

# CHINARY UNG

(b. 1942)

1 Khse Buon (1980) (16:57)

Susan Ung, viola

2 Child Song (1985) (23:52)

Clay Ellerbroek, alto flute

Susan Ung, viola

Elena Mashkovtseva, harp

Seven Mirrors (1997) (18:25)

3 I A Window in the Sky (2:21)

4 II Dotted Path (2:08)

5 III "...Roar, lion of the heart..." (2:40)

6 IV "...laughter passes over the earth." (3:03)

7 V "...space between the fish and the moon." (2:53)

8 VI Tattooing Space-Time (3:11)

9 VII Flying Mirrors (2:06)

Charles Wells, piano

*One must search beyond the procedures of a musical practice, discern its original esthetic commitments, and trace how its tradition has evolved. If one is blessed with a cross-cultural heritage, one must then regard it as a privilege and obligation to commit oneself to the search in both practices.*

*"Sights And Sounds: Remembrances"*

*– Chou Wen-chung*

The music on this disc represents a portrait of the composer Chinary Ung at a crossroads. Although his output has been voluminous and consistent for a period of over twenty years, there was a long time during which he was nearly silent. Indeed, between the years 1974-1985 Ung composed only one work, the solo string piece *Khse Buon* (in 1980). While this piece represented a dramatic statement of the composer's emerging voice, it was surrounded by an emptiness that consumed the rest of Ung's creative energies, thus delaying the moment when he could embrace its implications. The hiatus was more than a personal existential crisis—it was the result of the Cambodian holocaust, in which members of Ung's family were among the millions murdered.

The events that tore apart Cambodia were wrenching for Ung, who had come to New York for musical studies in 1964. The initial plan had been to return to his homeland in the later 1960's, but as the situation there became increasingly volatile he was instructed by his father to remain in the United States. While in New York, he studied composition with Chou Wen-chung, earning a doctorate from Columbia University in 1974. This marked the culmination of a period of rapid development in the practice of western art music, to which he had first been introduced as a teenager. As the situation in Cambodia approached its nadir Ung found it essential to delay his compositional career and make an effort to preserve some aspect of Cambodian cultural life even as it was being systematically dismantled. He

taught himself to play the *roneat-ek*—the Cambodian xylophone—by transcribing recorded performances from masters on the instrument. Soon, he formed a *Pinpeat* ensemble, and with it he performed hundreds of concerts. He also produced a series of records on the *Folkways* label as a means of anthologizing extant historical recordings. While Ung's efforts were spurred by terrible events, they represent a sense of responsibility, and if there is an element of political resistance inherent therein it marks the most and the least an expatriated artist could do under the circumstances.

As a composer, Ung was a sort of orphan—disconnected from his cultural roots and without peers who could provide him with a template for how one might find a personal voice in a western musical context. Although he was not composing during this tumultuous time, Ung was engaging in research. Part of this was related to the *Pinpeat* music, of course, but he eventually sought out other traditional musical cultures as well, particularly those in Southeast Asia and India. This might strike one as an odd progression: first Ung was introduced to western classical music while in Cambodia, where resources and access was meager. Then, after his formal training in composition, he learned about Asian music while in the United States. In other words, he always approached a musical tradition as an outsider. While it would be a mistake to assume his research was anything other than serious and exhaustive, it seems clear that as Ung absorbed information his eventual creative interpretation of these musical traditions would be highly personal and unbound by the contexts that produced them.

The first two works on this disc, *Khse Buon* and *Child Song* (1985), represent the initial soundings of Ung's personal creative voice, or his *fingerprint*, as he terms it. *Khse Buon* was first scored for 'cello but appears here in its version for viola. Ung has cited numerous influences in his string writing, including Indian *saranghi* music, which is characterized by drones and slides along with "tails"—flourishes appearing at the ends of phrases. Ung's work also refers to Japanese *koto* music along with the solo string playing of Chinese, Indonesian, and Khmer origins. Yet, perhaps remarkably, Ung's language appears fully formed and coherent. No mere patchwork of ecotourist appropriation, *Khse Buon* displays a highly wrought, synthetic musical language that is indebted to east and west, but bound by neither. Although this work appears as an island in the middle of the composer's compositional hiatus, the approach to string writing it displays is still fully a part of his current practice.

