

Chinary Ung
(b. 1942)

1 **SPIRAL XI:**

Mother and Child (2007) (17:45)
Susan Ung, viola/voice

2 **SPIRAL IX:**

Maha Sathukar (2006) (29:55)
Thomas Buckner, baritone/percussion
Susan Ung, viola/voice/percussion
Lynn Vartan, percussion/voice
Stephen Solook, percussion/voice
Chinary Ung, conductor

When Chinary Ung set out to compose *Spiral IX: Maha Sathukar*, he established a union between the two series that had dominated his output for decades. The Spirals series began in 1987 and includes a variety of instrumental combinations—some of them idiosyncratic (such as *Spiral II* for mezzo-soprano, piano, and tuba)—ranging in scope from solo guitar to orchestra, but its last installment was in 1997. With that eighth piece, Ung figured he had exhausted this particular resource. Meanwhile, another series of works developed in which musicians were asked to perform vocal behaviors and their instrumental parts simultaneously—no small feat considering that the combination of acrobatic gestures and subtle timbral shadings that populate Ung's scores is enough to engage the abilities of most performers. To ask them to do something for which they haven't studied and practiced to perfection—singing, humming, whistling, chanting—requires a leap of faith on the part of the composer and the performer. Nevertheless, an impressive body of works emerged and, through their experience in playing them, there also grew a repertory of performers who developed a degree of comfort and facility with its extraordinary demands. The performances on this disc are evidence of this project's success.

What does it mean, though, to place these new demands on a performer? The question has practical and philosophical implications. From a historical standpoint, there is nothing new about singing and playing; it is common in folk idioms around the world. It is decidedly less common in the realm of western classical music, of course, where performance practice is a matter of specialization. Still, there are many pieces in the recent literature with some vocal demands, such as Crumb's *Black Angels* or Takemitsu's *Voice*, however

neither of these works uses the voice as extensively as does Ung in his recent music. From a practical standpoint, the musician has to come to terms with a vast gulf between her hard-earned, refined, and expert instrumental technique and her relatively raw, unrefined vocal abilities. She has to rethink the most basic thing: breath. The violist Susan Ung (the composer's wife) notes that "a simultaneous [vocal] line—to be sung, whistled, or shouted, in different rhythms, and on different pitches and dynamics—can throw a wrench into the whole concept of string performance. We are forced to use different parts of our musical brains, and at first this can be daunting." The issue of language (and pronunciation) compounds the challenge as the text consists largely of syllables taken from the Pali, Sanskrit, and Khmer languages.

Although formidable, these are technical matters, and the example of the last 60 years or so of contemporary music indicates that any reasonable technical challenge can be met by a suitably motivated and able musician. From a philosophical perspective, the practice is a critique of the hyper-specialized model of western classical instrumental approaches, and an homage to the folk traditions of Southeast Asia. It is no mere coincidence that Ung developed this approach largely after he began making regular trips to Cambodia, from which he had been exiled for forty years. Whereas Ung's music before 2002 seemed to draw energy and from a variety of Southeast Asian traditions in order to form a new music for a western concert setting, his music after 2002 increasingly seems to be directed towards Southeast Asia, and Cambodia in particular. The large chamber work *Aura* (2005) is the chief exemplar of this new direction. Aside from featuring extensive vocalization in the instrumental writing, the work

features a veiled transcription of the Sathukar, a piece of music played at the beginning of important ceremonial occasions. Traditionally, this music is a song without words featuring a shared, "hidden" melody. Ung's version is characteristically idiosyncratic and personal, but it taps into the DNA of the traditional source in an effort to reach into the Cambodian musical consciousness. Ung revisits the Sathukar in *Spiral IX: Maha Sathukar*, but expands it substantially into a work lasting approximately thirty minutes (maha means "grand," or "great" in Sanskrit). Whereas the Sathukar was an identifiable element in *Aura*, in *Spiral IX* it has swelled beyond recognition. Aside from architectonic elements, the chief piece of the traditional model that shines through in *Spiral IX* is the sense of ritual, of deep spiritual intent. Indeed, this spiritual resonance is a consistent feature in Ung's work, made all the more present by the use of the voice.

The voice has a powerful effect on the listener's experience of the music. In *Spiral XI: Mother and Child*, for viola, the performer draws us into an intimate space. She begins to play a languid, lyrical passage full of longing, dominated by the rich sounds of the viola's lower registers. Then, she starts to sing. The vocal line is at once wedded to yet independent of the viola line—they are in the same hemisphere but take slightly different paths towards a single expressive goal. It is a highly unusual scenario for a work that is classified ostensibly as a solo, but the overall sense one gathers from experiencing this music is not its newness or strangeness, but rather its unity, its intimacy, and its timelessness.

