

NWCR726

Mountain Clear Water Remote

Music of Bun-Ching Lam

Performed by the New Performance Group



1. *After Spring* (1983) (13:31)
Thomasa Eckert, piano; Bun-Ching Lam, piano
2. *Bittersweet Music* (1981) (3:29)
Paul Taub, piccolo
3. *Lü* (1983) (18:21)
Matthew Kocmierski, percussion
4. *Another Spring* (1988) (12:25)
Paul Taub, alto flute; Walter Gray, cello;
Bun-Ching Lam, piano
5. *Last Spring* (1992) (13:04)
Ella Marie Gray, violin; John Weller, violin;
Melissa Hamilton, viola; Walter Gray, cello;
Bun-Ching Lam, piano

Total Playing Time: 60:50

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Notes

Mountain – Water – Clear – Remote. Four single words, yet together they have the power to suggest a vast landscape. Composer Bun-Ching Lam loves to explore just such complexity hidden within simplicity. She meticulously develops basic musical materials, such as tone, texture, and movement, into intricate, elegant works of beauty.

Bun-Ching Lam didn't always envision herself a "painter" of aural landscapes, however. Born in 1954 in the Portuguese colony of Macau, she trained first as a pianist and received her bachelor's degree in performance from the Chinese University in Hong Kong. She only began composing in 1976, when she moved to the United States as a scholarship student at the University of California at San Diego, where her teachers included Bernard Rands, Robert Erickson, Roger Reynolds, and Pauline Oliveros, and where she received a Ph.D. in composition in 1981. From 1981 to 1986 Lam taught at the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. Since then, she has won a Rome Prize and received numerous grants; her works have been featured around the world at prestigious venues (Carnegie Hall: *Sudden Thunder*, American Composers Orchestra) and festivals (Bang on a Can, Pacific Soundings, Aspekte). Lam now lives in New York, where she enthusiastically collaborates with Chinese musicians, notably *pipa* virtuoso Wu Man, and works in Chinese Shadow Theater (*The Child God*). Upcoming premieres include a solo cello piece for Maya Beiser and *Fa* for the Minneapolis Guitar Quartet.

The five works on this CD span a lengthy, eleven-year period—almost Lam's entire career as a composer—yet they demonstrate a remarkably consistent sound world. Her highly personal musical language integrates the chromatic harmonic

vocabulary favored by postwar Western composers with an Asian sensitivity to timbre and the treatment of time. "I'm interested in the purity of resonance," she elaborates. "Music is like an 'action' painting, where ink splashes against the canvas and drips into thinner lines or settles in blobs, depending on the strength of the brushstroke or the density of the paper. Composers 'throw' notes, too, and they 'splash' or resonate in varying ways." (However, when she inflects sustained tones, Lam eschews typically "Chinese" techniques—such as microtonal inflection, pitch bending, and varying the intensity of vibrato—in favor of simply altering the resonating pitch's texture.) "Time must flow in a continuum," she continues, "I'm very concerned with the changing balance between stillness and motion in my music, so working with rhythm is a kind of discipline for me. I like to structure time in periodic, but not square, blocks."

Featured on this CD are three works from Lam's "Spring" cycle, an ongoing series that highlights the piano in various ensemble settings; each piece contrasts specific sonic characteristics of the piano to those of the accompanying group. Lam also plays with and incorporates symbolically the many different meanings of the word "spring" in this cycle; in Chinese poetry, "spring" carries strong associations (the season, a spring of water, spring up/spring down) and is used for veiled references (including sex). Lam hopes to add one more piece to this cycle, a piano concerto entitled *Eternal Spring*; not recorded here is *Springwaters* for piano and winds (1980).

After Spring for two pianos (1982–83), lyrical and dream-like, is based upon a simple five-note theme. This melodic cell, heard at the beginning of the piece, is slowly developed and varied, gradually generating chords and flourishes of

Romantic sweep. The interval of a perfect fifth (the last two notes of the five-note theme) is significant here both melodically and harmonically; near the work's conclusion, harmonies consist solely of superimposed fifths. Structured formally upon the general scheme of a traditional Chinese *Qin* composition ("Loose beginning – Into the tune – Contrasting: Into slow – Start again – Ending sound"), this sectional piece also investigates differing, and sometimes contrasting, moods, textures, and densities. Playful rhythmic cycles appear; repeating melodic patterns simultaneously run at different speeds or move in and out of phase as their accented notes shift in relation to the metric beat, and ostinati pulse at slightly irregular intervals of time.