When he returned to a place in which he could compose consistently, Ung reawakened the instrumental language of *Khse Buon* and revisited it in the context of other instruments. Although he would soon gain acclaim for the quality of his orchestral writing with *Inner Voices* (1986), winner of the Grawemeyer Award in 1989, it is in intimate settings where one gets a particularly vivid sense of his rich, sinewy and dramatic voice. Ung's instrumental writing involves long, languid lines that are replete with nuance, often achieving a vocal quality. Rarely does the performer dwell upon a single mode of playing or a uniform timbre. Rather, modulation is the norm; thus, when there are periods of uninflected behavior they

tend to stand out in profile. This is not to say that the state of timbric modulation is somehow unsettling. Indeed, the frequent changes of sonic coloration are so gradual and smooth that one hardly registers the transitions. This approach features strongly in *Child Song* as well as *Khse Buon*.

The image shows a musical score for a single melodic line, likely for viola or cello. The score is written on a five-line staff with a treble clef. It begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 60. The music consists of several phrases, some of which are followed by fermatas. Above the staff, there are performance instructions: "throw the bow cords" with an arrow pointing to the right, and "pont." (ponticello) with an arrow pointing to the left. Below the staff, there are dynamic markings: *fff* (fortissimo) and *mp* (mezzo-piano). Above the staff, there are Arabic numerals indicating the duration of the fermatas: 5, 7, 5, and 3. There are also microtonal inflections indicated by small arrows and the word "microtonal" written vertically. The score is enclosed in a rectangular box.

Example 1: *Khse Buon* (1980) Note the changes in bow position, extremely long fermatas (Arabic numerals under fermatas indicate the number of seconds to be held), and microtonal inflections.

With *Child Song* Ung makes direct reference to his heritage by paraphrasing bits of a Cambodian song he remembered children singing to accompany clapping games (one thinks of "pat-a-cake" as an American analog). He makes little attempt, however, at blurring the edges between these passages and those around them, in which a more personal, characteristically flexible language prevails. The formal seams, then, are quite audible when, midway through the work, a dance-like passage emerges characterized by dotted rhythms and a shimmering modality that would not sound out of place in a Terry Riley score. Because this composition (which appears on this disc in a new arrangement for alto flute, viola, and harp) effectively broke the creative silence that had accompanied the Cambodian

holocaust it is hard not to hear the collision of styles as that of the innocent and the elegiac. There is, perhaps, something inherently sad about nostalgia, and while the composer's deeply expressive writing nevertheless refrains from any manipulative romanticism, the distance that separates the innocent (i.e. unknowing) children's song section from the critical (i.e. knowing) material is a deeply thoughtful dialectic.

Each of the works on this disc feature—in various ways—Ung's view of musical time, a view that reveals his sympathy for Asian aesthetics even more than does his treatment of pitch and instrumental color. In Western classical music, time governs all. Typically, time is relatively constant (at least in the context of a musical passage) and is divided and subdivided into orderly meters and note values. The patterns that emerge according to this template of sound events produces rhythms, metrical emphasis, and phrases which is the stuff that composers have written for hundreds of years. Performers can adjust and bend these temporal values in order to elicit interpretation, but they dare not bend them beyond the breaking point or risk unraveling the entire structure. Ung's music is largely un-metered—although note values are given there is an inherent flexibility ascribed to the temporal domain. In *Child Song* meter occasionally emerges to orient the players, but at other times they follow cues in the midst of *ad libitum* phrases. Long fermatas further remove any sense of point-to-point succession, placing the emphasis on the moment. *Khse Buon* is entirely un-metered, and while the piano work *Seven Mirrors* contains the most sophisticated rhythmic writing of the three

works on this disc, it too is mostly in free meter, thus the composer implies an inherent flexibility in the execution.

In Ung's music, one rarely encounters an orderly succession of events that corresponds to the Western tradition of musical time. Rather, one often encounters suspension and silence. The latter is considered sacred space in the Buddhist tradition, while suspension—the separate and singular sound event—would seem to be a companion idea. Space, or suspended time, is considered to be inherently spiritual, whereas the standard passage of time according to the clock's progress is of the mortal plane and therefore transitory. When a Westerner speaks of the *mortal* and the *celestial*, she often means the *real* and the *fantastic*. Buddhist cosmology inverts these realms, so the spiritual, being eternal, is more real than is one's physical, mortal existence. Such a provocative formulation can be a remarkable ally for a composer, and Ung has addressed it on many occasions throughout his career.

Given Ung's penchant for an instrumental approach that involves sliding, swelling, modulating sounds, it is no wonder that he was wary of composing a work for solo piano. The commission for *Seven Mirrors* was not filled quickly but lay on the composer's proverbial back burner for years. The rigidity of the piano attack and the relative lack of control over its decay meant that Ung could not rely upon practices he had already perfected; however, when one dimension of music is suppressed, another can emerge in profile. In this case, time became central to the work.

