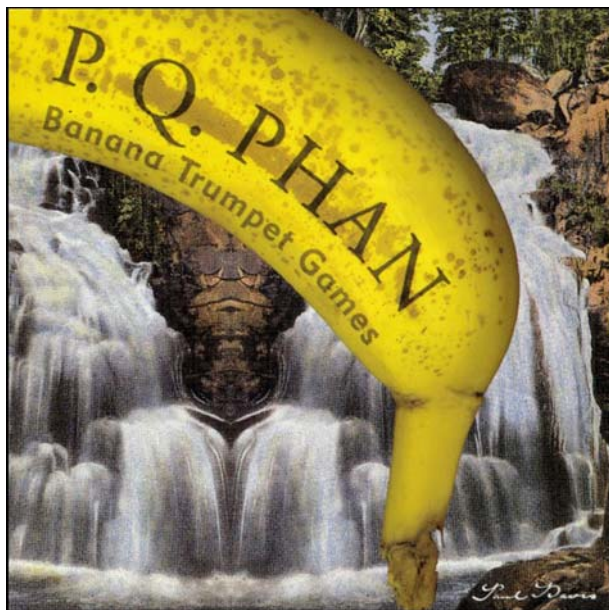


NWCR849
P.Q. Phan
Banana Trumpet Games



1. *Banana Trumpet Games* (1993) (5:35)
 Pamela Decker, organ

2. *Beyond the Mountains* (1995, rev. 1999) (14:57)
 E. Michael Richards, clarinet; Julieta L. Mihai, violin;
 Leonardo G. Altino, cello; Kazuko Tanosaki, piano;
 William F. Brooks, conductor
3. *Rough Trax* (1993, rev. 1999) (7:30)
 Debra Richtmeyer, alto saxophone; Nancy
 Ambrose King, oboe
4. *Unexpected Desire* (1997) (9:17)
 Samaris Trio: Molly Fung, violin; Brian Dumm,
 cello; Sylvia Wang, piano
5. *My Language* (1999) (12:09)
 Tanosaki-Richards Duo: E. Michael Richards,
 clarinet; Kazuko Tanosaki, piano
6. *Rock Blood* (1994) (5:55)
 The University of Illinois Percussion Ensemble:
 Stacey Bostwick, Teun Fetz, Richard Kurasz, Joshua
 Manchester, percussion; William Moersch, conductor

Total playing time: 55:23

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Notes

The trajectory of **P.Q. Phan** as an American composer is both as complex and original as contemporary culture, and yet also classic in its tale of an immigrant’s adaptive dialogue between his original culture and that of his new home. Phan, born in 1962, grew up in Saigon, where his formal studies were in architecture. But he was drawn to, and undertook a course of, self-study in piano, theory, and composition. After the fall of Saigon, he and his family attempted to escape the Communist regime via boat, but were captured; Phan spent six months in prison as a result. “You learn a lot about life in a Vietnamese jail,” he now remarks.

In 1982 the family received official permission to emigrate, and arrived in the U.S. Phan began his musical studies in earnest in Los Angeles and Ann Arbor. He is now professionally recognized and established, the winner of the Rome Prize and a professor at Indiana University. Despite what has been a turbulent life of extraordinary dislocation—physical, cultural, and professional—he exudes jovial good humor. There is a generosity in his speech which naturally spills over into his music.

A common criticism of “classical” music is that it is Eurocentric and elitist. Yet from the very beginning, the tradition has always looked to musics of other groups and cultures for sustenance and renewal. Arabic song influenced the vocal pieces of the troubadours, Haydn and Mozart transcribed and rewrote peasant dances, and Debussy found inspiration in the music of the Indonesian gamelan. The very abstraction of the Western art music tradition, with its precise but flexible notation, has allowed “other musics” to penetrate and influence it naturally, leaving their trace like marks on a palimpsest.

