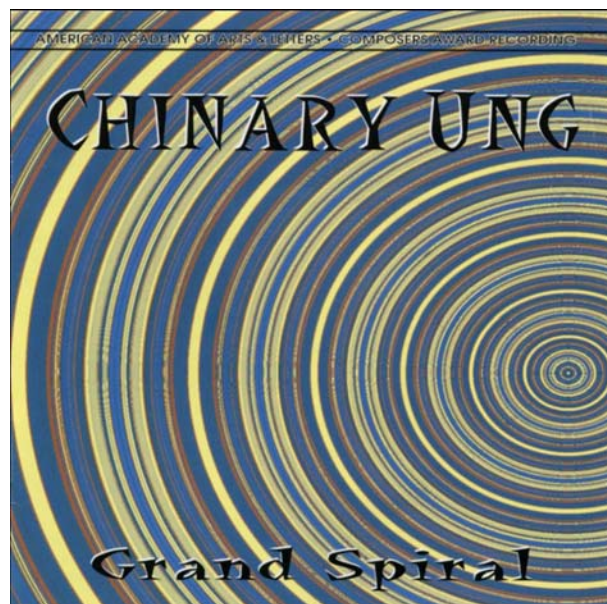


NWCR710

Chinary Ung

Grand Spiral



1. *Grand Spiral* for Symphonic Band (1990) (11:59)
Arizona State University Symphonic Band;
Richard E. Strange, conductor

2. *Spiral II* (1989) (9:49)
Judy May Sellheim, mezzo-soprano; Robert Hamilton, piano; Daniel Perantoni, tuba; Arthur Weisberg, conductor
3. *Khse Buon* for Viola Solo (1980) (11:02)
Susan Lee Pounders Ung, viola
4. *Mohori* (1974) (12:36)
Barbara Martin, soprano; Contemporary Chamber Ensemble: George Haas, oboe; Kenneth Hosley, percussion; Susan Jolles, harp; Gilbert Kalish, piano; Susan Palma, flute; Joseph Passaro, percussion; David Starobin, guitar; Arthur Weisberg, conductor
5. *Khse Buon* for Cello Solo (1980) (18:48)
Marc Johnson, cello
6. *Tall Wind* (1970) (7:09)
Joan Heller, soprano; Keith Underwood, flute; Robert Atherholt, oboe; David Starobin, guitar; Chris Finckel, cello; Arthur Weisberg, conductor

Total playing time: 72:06

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Notes

Try, for a moment, to imagine a landscape for Chinary Ung's *Grand Spiral*. Where—even on the most up-to-the-second multicultural, postmodern map—might you find a concert band that sounds like a gamelan and a concert band? Where, short of finding John Coltrane wandering through the Mekong Delta, might a saxophone quartet prominently display the sinuous interlocking lines of Asian music but still effortlessly submerge into close jazz harmonies? Where might you find a concert band playing music of tremendously intricate rhythms, riotously colorized effects, while making so singular an impression? Where might complexity and simplicity, diversity and unity, form and structure, improvisation and purpose, all seem to derive from the same musically unified field theory?

When **Chinary Ung** won the Grawemeyer Award for Musical Composition in 1989 for his orchestral work, *Inner Voices* (written shortly before *Grand Spiral* and nearly as exotic), it was indeed as if his music came out of nowhere. Ung wasn't exactly unknown—three selections on this collection, *Tall Wind*, *Mohori*, and *Khse Buon*, are reissues of recordings that had already been released on CRI. But a composer born in Cambodia, who was then teaching at Arizona State University, Tempe, hardly had the international visibility of previous Grawemeyer winners: György Ligeti, Witold Lutoslawski, and Harrison Birtwistle. Additionally, *Inner Voices* happened to be a stylistic breakthrough for Ung. [A recording of *Inner Voices* by the American Composers Orchestra and conductor Dennis Russell Davies was recently released on the Argo label.] This recording offers a

fascinating display of Ung's difficult and fascinating progress into his exotic and unique musical landscape.

Born in Takeo, Cambodia in 1942, Ung grew up in a musical environment exclusively Cambodian or Khmer. But it was the unlikely E-flat clarinet that he studied at the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, simply because that was, by chance, the only instrument available to him. After emigrating to the United States in 1964, Ung enrolled at the Manhattan School of Music to continue his studies in clarinet but discovered, in the process, a talent for composition, which he continued at Columbia University, where he received a D.M.A. in 1974. Since the fall of 1995, Ung has been teaching at the University of California, San Diego.

Ung's earliest music, as represented here by *Tall Wind* from 1970, is often noted for its Asian brushstrokes. And although there is the delicate and subtle use of instrumental color and the elegant ornamentation, Asia was not consciously on Ung's mind in the composition of the score. *Tall Wind* is more characteristic of the uptown, modernist music of the time in New York. Written for soprano, flute, oboe, guitar and cello, it is in three movements: the first, a vocalise; the succeeding ones, settings of two poems by e.e. cummings, which also fit suitably into post-Webern language that dominated academic music at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s.

In contrast with *Tall Wind*, four years later Ung made a conscious attempt to recreate something of the Cambodian musical experience while still working within the post-Webern framework. The result was *Mohori* for mezzo-soprano and chamber ensemble. In Khmer music, *Mohori* is

the royal palace ensemble consisting of voice, winds, strings and percussion. Also, *Sat Mohori* is the term for a legendary bird in Khmer folk song.