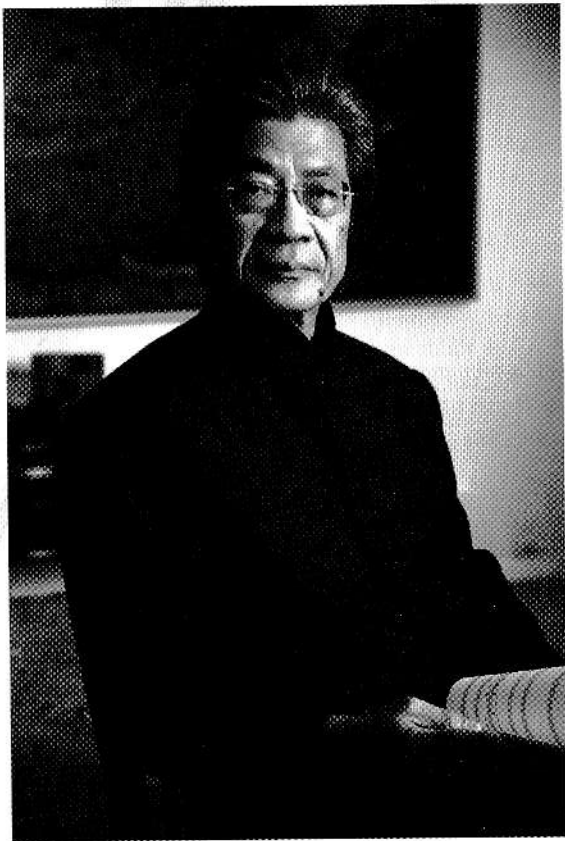
*Seven Mirrors* is a set of short pieces that have the quality of interludes. Each movement has a title, some of which are drawn from writings by Tagore (i.e. movement 4: "...laughter passes over the earth") and Rumi (i.e. movement 5: "...space between the fish and the moon."). These aphorisms can be at once evocative and imprecise, thus allowing Ung to create an interpretive sound world to match his conception of the poetry. Oftentimes in this music an idea emerges; then it is revisited and held, so in a way time slows down and space opens. The manner in which Ung delivers musical information requires the listener to adjust one's expectations. Rather than hearing an idea sound, transform, and recur (as in a sonata, for example) we hear it sound and resonate. There is transformation, but it is more a matter of listening *through* the musical idea than some attempt by the composer to move it elsewhere in time. These are among the joys and challenges of listening to Ung's music.

In thinking about the quote from Chou Wen-chung that opened this essay, it strikes one that Chinary Ung has fulfilled each of the requirements his mentor set forth in order to be a responsible composer of Asian heritage in a post-Modern world. The words *privilege* and *obligation* are remarkably potent admonitions, and one scarcely finds examples in which they are embodied so well. This is not merely a matter of duty: the degree to which Ung has dedicated himself to learning about musical practices from the west and east as well as the seriousness with which he addresses the problem

of bringing issues of Asian aesthetics into the concert hall has informed a musical language of great vitality, breadth and imagination, as evidenced by the works on this disc.



*Adam Greene is a composer living in San Diego. He holds degrees in music composition from the University of California, San Diego (Ph.D.) and the New England Conservatory of Music (M.M.).*



**Chinary Ung** is often associated with that group of Asian-born composers whose music incorporates aspects of eastern musical characteristics into a western classical music setting. He has been widely awarded and recognized, and was the first American composer to win the prestigious, international and much coveted Grawemeyer Award (in 1989). He considers his solo work for cello/viola, *Khse Buon* (1980), to be his first work which is successful in this venture and *Child Song* came a few years later (1985). *Seven Mirrors* is Ung's first solo work for piano is a kind of character study, and involves poetry and visual stimuli as take-off points for a string of seven consecutive, contrasted but linked movements. Ung has a busy commissioning schedule, and includes a large catalogue of recent works which require instrumentalists to use their voices extensively. His new string quartet, (*Spiral X*), was recently premiered at the Library of Congress and his trio for baritone, viola and percussion (*Spiral IX*) will be premiered at Herbst Theater in San Francisco this month. He has also just finished a new solo work for viola (*Spiral XI*); all of these works include extensive vocalization. He is currently composing a new collaborative work for the LA Master Chorale, working with choreographer Sophiline Shapiro, Cambodian dancers and musicians and a western chamber ensemble, which will be premiered at Disney Hall in Los Angeles. Several new recordings have recently been released, including one by Southwest Chamber Music on the Cambria label (Aura, Still Life After Death and Oracle). Del Sol Quartet will soon release a recording of his new quartet, *Spiral X*, and another album of Ung's works will soon be released by Da Capo Chamber Players on Bridge Records.