Ung's mentor and friend of more than 40 years, the composer Chou Wen-

From the manuscript of *Spiral XI: Mother and Child* (2007). The vocal line sets syllables drawn mostly from Pali, Khmer, and Sanskrit. Although there are some unisons in pitch and rhythm, the tendency is for each line to have a sense of independence between points of contact.

chung, had this to say regarding the recent work:

Given Chinary's family experience during those years of extraordinary political and social upheaval in Cambodia, inevitably the urge for a modern reincarnation of the ancient practice of chanting would propel him to evolve over the decades a methodology for synchronizing such musical events as: conventional, extended, or newly invented instrumental techniques, including percussive sounds on chosen objects; versus a rich repertoire of sung, spoken or otherwise vocalized sounds—all of which come together in a cohesive flow of invented as well as traditional sonic events.

*Naturally, the practice of accompanying one's own voice with something as simple as hand-clapping has been around as long as human history. But in *Spiral XI* (2007) for viola solo, the virtuosity demanded of the soloist is in the intertwining of the performer's two "voices," as if they were the two "vehicles" for attaining enlightenment in Buddhism.*

Clearly, the interpretational demands of this music are not only technical. Ung draws the performer's voice into the work in order to gain something more, something greater than the instrument alone can provide. Chou's interpretation—that the voice and instrument represent different means or traditions towards a common goal: enlightenment—is particularly striking. He amplifies further:

I have the feeling that when Chinary began using vocal expressions of performers there was a spiritual urge to use another means to produce sounds that would be

even more personal in feeling than anything that can be achieved by manipulating an instrument. When a singer sings, the vocal chord becomes one's instrument. But when a performer sings while playing on an instrument, simultaneously or alternately, it seems there are two layers of emotion, one being maneuvered extra personally and one directly from one's heart. I do not believe Chinary was thinking of something equivalent to the same person playing two instruments. Therefore, subconsciously perhaps, he was trying to express in his music what a Buddhist would describe as two "vehicles," one to be heard and one to be felt.

It is an apt assessment; after all, Ung has invoked Buddhist concepts elsewhere in his music, and always in a decidedly non-doctrinaire manner. For instance, the extended periods of relative stillness that emerge in *Spiral IX* refer to the Buddhist principle of Shunyata, a complex idea meaning a void or bubble, but which can be interpreted as spiritual openness. Ung first explored this concept in the 2006 work *Rain of Tears*, where the bubble was expressed as a broad registral space. In *Spiral IX* the instrumentation did not support the same approach, thus the space that opens is temporal. Ung believes the purpose of this openness is to invite compassion, giving this music a broader purpose: to dispel suffering. The startling array of behaviors and colors Ung creates are construed as "textures of compassion" in which the listener becomes immersed. A concept as rich and broad as the Shunyata accommodates myriad interpretations, so it is no wonder that Ung has chosen to revisit it. Return is a central theme in Chinary Ung's compositional practice. When Ung composed the earlier installments of the *Spiral* series he viewed the concept of the spiral primarily as a means of describing

technical processes he had developed for dealing with pitch and large-scale form. Over a period of years Ung internalized these techniques to such a degree that the spiral concept no longer carried any force. In order for it to become relevant again, the spirals needed to open wider so they could merge with the metaphysical issues that had captured Ung's imagination. Could a longer coil of a spiral suggest the Shunyata? Could enlightenment be the final link of a seemingly infinite spiral?

Ung has the remarkable ability to invite big, unanswerable questions through his work, and they are invoked here in the context of a recording featuring just two compositions with only a few performers. Nevertheless, these are works on an epic scale. They are micro-epics, intimate odysseys; they transport us listeners far while drawing us into their rich, distinctive sound worlds. The performers' voices establish a frame of reference that is inherently humane even as the instruments (and the performers' whistles) access ethereal planes. The spiral is no longer simply coiled but can be configured to accommodate an overarching trajectory, such as that of the viola in *Spiral XI*, rising from its initial low C to the culminating high C harmonic.

—Adam Greene

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

Over the past forty years Chinary Ung has developed a musical language that indicates an open ear toward the sounds of the east—Southeast Asia and his native Cambodia in particular—as well as the textures and instrumental practices of contemporary western concert music. From the solo 'cello piece *Khse Buon*, to the Grawemeyer Award-winning *Inner Voices*, to the epic *Aura*, Ung's music is characterized by a vivid sound world with an intense emotional trajectory.

An astonishingly prolific composer, Ung's focus is rarely turned inward. His activities as a cultural leader and educator indicate a profound sense of responsibility to a broader cultural and societal context. Ung has worked with numerous institutions and individuals who share his dedication toward preserving Cambodian culture and forging cultural exchanges between Asia and the West. As an educator, Ung has taught courses in Southeast Asian music and he has instructed generations of young composers at several institutions in the United States and now, through a series of residencies, in Asia as well.

Chinary Ung's compositions are published exclusively by C.F. Peters Corporation and they are registered under BMI. His growing catalog of recordings can be found on CRI, New World, Argo, CAMBRIA, Atoll, NAXOS, and oodiscs. This is the third portrait volume of Ung's music on Bridge Records.

