sound and interlocking vocables suddenly emerge into the foreground. Next, the percussionists, piano, harpsichord and guitar provide an energetic rhythmic counterpart to the resonant harmonic field created by the saxophones, followed by dueling gongs and temple blocks. These sounds come and go as if we are being led through the various interior quarters of Yang's pleasure kingdom. And, as if one awakens from a dream, the piano and electric guitar conclude the piece with a somber, pointillistic texture that signals a nostalgic and wistful afterthought. *Milou* was commissioned by First Night Boston in collaboration with the Tremont Theatre Dance Project and premiered on the eve of the new millennium in the Emerson Majestic Theater in Boston.

*Ascension* (2008), for brass quintet and percussion, presents a boisterous ritual of celebration, tempered by moments of serenity and contemplation. It opens with high trills and tremolo figures played by trumpets and trombone over a rhythmic ostinato in the percussion. The low, rhythmic utterance of the tuba ushers in a transition to a playful sparring of horn, trombone, and tuba using glissandi, followed by a more somber, chorale-like section for the brass. The temple blocks' solo segues to clapping and intersecting vocables uttered by the trumpets. The middle section offers a different kind of ritual, a sacred prayer that calls to mind Tibetan Buddhists' chant, with speech-like rumbles made possible through the plunger and Harmon mutes. Then the somber chorale texture returns, intermingled with playful variations of previously introduced textures, which take us back to the wild, orgiastic outcry of the opening. The piece was commissioned by and dedicated to the Meridian Arts Ensemble, which gave its premiere at the Manhattan School of Music.

Liang's longstanding interest in calligraphy has led him to experiment with various manners for translating calligraphic strokes into sonic gestures, for example, by tracing the calligraphic strokes of Chinese characters inside the piano. *Winged Creatures—a Cadenza for Harpsichord* (2006), composed for Takae Ohnishi as an encore piece for her recital, requires the harpsichordist to improvise the cadenza based on the Chinese character for *flight*. To this end, Ohnishi uses a variety of extended techniques—plucking the strings with fingernails, sliding her palm on the

strings, bending the note after attack with a tuning key, etc.—to evoke the image of avian creatures in flight. In the beginning, violins and cello apply *flautando* (a fast bow with a lot of air) and *sul ponticello* techniques to recreate a calligraphic stroke called *chousi bifa* (“drawing out the thread”). While the ethereal harmonies sustained by the strings evoke the sounds of open air and wind, the harpsichord—our winged protagonist—moves abruptly between the high and low registers of the instrument to create dramatic tension and an opposition of forces. Liang comments that the extended techniques for the harpsichord were inspired by the energy and flow of calligraphic strokes found in works by master calligraphers from the Song or Tang dynasty. On a philosophical level, the piece encapsulates the cosmological order and chaos present in natural phenomena.

*A Journey into Desire* (2009) is based on a narrative of *Honglou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber) by the eighteenth-century author Cao Xueqin. In creating a musical parallel to the Buddhist story about the illusory world of human existence, Liang uses core pitches (G, E, A) to represent the protagonist Boyu in his journey. Throughout this cyclical variation, the intermittent chords and dramatic gestures represent Boyu’s encounter with the twelve female beauties of *Jinling* in the human realm. Do the pitch bends and glissandi represent scenes of seduction? Do the mournful and sobbing gestures at the end represent the women’s reaction to being left behind? The guitar’s expressive gestures evoke drama without offering a definitive narrative. Liang also introduces vibratos of different speed and “reverse” bend (producing the pitch with the string already bent and then unbending), among other bending techniques for the left hand of the guitar, which are inspired by performing techniques associated with pipa and guzheng to create a musical expression of sobbing. The piece was commissioned by the South Bay Guitar Society and dedicated to Steve Lin, who gave its premiere at San Jose State University in 2009.

