

Šu, for Sheng and Orchestra

Unsub Chin

In 2018 Unsub Chin became the fourth recipient of The Marie-Josée Kravis Prize for New Music at the New York Philharmonic, following in the steps of previous awardees Henri Dutilleux, Per Nørgård, and Louis Andriessen. The prize includes the commission of a new symphonic work for a future season, but this year the Orchestra has programmed her *Šu* (pronounced “shu”), a single-movement concerto for sheng and orchestra, the fourth of her compositions it has presented.

Following study at Seoul National University in her native South Korea, Chin traveled to Hamburg, where from 1985 to 1988 she was a pupil of György Ligeti. Settling in Berlin, she realized a sequence of compositions at the Electronic Music Studio of the Technical University of Berlin. By the early 1990s her acoustic works, for orchestra or various ensembles, began to attract attention. Her breakthrough was *Acroscopic-Wordplay*, premiered by the Nieuw Ensemble in 1991 and since performed in some 20 countries in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. In 1992 she entered into an artistic collaboration with the Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris.

Some of Chin's compositions involve a combination of acoustic and electronic sounds. Others are strictly for acoustical forces both instrumental and vocal. Her opera *Alice in Wonderland*, premiered in 2007 by the Bavarian Staatsoper in Munich, and widely hailed by critics, was disseminated through a commercial DVD, and has since been staged in Geneva, Bielefeld, Germany, and St. Louis.

Her year as composer-in-residence with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin in 2001–02 led to the composition of her Violin Concerto, for which she was awarded the Grawemeyer Award in 2004. Other honors

that have come her way include the Arnold Schoenberg Prize in Vienna, the Heidelberger Künstlerinnenpreis, the British Composer Award, the Music Composition Prize of the Fondation Prince Pierre de Monaco, the Wihuri Sibelius Prize, the Hamburg Bach Prize, and, in South Korea, awards of the Kyung-Ahm and the Daewon Foundations, and the Ho-Am Prize. She served as composer-in-residence with the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra, for which she established and oversaw a contemporary music series. She has also served as composer-in-residence for the Philharmonie in Essen, Germany, and this season she is composer-in-residence with the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra in Hamburg.

Chin's music occasionally employs sounds associated with Asia, but her music is really part of the international avant-garde; it is per-

In Short

Born: July 14, 1961, in Seoul, South Korea

Resides: in Berlin, Germany

Work composed: 2009, on commission from Suntory Limited (for the Suntory Hall International Program for Music Composition); ZaterdagMatinee; Los Angeles Philharmonic Association, Gustavo Dudamel, music director; and Philharmonie Essen; inscribed “Written for Wu Wei; dedicated to Jungho Choe and Sukhi Kang, on the occasion of their 75th birthdays”

World premiere: August 28, 2009, at Suntory Hall in Tokyo, Japan, by the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, Kazuyoshi Akiyama, conductor, Wu Wei, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 21 minutes

sonal rather than national, and decidedly not nationalistic. In fact, *Šu* is her first concerto to feature a non-Western instrument; her other concertos are for cello, clarinet, piano, and violin, plus a Double Concerto for Piano, Percussion, and Ensemble. The title of *Šu* derives from the symbol for air in Egyptian mythology. Chin devises striking effects of instrumental timbre, often making subtle use of a large number of percussion instruments; here they include binzasara (a Japanese wooden rattle constructed of small wooden tiles laced on a string), dobači (a Japanese cup-shaped bell), and Javanese gongs.

Glowing or shimmering timbral combinations sometimes flicker through Chin's lyrical soundscapes. She has written:

My music is a reflection of my dreams. I try to render into music the visions of immense light and of an incredible magnificence of colors that I see in all my dreams, a play of light and colors floating through the room and at the same time forming a fluid sound sculpture. Its beauty is very

abstract and remote, but it is for these very qualities that it addresses the emotions and can communicate joy and warmth.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo, one doubling piccolo and alto flute), two oboes and English horn, three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet and one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, two tubas, timpani, harp, tubular bells, crotales, snare drums, four bongos, three congas, tambourines, silk paper, four harmonicas, vibraphone, cowbells, binzasara, bamboo chime, crotales, cymbals, finger cymbal, tam-tams, two timbales, three tom-toms, tenor drum, maracas, guiro, frame drum, xylophone, triangles, sandpaper, flexatone, water gong, thunder sheet, mark tree, three Javanese gongs, orchestra bells (with pedal), dobači, bass drum, twig brush, log drum, slit drum, glass wind chime, harp, and strings (including four violins and two violas positioned on the balcony), in addition to the solo sheng.

Listen for . . . the Sheng



The name *sheng* first appeared in a written source in about the 7th century BCE, although references to differently identified mouth organs date from five to seven centuries earlier. Traditionally an accompanying instrument, the modern sheng has been thrust to international prominence in new works thanks in large part to the efforts of soloist Wu Wei. Versions of the instrument were also embraced in Japan (as the *shō*), Laos (as the *khene* or *khaen*), and Korea (as the *saenghwang*).

Unsusuk Chin first encountered the instrument in its Korean form, when she heard it being played on a mountain from afar. She reports that she associated the experience with “yearning for a distant place” — and she incorporated the idea of distance into *Šu*, partly by placing a group of violins and violas apart from the orchestra for the final pages.

A 19th-century sheng, from the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art