Susan Ung

Susan Ung has performed in major venues in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, as well as at festivals in Santa Fe and La Jolla. Her international experience includes residencies in Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Thailand, and Cambodia. Her approach to the viola is informed by an interest in traditional music from several Asian cultures, which she studied at Northern Illinois University and SUNY Stony Brook with Nobuko Imai and John Graham. The fruit of these studies and a commitment to the music of her time have blossomed in a long collaboration with her husband Chinary Ung. Their work together has led her to develop a repertoire of unorthodox skills, particularly the use of complex vocalizations while simultaneously playing the viola. Susan Ung appears on recordings on the Bridge, CRI, Cambria, and Koch labels.



Lynn Vartan



Percussionist Dr. Lynn Vartan is an international performer and educator who is an advocate for diversity in music. In addition to teaching at Southern Utah University, Dr.

Vartan is the percussionist for Southwest Chamber Music, the violin/percussion duo 61/4 with Shalini Vijayan, and the Exacta Duo with Miguel Gonzalez. Dr. Vartan has worked with Michael Colgrass, Vinny Golia, Arthur Jarvinen, Ursula Oppens, Joan Tower, Glen Velez, Xtet, James Newton, Chinary Ung, the Hilliard Ensemble and the Tambuco Percussion Ensemble. As a soloist, Lynn Vartan has been featured on the Los Angeles Philharmonic Green Umbrella Series, the Different Trains Series, at Montana State University, the Hanoi Conservatory, Cornell University, with the Sierra Wind Symphony, the Helena Symphony and at the World Trade Expo in Seim Reap, Cambodia. As a recording artist, she has appeared on the ECM New Series, New World Records, Bridge Records, Albany Records, and was twice Grammy® nominated on the Cambria label with Southwest Chamber Music.

Thomas Buckner



For more than 40 years, baritone Thomas Buckner has dedicated himself to the world of new and improvised music. Buckner has collaborated with a host of new music composers including Robert Ashley, Noah Creshevsky, Tom Hamilton, Earl Howard, Matthias Kaul, Leroy Jenkins, Bun Ching Lam, Annea Lockwood, Roscoe Mitchell, Phill Niblock, Wadada Leo Smith, Chinary Ung, Christian Wolff and many others. He has made appearances at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Herbst Theatre, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Ostrava Days Festival, the Prague Spring Festival, and the Sibelius

Academy in Helsinki. Buckner is featured on over 40 recordings, including 6 of his own solo albums. His most recent solo recording "New Music for Baritone & Chamber Ensemble" includes works by Annea Lockwood, Tania Leon, and Petr Kotik. He also appears in the newly released CD/DVD "Kirili et le Nymphéas (Hommage à Monet)". This recording documents the latest in his ongoing series of collaborations between the sculptor Alain Kirili and improvising musicians and dancers. For the past twenty years, Buckner has co-produced the Interpretations series in New York City. He also created the Mutable Music record label to produce new recordings and reissue some important historic recordings, previously unavailable in CD format.

Stephen Solook



Critically acclaimed percussionist Stephen Solook is currently pursuing his DMA at the University of California at San Diego. Steve has been fortunate to perform extensively in world music, orchestral music and contemporary music throughout the world. With co-founder, Tiffany Du Mouchelle,

of the Aurora Borealis duo (for soprano and percussion) they have performed together more than any other duo of its kind. As a teacher, Mr. Solook has taught in North America, Africa, Asia, and worked with NPO Cultures in Harmony. Current research, in 2011, sponsored by Pacific Blue Foundation, has brought Steve to research music in Fiji. Mr. Solook can be heard on Bridge and Vortex labels. For more information please visit, www.StephenSolook.com.

Producers: Jacob David Sudol (*Spiral IX and Spiral XI*) and Sean Heim (*Spiral XI*)
Engineer, Edited and Mastered by Joe Kucera
Assistant Engineers: Scott Levine, Jason Ponce
Design: Sandra Woodruff
Executive Producers: Becky and David Starobin
Annotator: Adam Greene
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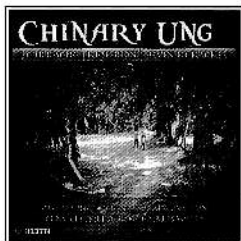
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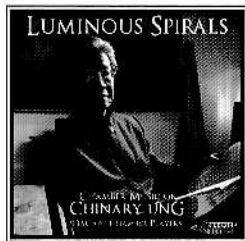


Music of Chinary Ung Vol. 1

Khse Buon (1980)

Child Song (1985)

Seven Mirrors (1997)



Music of Chinary Ung Vol. 2

Child Song (1985)

Luminous Spirals (1997)

Spiral VI (1992)

...still life after death... (1996)

Oracle (2004)

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