The meaning for *Yuan* (2008) in Chinese ranges from injustice, grievance or lamentation to prayer. By incorporating all three meanings in the eponymous work for saxophone quartet, Liang pays homage to the history of injustice—a recurring theme in Chinese history and literature. To this end, Liang took the intonations and melodic contours of the sound of the Chinese text from Guan Hanqing’s fourteenth-century play *Injustice to Dou-E* as the main source for the principal musical materials for this work. And the narrative import of this work is intensely tragic; the piece begins with rapid rhythmic figurations played *tutti* that symbolically manifest violence; intermittent solo entries of the soprano saxophone (with glides) signify lamentation. The middle section represents a “timeless” prayer, comprising sustained tones with subtle changes in articulation that make one think of wind passing through a desolate landscape. A nostalgic moment is captured by the folk song from the Yao group of the Hunan province played by the soprano saxophone, with the backdrop of resonant multiphonics played by other saxophones. There is the resurgence of violence that accompanies the return of the opening material, with keyclicks and open slaps adding to the anarchic interplay of sounds. Much to the listener’s surprise, the piece concludes with an expression of intense lamentation; the players use detached mouthpieces to create mournful gestures, “as if the tormented souls could only find comfort in the company of one another,” Liang remarks. These voices of human cry recede into the background as the fragment of the Yao folksong is heard once again. *Yuan* was commissioned by World-Wide Concurrent Premieres and Commissioning Fund, Inc. and was made possible through a grant from the Fromm Music Foundation.

There is often a vivid image that provides a point of reference for hearing Liang's music. Such is the case for *Lake* (1999) for two flutes. The sight of a beaver making a "V" shape on the surface of the water in a moonlit lake inspired Liang to compose a duet where the flutists "inscribe their markings with sound on the surface of silence." The intermingling of two sounds, slowly shifting in their intonation, mode of articulation, and dynamic shading, recreate the ephemeral experience of gliding on water and tracing the shadow cast by a moon. *Lake* was composed for Orlando Cela and Masumi Yoneyama in 1999.

The Harp Concerto (2008) was influenced by the paintings of Huang Binhong (1865–1955), whose work emanates luminosity amid thick, dark layers of ink. By analogy, Liang conceived this work for harp as a subject that "shines through the dense forest of the orchestra." To this end, he assigns a whole range of extended techniques to the harp, including plucking with fingernails, bending tone with tuning key, palm glissando, use of felt timpani mallets, sliding with a protractor, and inserting a piece of paper. In the first section marked "Slowly and Intensely," the harp serves the role of a protagonist whose action sets off a series of reactions from other instruments. Beginning with subtle responses in the flute's whistle tones and strings' glissando harmonics, the composite texture gradually builds in rhythmic momentum and textural density. The second section, marked "Ethereal and Blurry," shows off the lyrical and resonant qualities of the harp; crotales and tam tam offer rhythmic counterpoint to the gentle strumming of the harp in a manner that recalls Bartók's night music. The third section "With Clarity" involves the cascading entries of other instruments to echo the harp's rapid trill, followed by a passage where the harp's arpeggiation triggers harmonics in woodwinds and strings to create a resonant harmonic spectrum. Such techniques expand on Liang's concept of "one-note-polyphony" introduced in his earlier work *Brush-Stroke*. The final section introduces a syncopated, dance-like rhythm in the harp, based on rhythmic and temporal canons, as other instruments join one layer at a time in building to a climactic plateau. The harp's luminous presence dominates as it interacts with increasingly smaller instrumental forces and concludes the piece with an upward flourish of glissandi in thirds. The Harp Concerto was commissioned by the Manhattan Sinfonietta and is dedicated to harpist June Han and conductor Jeffrey Milarsky. It received its premiere at New York City's Merkin Concert Hall in 2009.