**Susan Ung's** interest in contemporary music for the viola began as a collaboration with her husband, Chinary Ung, on his first solo work for cello/viola, *Khse Buon*, in 1980. The opening of the work is based on a viola improvisation inspired by Indian saranghi music. Most performances for viola have been 10 minute versions, as opposed to the near 20 minute cello version. This recording of the work for viola comes after many years of composer-approved performances, and a desire to come up with a longer version best suited to the viola. *Child Song* was originally written when Susan was pregnant with their first child, in 1985, for alto flute, viola, cello and harp. A subsequent version was written later for flute, violin, clarinet and piano. Once again, this recording is a revision of its original form. In this case, the revisions occur both in instrumentation (omitting cello), as well as some compositional changes.

While majoring in viola performance as an undergraduate at Northern Illinois University and studying with members of the Vermeer Quartet, Susan Ung became interested and involved in performances on various Asian and Indonesian instruments, as well as improvisation. She developed a particular interest in the performance of new music since her graduate student days at SUNY Stony Brook, and associations with Arthur Weisberg and violist, John Graham. Later, she helped to manage a contemporary ensemble conducted by Weisberg, Ensemble 21, and also worked with Harvey Sollberger as a manager and principal violist of The La Jolla Symphony. Recently, travel and touring with the music of Chinary Ung are a frequent part of her life, with festivals and concerts both in the U.S. and in Australia, Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. She has been part of several premiers and recordings of her husband's newest works, including chamber works *Aura* and *Spiral IX*, as well as new work for solo viola, *Spiral XI*.





**Charles Wells** was born in 1960 in Missouri. His first few years saw him moved to different parts of the United States -- both eastern and western-- which has allowed him to come into contact with several people, including from many parts of Europe. His mentor, Annie Steinbach, was a displaced musician of renown from Vienna, Austria, for example, and Charles grew up with both the languages and the musical sensibilities of that part of the world. Later, he would travel with her, and afterward, he would go on to study for a time at a couple of Universities, taking a degree from Arizona State University, where he studied

composition with Chinary Ung. He has taken "Seven Mirrors" to Japan, and has performed in Europe and the U.S. for both private and public audiences. He currently lives in Phoenix, Arizona, where he teaches piano, and is also working on other recording projects.

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**Clay Ellerbroek** began his studies at the age of thirteen in his hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He studied at The Interlochen Arts Academy with Jacqueline Hofto and Christopher Kantner and at The New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts where he also mentored with Leone Buyse and Paula Robison.

In his first year at the conservatory he was invited by John Heiss to perform with the NEC Contemporary Ensemble and held Principal Flute positions with The New England Chamber Orchestra, The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Chamber Orchestra and The Middlesex Chamber Orchestra. In 1992 he was a finalist in the Concert Artist Guild competition as a member of the Cirrus Wind Quintet.

Mr. Ellerbroek performs regularly with The San Diego Symphony, The San Diego Opera and The Mainly Mozart Festival and has also been heard with The San Diego Chamber Orchestra, The Honolulu Symphony, The Mladi Chamber Orchestra, The La Jolla Music Society Summerfest as well as being a featured artist in the Seagate Concert Series. At the request of Maestro Jahja Ling, Mr. Ellerbroek performed as Acting Principal Flute during the San Diego Symphony's 2005-2006 season. He teaches at The University of San Diego as well as privately.





**Elena Mashkovtseva**, graduated from Moscow Conservatory where she studied with the internationally renowned Vera Dulova. Elena received first place at the USSR International Harp Competition in 1987. She was harpist in the world renowned Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra and the Russian National Orchestra. Since then, she has performed extensively in Russia, Europe, Mexico and the United States with such world renowned artists as Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, Josh Groban, John Williams, Marvin Hamlisch, Joshua Bell, Roberta Flack, and Johnny Mathis to name a few. As a soloist, she has recently performed the Mozart flute and harp concerto, Ravel

*Introduction and Allegro*, Debussy Dances and the Boieldieu Concerto with various orchestras. Elena now lives in San Diego where she is on the faculty at San Diego State University. She is the principal harpist for the San Diego Symphony, San Diego Opera, and the San Diego Chamber Orchestra, as well as a frequent guest of various local chamber and contemporary ensembles including several world premieres. Ms. Mashkovtseva also has a private studio of approximately twenty students, many of whom have won regional and national competitions. Since moving to California in 1996, she has performed in studio recordings and numerous projects, including film scores. In 2001, Elena Mashkovtseva was nominated for a Grammy award for her performance of Latin music with the Orchestra of Baja California.

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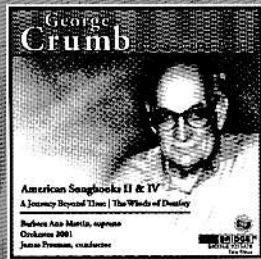
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