



**CHEN Returning Souls<sup>1</sup>. Returnings<sup>2</sup>. Sweet Rice Pie<sup>3</sup>. Fantasia on the Theme of Plum Blossom<sup>4</sup>. Our Names<sup>5</sup>** • <sup>1</sup>Cho-Liang Lin (vn); <sup>2,3,5</sup>Leone Buyse (fl); <sup>2</sup>Robert Schulz (per); <sup>2</sup>Bion Tsang (vc); <sup>3</sup>Timothy Jones (bar); <sup>3</sup>Timothy Peters (vn); <sup>3,5</sup>Michael Webster (cl); <sup>3</sup>Nuiko Wadden (hp); <sup>3</sup>Matthew McClung (per); Norman Fischer <sup>3</sup>(vc); <sup>5</sup>(nar); <sup>3</sup>Kevin Noe, cond; <sup>4</sup>Formosa SQ; <sup>5</sup>Jeanne Kierman Fischer (pn); <sup>5</sup>Brandon Bell (per); <sup>5</sup>Ben Odhner (vn); <sup>5</sup>Coleman Itzkoff (vc); <sup>5</sup>David Cho, cond • NEW WORLD 80746-2 (62:42)

Shih-Hui Chen is a Taiwanese composer, born in 1962, and who undertook her musical studies at the National Academy of Arts in Taipei, followed by graduate studies at Northern Illinois University and Boston University, the latter institution awarding her a DMA degree in 1995. Her musical childhood was steeped in Western classical music, but her father was particularly fond of Chinese opera, so by no means was her training devoid of Eastern influences. Typical of many Chinese or Taiwanese composers, her music exhibits a fascinating mixture of Eastern and Western elements, although certain of her works emphasize one end of the spectrum or the other. For instance, her first and second string quartets show little Eastern influence, whereas her *66 Times*, a quiet piece with charming melodies, utilizes the Chinese concepts of a single sound, embellished in various ways, and heterophony, a linking of the linear musical structure with vertical deviations from a common melodic line in various instruments.

The CD opens with *Returning Souls: Four Short Pieces on Three Formosan Amis Legends*, for solo violin. I had put the CD into my player before I noted who the violinist was, and immediately I thought, “What a terrific violinist!” Then, I looked and saw that it was Cho-Liang Lin, and thought, “Well, that explains it.” I’ve long been a great admirer of his playing. The work is cast in four brief movements, the first of which serves as an introduction. From the onset, there are strong hints of the composer’s ethnicity, with a melody that is pentatonic in character, and the erhu-like downward *glissandi* of a minor third. But there are plenty of Western effects heard as well. The third movement has an interesting conflation of quick *pizzicati* and bounced-bow figures on the violin’s G string. Certain pitch sets are prominent, as well, and these are not pentatonically derived. Overall, the tonal center of G minor seems particularly prominent, but the work concludes with a *pizzicato* figuration high up on the E string, and completely outside of the fundamental tonality of the piece, producing a novel conclusion to the work. In short, the piece makes a strong and splendid effect in its contrasting moods.

Just as the violin of the opening work hints at the Chinese equivalent instrument (the erhu), so the Western flute of the following work casts allusions to the quintessential Chinese flute, the pipa. In *Returnings*, a work from 2009, the flute is accompanied by percussion and cello, but the flute is granted the lion’s share of the melodic activity. The pipa is occasionally represented more directly in a few places

where there are trills of wide intervals (in usual Western flute music, trills do not exceed the interval of a major second, but trills of wider intervals are common in the pipa music I’ve heard). The percussion also conjures up an Eastern atmosphere, and a wide variety of instruments is employed, including temple blocks, cymbals of various sorts and the vibraphone. The cellist is given some moments to shine in solos that are vigorously busy and full of notes. This ten-minute work, like its predecessor, makes an extremely strong impression.

The song cycle, *Sweet Rice Pie: Six Songs on Four Taiwanese Nursery Rhymes*, is cast in the same freely-tonal (or perhaps quasi-atonal) framework as the preceding *Returnings*. Tonal centers exist, but they are fleeting, so it is difficult to pigeonhole the style of the work. It’s not quite like anything else I’ve heard in my many decades of listening to music. Perhaps the biggest surprise here is Timothy Jones. Given his name, I would have expected him to sing the work in an English translation, but he sings in Chinese (Taiwanese?) throughout, and most convincingly to my non-Chinese ears. Much of the singing would be better characterized as intoning or speech-song, but Jones’s voice seems perfect for the music, and a non-Chinese speaker (at least) would swear that he was a native-born speaker of the language. The nursery rhymes prove that topics of interest to children are well-nigh universal, although the style of the music is generally far removed (the fifth song is an exception) from what most parents would sing to their infants. Nevertheless, the piece succeeds brilliantly in every parameter of consideration.

Chen’s String Quartet, *Fantasia on the Theme of Plum Blossom* from 2007 is based on a traditional tune that has been set for many Chinese instruments. In it, one hears her employment of the idea of the importance of a single sound and its embellishments, which sometimes verge into micro-tonality and polyrhythms. The three-movement work is highly virtuosic, and brilliantly performed by the Formosa Quartet, which is comprised of violinists Jasmine Lin and Wayne Lee, violist Chi-Yen Chen, and cellist Ru-Pei Yeh. As in the preceding works, there are subtle and sometime rapid shifts between areas of greater and lesser tonal security. I also hear sub-currents of pathos pervading this work, and the piece makes a deep impression through Chen’s idiomatic use of *pizzicati*, *jeté* bowing and other brilliant effects.

The concluding work, *Our Names*, is scored for narrators and instrumental ensemble. In this case, the text is spoken in English with a few Taiwanese phrases interspersed, but the curious thing is that only one narrator, Norman Fischer (who is the cellist in *Sweet Rice Pie*) is mentioned. There is a second woman’s voice heard throughout, and she is given no credit. Perhaps it is the modest composer? The subject of the narration is the neglect of the indigenous people of Taiwan, who have historically been swallowed up by their more numerous Chinese neighbors. The drama of the texts is well supported by drama in the instrumental ensemble, which is kept quite busy throughout the almost quarter-hour-long work.

There is no denying that Chen is a major compositional talent, and I hope that this CD will serve to make her music more widely known and loved by those interested in the music of our time. This all-around superb CD is simply not to be missed, and I’m thankful for being given the privilege of reviewing it. **David DeBoor Canfield**