The concept of lyricism governs the trio *Another Spring* (1988). Here Lam emphasizes the piano's linear capabilities to reflect the alto flute's and cello's inherently melodic natures. She also blends the instruments' timbres into a harmonious whole while retaining the individual quality of each instrument's voice. Numerous types of articulation in this trio colorfully generate an array of resonances.

The dark, brooding *Last Spring* (1992), written for pianist Ursula Oppens and the Arditti String Quartet, exemplifies Lam's mature compositional style. Here she probes the piano and string quartet's varying technical abilities to reverberate. "Unlike the string quartet," she elaborates, "the piano is incapable of modifying a sound once the key is depressed, nor is it possible to sustain a sound for very long. Yet it can produce massive sonority, overpowering most instruments. In *Last Spring* the string quartet is often used as an amplification of and an extension to the piano's resonance: at times echoing, other times reacting." This concept is introduced in the piece's opening: the piano's violent, yet quickly fading chords are prolonged by soft, scurrying figures in the strings. These both extend the duration of the piano's motive and modify its resonating texture. The idea of "separation"—the phasing in and out of togetherness—is likewise crucial in this piece. Lam plays with the relationship between the piano and the strongly individual timbres of the strings by occasionally blending, but most often keeping them distinct. Similarly, at times she tricks the listener by making ambiguous the exact placement of the beat; only rarely does the full ensemble observe the same accented beats.

Completing this CD are two of Lam's virtuosic works for solo instruments, idiomatically conceived and sensitively written for the performer. *Bittersweet Music I* (1981) explores the piccolo's expressive capacity and timbral possibilities and consciously employs pitch bending and microtones to emulate the sound of a *dizi* (Chinese bamboo flute). The "beats" resulting from octave multiphonics phasing in and out of perfect tune provide further textural coloring. *Lü* for percussion (1983), a stunning dance score for Seattle choreographer Gina Gibney, evokes a woman making an imaginary journey of the spirit. ("Lü" means journey or travelling in Chinese.) Applying Gibney's conception, Lam divided the score into six connected sections entitled

"Preparation – Emerge – Travel – Offer – Collect – Sacrifice"; each movement, she explains, signifies a different stage in the woman's journey, "somewhat analogous to the Buddha's search for enlightenment." Rhythmic cycles and structural symmetry help unify this work, whose movements present an ever-changing number of instruments progressing through the timbres offered by the different percussion families (wood, skin, metal). The repeated striking of a woodblock demarcates a continually varying cycle in "Preparation," *Lü's* opening movement. This gentle sound, followed by louder gestures in the other instruments, mirrors the opening of *Last Spring*: thunderous piano chords followed by soft string murmurings. An unexpectedly ethereal "sacrifice" concludes *Lü*; eerie timbral howls accompany the protagonist as she simply passes into another dimension.

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Formed in Seattle in 1979, the **New Performance Group** comprises a core of seven musicians, often augmented by guest artists. The group performs music from a wide range of twentieth-century styles, but typically focuses on the work of living American composers. One of the group's most satisfying activities has been the presentation of works in collaboration with the composers themselves, including Charles Amirkhania, Henry Brant, John Cage, Anthony Davis, Robert Dick, Paul Drescher, Janice Giteck, Malcolm Goldstein, Lou Harrison, Bun-Ching Lam, Tania León, James Tenney, and Chinari Ung.

Many recordings have emerged as products of these collaborations: *Night Songs* by Paul Drescher, on New Albion Records; John Cage conducting his full-length *Atlas Eclipticalis* with *Winter Music*, on Mode Records; Bun-Ching Lam conducting her *Four Beckett Songs*, included in a special collector's edition of the poetry of Samuel Beckett; and two CDs of Janice Giteck's works: *Breathing Songs* on Mode, and *Home* on New Albion. A five-part radio series entitled "Sinister Resonance," consisting of recordings of past performances along with interviews of ensemble members, was developed and nationally distributed by Seattle's Jack Straw Foundation.

In addition to its concerts with the Cornish Music Series, since 1994, the New Performance Group has been a participating ensemble in Music in Motion, a national new music network created to build new audiences for new music. As one of the five ensembles selected for this project, the New Performance Group has traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Painted Bride in Philadelphia, and the Atlantic Center for the Arts and Orlando Art Museum in Florida, working with composers Deidre Murray, Stuart Dempster, Rinde Eckert, Chinari Ung, and William Duckworth. CRI is proud to present this disc as part of its latest series *eXchange: music at the crossroads*, an on-going collection of recording which features composers and artists whose music expresses their own cultures and heritages. Born from Asian, Latin American, African, Jazz and beyond, this is music with a new sense of place.

Production Notes

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