And the process works in the opposite direction as well. For a composer coming from outside the classical tradition, its “objectivity” offers a chance to view one’s native musical culture more clearly. The composer can use her/his home tradition in a more personal manner than would be possible if s/he had to submit to all its traditional norms. Indeed, Phan took this process of “creative distancing” a step further, studying ethnomusicology in graduate school to understand his Vietnamese heritage “from the outside,” understanding the particular from an increasingly global viewpoint.

Phan’s music deals constantly with the issue of how a composer from a distinctly non-Western culture reconciles himself to a new environment. The pluralism of contemporary American culture gives him perhaps more freedom than he would find in any other Western society, but the struggle is real nonetheless. Almost all the pieces on this collection deal with the ambiguities of his position in some programmatic or metaphoric sense. And on the level of the notes themselves, Phan has devised techniques to explore traditional Vietnamese practice in a new context. To take just one example, a key element of Vietnamese harmony is the use of “neutral” thirds, intervals in chords which are neither major nor minor. By creating rapid changes from the interval of major to minor third in his harmonies, he creates a fluid modality which evokes in a new manner, idiomatic to Western instruments, the effect of this traditional practice.

Banana Trumpet Games (1993) makes a rousing start to this collection. In Vietnam, children often make toy trumpets out of banana or coconut leaves; that brazen, reedy sound is captured by Phan’s organ writing, which uses clusters of

pitches to achieve this color. The insistent repetitive accompaniments and the use of Asian modes create a sound for the organ which is utterly unlike its traditional voice, yet still idiomatic. And listen to how Phan manipulates those modes in the slower central portion of the work: they are constantly inflected, “bent” so as to shift chromatically from one pitch-center to another with a fluidity one associates more with early twentieth-century European music. It is another example of how the composer seamlessly blends practices from different cultures.

Beyond the Mountains (1995, rev. 1999) is the longest and perhaps most ambitious work on this program. Written for a combination of clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, it makes reference to a place toward which the imagination aspires, a realm beyond ordinary experience, simultaneously alluring and intimidating in its difference from everyday experience. The music opens with a burst of Expressionist energy, and for a while it appears that the entire piece will be a sort of “meta-wind chime,” slowly dispersing into evermore lyrical and languid realms after that initial explosion. But Phan does not seek easy resolutions to the questions he poses. In the final minutes, the greater openness which the music has achieved over its course is put to the service of the same creative frenzy which started the work (in the score, it is marked “Like a crazy horse”). The result is a climax that is both broad-breathed and intense, exhilarating in its powerful surge toward the summit.

Rough Trax (1993, rev. 1999) creates contrast and synthesis of a different sort. On the one hand, there is the “rough” sound of the instruments in the outer sections of its tripartite form, where multiphonics and bent tones predominate, contrasted with the lyrical lines of its center. Second, there is the play of instrumental color. We don’t usually associate oboe and saxophone as “cousins,” but Phan understands the mutual affinities of their sounds, and is able to create a seamless timbral blend through the piece, no matter how sweet or sour its overall sonic taste.

Unexpected Desire (1997) plays out a provocative story. Traditional Vietnamese courtesans often came from noble families fallen on hard times; their standard practice was to provide company for wealthy or powerful men, only in exchange for full security and protection. Phan, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, suggests that this situation is analogous to his own, in which his early interaction with Western culture demanded a certain degree of submission to foreign norms, and submergence of previous identity. But the piece’s story has a twist, which mirrors the composer’s own experience: the courtesan finds a customer to whom she is drawn, and over time the relationship deepens into mutual attraction. Just so with Phan’s relation to American/Western culture: the violin plays the role of the concubine, the cello and piano the “customer.” Reference is made to *hát á dào* and *hát châu vãn*, two traditional vocal styles from northern Vietnam. The first is seductive yet also sinister: its origins come from a songstress who wooed her enemies with music, only to kill them. The second is music for religious possession, straining toward a state of ecstatic trance. The music is by turns insinuating, angry, and passionate, the two characters via the two musics merging into a single climactic gesture.

