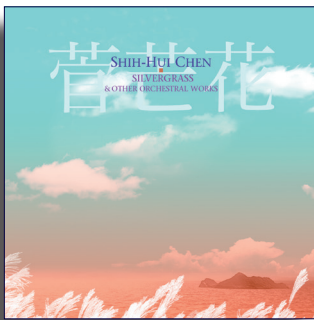


This disc presents a composer in full command of her powers.

**CHEN** *Fantasia on a Theme of Guanglingsan for Zheng and Chinese Orchestra*.<sup>1, 2</sup> *A Plea to Lady Chang'e for Nanguan Pipa and Chamber Orchestra*.<sup>3</sup> *Fantasia on the Theme of Plum Blossoms for String Orchestra*.<sup>5</sup> *Concerto for Pipa and Chamber Orchestra*.<sup>5, 6</sup> *Silvergrass for Cello and Chamber Orchestra*.<sup>5, 7</sup> • <sup>1</sup>Hsin-Fang Hsu (zheng); <sup>6</sup>Wu Man (pipa); <sup>7</sup>Wen-Sinn Yang (vc); <sup>2</sup>Chih-Sheng Chen, <sup>4</sup>Jerry Hou, <sup>5</sup>Yao-Yu Wu, cond; <sup>4</sup>Loop 58; <sup>3</sup>Little Giant Chinese O; <sup>5</sup>Natl Taiwan SO • NEW WORLD 80807-2 (64:42 山)



The Taiwanese composer Shih-Hui Chen (b. 1962) came to the U.S. to study in 1982, and quickly received significant recognition: many of the most prestigious awards, fellowships, and commissions. She's been Professor of Music at the Shepherd School of Rice University, in Houston. Amazingly, I wasn't aware of her until now. But this disc presents a composer in full command of her powers.

The booklet notes emphasize that Chen first came west very much steeped in the Modernist tradition; it's only been since she's come here that her Chinese roots have emerged in her music. One thing that's fascinating is the interplay between East and West in her work, which is deeper than in many with her background. What elements of sound and structure from which tradition make for the distinctive character of each of these pieces.

The Pipa Concerto of 2002 is the earliest work, and falls closest into the expectations of a "Chinese concerto." It's elegantly written, but to my ear not as personal and original as what is to come. The 2011 *Fantasia* is in three movements, and the third strikes me the most, as the string instruments are separated into a set of soloists, who perform music gestures that sounds more like traditional East Asian music, without of course being exactly that. The *Plea to Lady Chang'e* (2014) is unusual in that here, despite the use of Nanguan pipa (the Taiwanese cousin of the more familiar—to us—mainland instrument; Nanguan is the name of traditional Taiwanese musical practice), what's really unusual about the piece is the layering of ideas and a subtle polytempic structure, again a more Modernist practice.

The 2016 Cello Concerto is four movements but just a bit over 12 minutes. As a result it flies by, but there are so many ideas and contrasting materials

packed into it that it suggests a larger form and duration. Based on a series of poems by Huang Chunming, its vivid imagery inspires equally vivid sounds. I particularly love the way Chen packs lots of detail into this piece (and the others), creating a multi-dimensional effect. I found the tolling, funereal final movement (a lament for the poet's dead son) haunting.

But the kicker for this collection is the opener, *Fantasia on a Theme of Guanglingsan* for zheng and Chinese orchestra (2014). The zheng is a large zither, and ancestor of the Japanese koto. What really sets this piece apart in my mind is its extraordinary soundscape. Using all Chinese instruments and combining them with the more textural approach that comes out of recent Western practice, the whole thing opens up vast, somber, mysterious sonic expanses. (The zheng has a dark sound, also like a dragon growling in the opening.) It also develops a real head of steam. I've listened to it repeatedly and found its world rich, even a little terrifying.

Two miniscule quibbles: While texts and translations of the poems inspiring the cello concerto are included, those sung in the *Plea* are not. And also, it's not clear whether Men-Hiu Wei is both pipa soloist and vocalist in the piece.

I want to emphasize my analysis of what is Asian and what Western is impressionistic, hardly based on any firm ethnomusicological basis. I'm just speaking as a composer using a speculative ear. I do think that Chen has worked over the past few decades to find a true sweet spot between Western and Asian practices that melds aspects of sound and structure from each in imaginative ways. As the notes dub it, this is "intercultural" music that works to make a seamless blend on many levels of meaning.

**Robert Carl**