Mohori is based on the phonetic interjection, “hai-oe,” that Khmer singers, both in the royal orchestra and also in folk song, use for emotional emphasis. It is, Ung says, neither intended as an escape from words nor, in a pushy sense, to command a listener’s thoughts. Rather, it implies “a diffuse emotional state” that Ung felt underlied his compositional process. This diffuseness is most apparent in the kind of lyricism that pervades *Mohori* through a continually changing field of floating sound colors and effects.

The diffuseness of *Mohori*, while successfully bridging huge cultural gaps, could also be read as Ung’s difficulty in finding a cultural identity. While much of the piece maintains an intentionally floating feeling, the music symbolized a kind of ethnic drifting or isolation, which deeply troubled the composer. This was the direct result of the war in Cambodia. From 1976 to 1980, Ung was completely cut off from communication with relatives in his homeland. After 1980, when word of survivors began arriving from Thai refugee camps via the Red Cross, he discovered that at least half of his family had perished from execution, starvation, and suicide.

As a result, Ung wrote no more music for eleven years— with an exception, in 1980, of the solo cello work, *Khse Buon*—but instead began a serious study of his native Khmer musical traditions. He learned and became an active performer on the roneat-ek, a Cambodian xylophone, and he compiled two volumes of Cambodian music for Folkways Records. He also became active in helping Cambodian refugees during perhaps the most difficult and tragic period in his country’s history.

During this decade of soul searching, Ung devoted himself not just to the study of Cambodian culture but to Asian aesthetics in general. While teaching at Northern Illinois University in the late 1970s, he also continued to perform with Western performers and became involved with group improvisation. All of these experiences found their way into *Khse Buon*, written for solo cello and also transcribed for solo viola by Susan Lee Pounders Ung (both versions are included herein). The transformation of the cello into an Eastern sounding instrument is of course immediately apparent to the listener, especially in the invocation of the Indian bowed instrument, the sarangi. More important, though, was the freeing of Ung’s musical language, which he claims was a result of his experience at improvisation.

But it was not until *Inner Voices*, commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1986 and conducted by Dennis

Russell Davies, that Ung found his authentic outer voice, a voice that could combine East and West with seeming effortlessness and great originality. Ung has now followed *Inner Voices* with a series of works, for various sized chamber ensembles and orchestra, based on the concept of a music spiral, including *Spiral II*, written in 1989, for mezzo-soprano, tuba and piano, and *Grand Spiral*, written in 1990, for symphonic band (and later transcribed for orchestra).

Ung says that there is not really an easily identifiable concept behind the spiral compositions, other than the structural use of antiphonal musical spirals that tend to regenerate themselves in one way or another. He describes the process as “a certain set of notes...recalled in succession to form newer and newer phrases—therefore extending not only the length, but also creating a ‘spin-off’ energy of notes in a spiral manner.” A similar kind of spiral process, used on a larger scale, restates certain passages in an alternative fashion “to generate a kind of formal structure by relying constantly on the previous passages to push forward in a type of ‘spiral’ form.”

A poetic multicultural spiraling is more noticeable, however, in *Spiral II* that is written in three sections without break. The first section, *Invocation*, employs the phoneme “na” and a dotted rhythm drawn from Cambodian music that is traditionally used to summon the surrounding spirits to join in. The second section, *The Island of Bali*, evokes the gamelan of Bali, and the third section, *Love Song*, is more free-formed, functioning with unmeasured meter.

Grand Spiral also has a striking poetic form, this time taken from a visual image. “The source of inspiration,” Ung wrote, “was the imagery of a translucent piece of sculpture that is constantly moving and rotating while reflecting sunlight, as perhaps a prism would. One can choose to see an artistic reality according to the time of the day and the varied positioning of the sculpture.” Ung says that in the process of writing the score he tried to imagine how the perpetual changing of visual colors could relate to gradations of instrumental color.

The result is a work that is always changing, always shimmering, always sonically and texturally elusive, turning back around and on itself in ways the listener more likely intuits than actually identifies. Perhaps, the model is not a musical structure or a cultural heritage, an emotional and spiritual state. Ung seems to say as much when he explains: “My philosophy is to explore my inner rhythms and feelings before I say it directly.”

—Mark Swed

Production Notes

Grand Spiral was recorded at Gammage Auditorium, Tempe, Arizona, 1990, Clarke Rigsby, engineer

Spiral II and *Khse Buon* for viola solo recorded at Kerr Center, Tempe, Arizona, January 29, 1991. Jack Miller, Sound engineer; Clarke Rigsby, Editing engineer.

From CRI SD 363: *Mohori*: Originally produced by Carter Harman, Recorded at National Edison Hotel, February 24, 1976

From CRI SD 487: *Khse Buon* for cello solo: Recorded in Dekalb, Illinois, 1982. Peter Middletown, Sound engineer. Tall Wind: Recorded at Vanguard Recording Studio, New York, 1982.

CD mastered by Joseph R. Dalton and Robert Wolff, engineer at Sony Classical Productions, INC., NYC.

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