

SFSymphony Nods to the Lunar New Year with New Works by (Mostly) Asian Composers

By Steven Winn, Musical America

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SAN FRANCISCO--In an eventful program of high contrasts timed to help mark the Lunar New Year, the San Francisco Symphony presented works by Korean-born Texu Kim and Younghi Pagh-Paan, China native Zhou Long, and Takashi Yoshimatsu, who hails from Japan. Along for the ride in the February 11 performance at Davies Symphony Hall was the Concerto for Pipa with String Orchestra by the seraphic American master Lou Harrison (1917-2003), whose long immersion in Asian music dates to his college years in the Bay Area.

The music, all of it new to SFS audiences, brimmed over with exuberance, captivating orchestral textures, concussive outbursts, dexterous rhythms, and vivid sonic imagery. If the program leaned more towards dazzling effects than probing musical ideas, the abundant pleasures cast a sustaining glow.

Conductor Perry So, who was born in Hong Kong, conducted with sure-handed vitality. Wu Man was the remarkable pipa soloist.

The evening opened with the West Coast premiere of Kim's *Bounce!!* As the composer explained in a program note, the inspiration for this seven-minute miniature was the sound of basketballs and squeaking sneakers at the gym where he works out.

Kim, whose other double-exclamation-point titles include *Splash!!*, *Flash!!*, and *Hiccups!!*, begins his musical workout with a light warm-up on piano, pizzicato strings, and some huffing and puffing from muttering woodwinds and muted brass. Eventually the percussion team kicks things into a thudding higher gear. But a winsome lightness prevails, with string harmonics and a few piano flutters in the cool-down. Fittingly, Kim sprinted down from his seat to take a quick bow and dash off again.

Resembling a large lute with a straight neck, the pipa proved winningly agile in the seven movements of Harrison's 1997 Concerto. In crisply articulated runs, singing vibratos, and one percussive exchange with a cello and bass, in which the performer thumps the body of the instrument and her colleagues thump back, Wu Man made her bravura turn seem fanciful and frictionless. Her fingers flew across the frets, strummed the strings like a gonzo bass guitarist, or set off the rapidly repeated notes of the balalaika.

Harrison exploits the instrument's capacity to be plaintive or plangent, lyrical or playful. While there are numerous solo passages, conversations with the string orchestra bloom in multiple ways. In the fourth movement, marked "Bits and Pieces: Wind and Plumb," the soloist sends out bell-like reverberations over long gliding orchestral phrases. The affectingly played "Threnody for Richard Locke" movement brought Samuel Barber at his most mournfully tender to mind. Coming full circle in the final "Estampie," the piece reprises themes from the opening movement, energized here in buoyant, brisk rushes shared by the soloist and band.

Yoshimatsu's *The Age of Birds*, the enchanting centerpiece of the evening's second half, is a tone poem sent aloft. Its three movements – "Sky," "Trees," and "The Sun" -- invoke avian life in all its variety and complexity. When a gathering swarm of dense harmonies suddenly swoop upward in rising, scoop-like phrases, listeners can see with their ears. Bells, a delicately tongue-fluttering flute, and chirruping woodwinds brighten the sky with assorted colors.

But Yoshimatsu, whose output includes six symphonies and ten concertos along with film scores, is no mere birdsong romantic. With percussion clatters and abrupt swerves, the piece conjures beaks and claws as well as feathers and flight. The intricate polyrhythms in the second movement skitter and land with Stravinsky-like surprises. The delicate string tracery in the third movement recalls Debussy. But these are resonances, not borrowings. This composer charts his own distinctive flight path, and so maneuvered through it all with confidence. At several points he raised his fingers one by one to signal the progress of certain tricky sections. When the last string shimmers die off, the memory of all the flocks lingers.

Pagh-Paan's *NIM* opens as if in media res of some Mahlerian frenzy. No sooner has the full orchestral boom relented a little than the percussion takes up its own hissing and whispering agitation of castanet, woodblock, drums, and more. The brasses set off a frantic alarm. A snare drum cuts in with military precision. A flute shrills. The sum effect is largely quarrelsome and remorseless, keeping a listener more on edge than drawn into the fray.

The evening closed with Long's *The Rhyme of Taigu*, which put a busy percussion section and clarinetist Carey Bell in the spotlight. With its concussive outbursts from the former and impertinent exclamations by the latter, a kind of adversarial game breaks out. Colors shift quickly, from tightly oscillating string figures to jazz-inflected commotion. The episodes keep coming, and the SFS was up to every challenge, bringing a bright brassy finish to a sparkling night.

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