My Language (1999) is a reworking of a decade-old piece for saxophone and piano. In a sense, its title says it all. The work feels like an exploration of various means of expression, from propulsive rhythmic ostinati, to dark guttural growls, to lyric modal lines. One senses the evolution of a personal, synthetic

voice taking place before us, in real time. And the concluding section, a wild dance, striding across the full register of both instruments, sounds like a hard-won aesthetic victory.

Rock Blood (1994) has distinctly kicky rhythms, but its title only secondarily refers to rock music. Rather, Phan tweaks himself by stating that his high cholesterol level is the source of the piece: “At times I could hear my blood streams rocking through my veins, finding their ways inside my body.” Certainly the rhythms are elemental; they get under your skin. Western ears may find similarities to the visceral sound of Japanese kodo drumming. The composer also knows a very important fact about percussion writing: less is more. By restricting the number of instruments used, he creates a characteristic sound, which he then plays with like a single instrument. Drums (from bongos to bass), woodblocks, and cymbals make up the ensemble, and only toward the end does the sound of a metal plate sneak in. Phan also knows how to literally make his sounds “dance”—listen to the way that motives are tossed back and forth between members of the quartet like a ping-pong ball bouncing across a table. And its conclusion puts an emphatic exclamation point to this program.

—Robert Carl

P.Q. Phan was born in 1962 in Vietnam. He became interested in music in 1978 while studying architecture and taught himself to play the piano, compose, and orchestrate. In 1982 he immigrated to the United States and began his formal musical training. He earned his B.M. from the University of Southern California and his D.M.A. in composition from the University of Michigan.

Phan’s music has been performed throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, Europe, Israel, Turkey, Australia, New Zealand, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, and Japan. Mr. Phan has received many commissions, from groups including the Kronos Quartet, American Composers Orchestra, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, Greater East Lansing Symphony, and Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble. His music has been performed by Ensemble Modern, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Radio France, the Seattle Symphony, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, Charleston Symphony, and many others. Phan has received a Rome Prize (1998), ASCAP Awards, the Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist Fellowship (1995), a Charles Ives Center for American Music Fellowship, and residencies at the MacDowell Colony. He has been a guest composer at numerous music festivals, including the Asian New Music Festival in Tokyo, Japan (1999), New Music Festival at Hamilton College, New York (1997 and 1999), Asian Composers’ Forum in Sendai, Japan (1995), New Music Festival at UC Santa Barbara (1994), and Music Lives in Pittsburgh (1992). He was a guest composer for the Kronos Quartet’s 1996 residency at the University of Iowa and the quartet has recorded his *Tragedy at the Opera* on the “Kronos Quartet: 25 Years” box set (Nonesuch 79504). He has previously taught at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Cleveland State University.

Beyond the Mountains was commissioned by the Brandstater family for the Brandstater Gallery Ensemble of La Sierra University. It is dedicated to Mrs. Rhona Hodgen.

Banana Trumpet Games was written for and dedicated to William Albright.

Unexpected Desire was written for and dedicated to the Samaris Trio.

This current version of *My Language* was written for and dedicated to the Tanosaki-Richards Duo.

Production Notes

All works published by Phan, P.Q. Publishing (ASCAP)

Beyond the Mountains, Rough Trax, Unexpected Desire, My Language, and Rock Blood were recorded and edited by Jon Schoernoff.

Banana Trumpet Games was recorded live in Clapp Recital Hall of the University of Iowa, 1995.

Beyond the Mountains, Rough Trax, Unexpected Desire, and My Language were recorded in the Foellinger Great Hall of the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois, 1999.

Rock Blood was recorded in the Tryon Festival Theater of the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois, 1999.

CD mastered by Robert Wolff, engineer, at Sony Music Studios, NYC.