Listening to Liang's music is cathartic in the sense that it releases us from the familiar conventions that trap our mind's ear to an expected course of hearing and response to musical sounds. Moreover, he turns his personal and collective histories into music that conveys powerful and primal emotions at times, providing a glimpse into the dark recesses of the human psyche. He comments on his quest to develop his own voice amid a plethora of musical, cultural, and aesthetic influences as follows: "I like old music that is new, and new music that is old. The old music that I study contains the seeds of the future; the new music that I admire seems to enfold shadows of time." In embracing the past in the future and the future in the past, Liang's musical vision frees itself from the burden of time. And as listeners, we are caught unbound in the timeless space and transported into his imaginary landscape of sounds.

*Yayoi Uno Everett is Associate Professor of Music Theory at Emory University in Atlanta and specializes in the analysis of postwar art music through the perspectives of literary criticism, semiotics, cultural studies, and East Asian aesthetics.*

**Lei Liang** (b. 1972) is a Chinese-born American composer whose orchestral, chamber and stage works have been performed throughout the world. Winner of the 2011 Rome Prize, Lei Liang is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Aaron Copland Award, and has received commissions from the New York Philharmonic and the Taipei Chinese Orchestra. Other commissions and performances have come from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fromm Music Foundation, Meet the Composer, Chamber Music America, the Arditti and Shanghai Quartets, San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, New York New Music Ensemble, Boston Musica Viva, and the pipa virtuoso Wu Man. As a scholar, he is active in the research and preservation of traditional Asian music. Lei Liang studied composition with Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Robert Cogan, Chaya Czernowin, Mario Davidovsky and Joshua Fineberg, and received degrees from the New England Conservatory of Music (B.M. and M.M.) and Harvard University (Ph.D). He taught in China as Distinguished Visiting Professor at Shaanxi Normal University College of Arts in Xi'an, served as Honorary Professor of Composition and Sound Design at Wuhan Conservatory of Music, and as Visiting Assistant Professor of Music at Middlebury College. He currently serves as Associate Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego.  
[www.lei-liang.com](http://www.lei-liang.com)

The **Manhattan Sinfonietta** presented world-class performances of contemporary art music from America and abroad, with a particular emphasis on works for large ensembles and works integrating ensembles with electronics. The Sinfonietta's membership consisted of some of New York City's finest performers of contemporary music. Past seasons included highly successful performances of Wolfgang Rihm's *Jagden und Formen* and a weekend-long festival devoted to music by James Tenney and Milton Babbitt.

The **Meridian Arts Ensemble**, a sextet comprised of five brass players and a percussionist, is America's leading brass group exploring the music of today. Founded in 1987, with ten commercial CD releases, more than fifty premieres, and performances on four continents and in forty-nine states, Meridian's devotion to contemporary music has brought the ensemble to a faculty position in Manhattan School of Music's Contemporary Performance Program.

Founded in 2003, The **Radnofsky Quartet** has been the featured saxophone quartet in Opera Boston's production of *Nixon in China*, NPR's "Says You," WGBH, NDTV, and the "American Composers Alliance Festival" in Symphony Space in New York City, as well as residencies at Brandeis University, Tufts University, Boston Conservatory, and Bowdoin College, to name a few. The Quartet has commissioned numerous works and has recordings on Innova and Albany Records.

Originally from Taiwan, **Chia-Ling Chien** is currently the Associate Principal Cellist of the San Diego Symphony. The First Prize winner of the National Taiwan Cello Competition and Best Performance of Bach Prize at the Corpus Christi International Competition, she graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Music with a B.M. and an M.M.

**John Fonville** has been dedicated to contemporary music for forty years as a flutist, composer, conductor and theorist. Extending the language and technique of the instrument, he performs on a complete set of quarter-tone flutes. He has been on the faculty of the University of California, San Diego since 1983.

Guitarist **Pablo Gómez**'s repertoire includes classics of the twentieth century and modern works to works written for him by renowned contemporary composers. He has performed in the United States, Canada, South America and Europe, including major festivals in Mexico. He is a professor at Mexico's National University (UNAM) and is currently pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of California, San Diego.

