

Review of Lee Pui Ming's New CD:

Emotional landscapes

by Laiwan

NINE FOLD HEART

by the Lee Pui Ming Ensemble
Pochee Records
Vancouver, 1994

"My music is rooted in improvisation, Chinese music and jazz. It starts from these sources and proceeds to break their boundaries," says Lee Pui Ming.

By now, most of us have witnessed Lee Pui Ming's dynamic performances (the Vancouver Folk Music Festival, last year's Racy Sexy Exhibition, or at the UBC Museum of Anthropology). We know her impassioned stage presence, her confidence in her musical knowledge and her playful improvising using the grand piano as piano, percussion instrument or echo box. Lee's performances were remarkable because visually her body expressed as much as what we heard musically.

Lee Pui Ming is fast becoming one of Canada's foremost contemporary pianists/composers. With her recent CD release of *Nine Fold Heart* Lee pursues her passion and vision to contemporize Chinese traditional and folk music by interpreting these into modern musical experiences in a North American context.

"I want to create a cultural expression that is alive and vital and that speaks to Chinese-Canadians here and now," says Lee.

For me, this CD is a release—and a relief that here is a body of work that expresses the complexities and intelligence of a contemporary Chinese-Canadian experience. The unusual way she interprets famous traditional tunes and the originality in her use of traditional Chinese instruments is refreshing. It defies the simplistic exoticization and eroticization of "Chineseness" in the West by presenting a profound interpretation of emotional landscapes in the here and now.

Nine Fold Heart is intense. There is exacting musicianship from Lee and her ensemble, made up of members from the Vancouver Chinese Music Ensemble: Qui Li

Rong on pipa/Chinese lute, and Yu Zhi Min on zhong ruan/Chinese guitar, Huang Ji Rong on erhu/Chinese violin and Pan Jian Ming on dizi/Chinese flute, with Vancouver percussionist Salvador Ferreras. A wide range of emotions are explored, transforming the comfort of the traditional into an amazing labyrinthine weaving of landscapes.

The CD begins with a lively "Danse Extravaganza" which uses as source material Xinjiang dance rhythms and music from the Westernmost region of China. It is a fast-paced adventurous trip that reflects the music from people who live along the Silk Road. Even with the Chinese instrumentation, influences of Persian rhythm and melody can be heard, showing the cultural exchange between China and Central and West Asia.

"Tale of Three Snakes" is an original composition featuring the three women of the ensemble Qui Li Rong, Yu Zhi Min and Lee. A highly visual piece with only the title informing the story, this instrumental is actually very funny. Through the melodrama of the interrelations between the three snakes—the hates and loves, the intrigues, the plottings and the foils—unfolds a tumbling tale in my imagination guided by the intensity of the musicianship and the playfulness of the images.

During a performance last year, the fast pace of this work and the manic shifts to hurriedly put the aluminum foil into place on the piano strings or along the neck of the zhong ruan at the right moment in the composition, certainly attained the desired musical effect. It also discouraged a romanticization of tradition.

"Three Kingdoms" begins with a nostalgic source, a pipa classic titled "Ambushed on Ten Sides" which has been a popular Chinese tune for two thousand years. It evokes for me the solitary dignity of the pipa that quietly moves into a darker side with Lee's piano. This is a composition about the horrors of war. It also demonstrates Lee's skill in weaving the traditional with the modern. The contemporary feel of this work connects the pain of war from the Three



photo by Laiwan

Kingdoms period of 200 A.D. to the misery and abjection of our wars today.

Nine Fold Heart is the least "Chinese" sounding work in a traditional sense. It is said to be a work "that probes the layers of the heart." Here, I hear a heart that is intricate, uncontained, mysterious, fluttering...

A lively ode to the favourite Chinese fictional character, "The Monkey King Suite" changes the pace with a playful rhythm. The great Monkey King has long been a source of inspiration for creativity for many. This is the only suite in this collection where Lee uses her experimental vocalisations of monkey-like sounds and traditional Chinese opera to describe the scenario with much passion and zeal.

Because it is reminiscent of popular Chinese street opera/plays, "Why Don't We Eat Noodles?" is a work that departs from the others. Written for the members of this ensemble it uses three different dialects of Chinese—Shanghainese, Cantonese and Mandarin—and expresses the chaos and fun surrounding the inability to decide what kind of noodles to eat. Within the vastness of China, noodles vary from region to region just as the dialects vary. This work celebrates this diversity, and although there is difference and debate, it also celebrates the one basic necessity: food, which through the pleasures of eating unifies difference.

On another level, the significance of "eating" and food as a cultural marker in much contemporary creative work by Chinese in the diaspora, and by Asians in general, intrigues me greatly.

The last piece on this CD is "The Grande Love Song." Its sources are a song from a classic opera about the pain of unrequited love, and an original Lee composition called "The Wedding," from her first recorded collection *Ming*. Lee skillfully weaves the traditional with the original to give this "love song" a life of its own.

Nine Fold Heart is a bold challenge to the traditional, embodying the diverse range of musical interests and expressions, intelligent experimentation and a passionate fervour to contemporize Chinese Canadian musical experience. It probably exemplifies the boldest challenge she has given herself.

Lee Pui Ming and her Ensemble will be launching *Nine Fold Heart* with a special concert at the UBC Museum of Anthropology on Friday May 13th at 8pm. Definitely a performance not to miss.

Born in Zimbabwe of Chinese origin, Laiwan is an interdisciplinary artist based in Vancouver since 1977.



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