

Unsuk Chin: An Appreciation By Paul Griffiths

What Unsuk Chin writes is a music of the iridescent. Just as the colors on the wing of a butterfly will seem to shift and flicker in the light, so this music is constantly alive with bewildering and enthralling possibility. It may simply be a matter of speed, of how notes are alternated in very rapid succession, so that our ears are deliciously foiled in trying to decide what we are hearing — not only what note, but what harmony and what implication.

Take the example, from many, of Chin’s Clarinet Concerto, which she wrote in 2014 for a commission from the New York Philharmonic and partner orchestras, and of which the Philharmonic gave the first complete performance in September that year. The work is full of flutterings, in the solo part and within the orchestral texture, and their effect is not at all, as one might think, simply static, a case of running on the spot. Chin’s music never does that. It is always on the move, very often from one febrile oscillation to another, motivated by a strong sense of harmony as a progressive force — progressive in providing impulse, direction, and flow, but progressive, too, in discovering new kinds of forward-moving imperative, distinct from the regular tonality of older music, even if this regular tonality will often have a hovering presence.

It so does very clearly in the central movement of this same concerto, the movement entitled *Hymnos*. Yet here we are very much displaced from the ordinary in two ways. In the first place, the soloist is playing two notes at a time, using special fingerings and breath control to bring out “multiphonics,” as they are often called. The technique is one that composers and clarinetists have been using for decades, and often the effect is wild, of a tamed beast going berserk, as is partly the case elsewhere in this concerto. Here, though, the multiphonics are closed down mostly to thirds and fourths, proceeding with a solemn calm that is indeed hymn-like. Even so, the harmony is not like anything we have heard before. This is a hymn from another planet, perhaps another galaxy.

There is another aspect to its strangeness. The very particular, supremely controlled multiphonics that Chin requires from her player in this movement are extremely difficult to find, and their difficulty expresses itself in their quiet, fragile character. More than that, they do not seem like clarinet sounds at all. Because we hear very little attack, we might think we are listening to a small organ or, as may be even more likely, emanations from Tibetan bowl gongs being rubbed to elicit their resonances.

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These alternatives, Western and Eastern, remind us that Chin's music escapes geography. It no more belongs to her native South Korea than it does to the Germany in which she has spent most of her adult life. Features that we might think of as identifiably Asian — such as the microtonal tunings that make regular Western intervals melt a little, or the cascading reverberations of metal percussion — are thoroughly absorbed, with no hint of local color. Even when Chin remembers her Seoul childhood in her work — the flashing-grubby, earthy-exhilarating encounter with street theater, for instance — what she produces is a compound of brilliance and mire, of gems in the rough, that is common to human experience everywhere.

As for Chin the European, she has drawn widely from her adopted continent in the texts she has set, including poems in English, German, French (modern and medieval), Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, Swedish, Finnish, Latin, and ancient Greek. Such polyglot choices bespeak a composer who enjoys technical challenges, and also one fascinated by different worlds of sound with which she can engage her own. Chin is not at home anywhere on the globe; she is at home everywhere, or can be. And this may be one of the important lessons she brings, to a world brimming again with frantic nationalism.

It should also be said that her music totally resists the label “female.” Chin has not gone for soft subjects. But neither does she want “to play with the boys.” Her imagination may be sexy, but it is not sexed.

Iridescence again. The butterfly's shimmer comes from the interference between a fixed structure, on the wing surface, and waves of arriving light. Without either one, it goes. Similarly, in Chin's music we hear spectacular patterns, audacious swoops, dazzling colors, all arising from the productive interference between East and West, female and male, tradition and innovation, then and now. As she has herself suggested, it may all go back to collisions and coalescences between two kinds of music she was discovering as a student. On the one hand, there was synthesized electronic music, and what it could teach ready ears about generating new colors by piling together pure frequencies. On the other, there was the music of the Balinese gamelan, an orchestra of tuned gongs and other metal percussion instruments. Chin has composed electronic pieces and has used arrays of percussion in many of her orchestral scores (although never, of course, with explicit reference to Balinese or any other music). More importantly, however, her music has vibrated and ricocheted between these extremes of the technological and the traditional, and has done so largely within a sphere, that of the symphony orchestra, belonging to neither.

The key is imagination. The key is fantasy. Like the authors she specially cherishes — most notably Lewis Carroll, on whose *Alice in Wonderland* she based her opera — Chin is a virtuoso fantasist as well as a fantastic virtuoso, an artist who shows time and again that there are always alternative worlds, shining far away and far beyond, taking us into undreamed-of territory, but drawing us with light that reflects on what we have before us, here and now.

Paul Griffiths was born in Wales in 1947 and has been writing on music professionally for almost half a century.