Harpist **June Han** holds degrees from the Paris Conservatory, Yale School of Music, and The Juilliard School. She is on the faculties of Yale and Columbia universities, The Juilliard School, and Bowdoin International Music Festival. She has appeared with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and Speculum Musicae, and frequently performs with the New York City Opera and the New York Philharmonic.

**Kate Hatmaker** is a violinist with the San Diego Symphony, and is also the Artistic Director of the chamber music organization Art of Élan. She has performed with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and the New World Symphony, and has been a soloist with the San Diego Symphony and the Breckenridge Music Festival.

**Jeffrey Milarsky** is a Professor of Music at Columbia University and the Music Director/Conductor of the Columbia University Orchestra. He also teaches at The Juilliard School and Manhattan School of Music. He has led such accomplished groups as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, American Composers Orchestra, the New York New Music Ensemble, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Speculum Musicae, the New York Philharmonic chamber music series, and the Manhattan Sinfonietta.

Harpsichordist **Takae Ohnishi** studied with Arthur Haas, Peter Sykes, John Gibbons, and Chiyoko Arita, and received degrees from Toho Gakuen School of Music in Tokyo (B.M.), the New England Conservatory of Music (M.M.) and Stony Brook University (D.M.A.). Since 2007, she has been serving as Lecturer of Harpsichord and Baroque Chamber Music at the University of California, San Diego and at the University of San Diego.

Flutist/composer **Jane Rigler** recently joined the interdisciplinary music department at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. She was a Japan/US Friendship Commission winner in 2009–10, where she led collaborations with many artists throughout Japan. Besides performing, composing and teaching, she organizes musical events in diverse sites, including MOMA in New York City and local neighborhoods.

**Jeffrey Zehngut** is Associate Principal Second Violin of the San Diego Symphony. He studied with William Preucil and Paul Kantor at the Cleveland Institute of Music and with James Lyon at Penn State University. He is also a member of Orchestra Nova.

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Tara Helen O'Connor, flute; James Austin Smith, oboe; Gilad Harel, clarinet; Adrian Morejon, bassoon; Patrick Pridemore, horn; Sycil Mathai, trumpet; Tom Hutchinson, trombone; Tom Kolor, Matt Ward, percussion; Stephen Gosling, piano; Cyrus Beroukhim, Calvin Wiersma, violins; Daniel Panner, viola; Gregory Hesselink, cello; Gregg August, contrabass; Jeffrey Milarsky, conductor

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Producer: Lei Liang

Editing: *Ascension*: Brian McWhorter. *Winged Creatures*: Scott Levine. *Lake, A Journey into Desire*: Tom Erbe. *Yuan*, Harp Concerto: Josef Kucera. *Milou*: Lei Liang, remix by Tom Erbe. Additional editing and mastering of all tracks: Tom Erbe

*Ascension*: Kevin Cobb, producer, Kevin Boutote, engineer. Recorded January 19, 2010 at Miller Recital Hall, Manhattan School of Music.

*Winged Creatures*: Scott Levine, engineer. Recorded September 15, 2010 at Conrad Prebys Concert Hall, UC San Diego.

*A Journey into Desire*: Tom Erbe, engineer. Recorded June 9, 2010 at Conrad Prebys Concert Hall, UC San Diego.

*Yuan*: Jeremy Sarna, engineer. Recorded live February 17, 2009 at Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory of Music.

*Lake*: Tom Erbe, engineer. Recorded January 23, 2011 at Warren Music Studios, UC San Diego.  
Harp Concerto: Sam Pluta, engineer. Recorded live February 18, 2009 at Merkin Concert Hall, New York City.

*Milou*: Patrick Keating, engineer. Compiled from live performances at Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory of Music, Boston, January 1997 to October 1999.

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4. *Yuan* (2008) 16:31  
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