

AMERICAN COMPOSERS ORCHESTRA
DENNIS RUSSELL DAVIES

Peter Basquin & Christopher Oldfather pianos*

Lou Harrison

Suite for Symphonic Strings

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------|
| 1. Estampie | 3:57 |
| 2. Chorale: Et in Arcadia ego | 5:49 |
| 3. Duetia: In honor of Eros | 2:37 |
| 4. Lament | 5:19 |
| 5. Round: In honor of Hermes | 3:08 |
| 6. Little fugue: Viola's reward | 3:33 |
| 7. Nocturne | 3:44 |

Chinary Ung

- | | |
|-----------------|-------|
| 8. Inner Voices | 20:23 |
|-----------------|-------|

Colin McPhee

Tabuh-Tabuhan

Toccata for orchestra and 2 pianos*

- | | |
|-----------------|------|
| 9. I Ostinato | 7:26 |
| 10. II Nocturne | 6:08 |
| 11. III Finale | 6:24 |

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Asian voices, American voices, Inner voices ...

“*Tabuh- Tabuhan*,” Colin McPhee once explained in a program note, “was written after I had already spent four years in Bali engaged in musical research and is largely inspired, especially in its orchestration, by the various methods I had learned of Balinese gamelan technique.” McPhee also noted that “many of the syncopated rhythms of Balinese music have a close affinity with those of Latin American popular music and American jazz.” Those are extraordinary words from an American composer in the first half of our century when American music was Europe dominated and when its exoticism tended to come from Latin America or indirectly, through jazz, from Africa, The composers on the West Coast who had grown up amidst

Pacific Rim cultures - Henry Cowell, Harry Partch, John Cage and Lou Harrison - were the outsiders, and remain so even now. Still, the Pacific Ocean has proven a porous barrier, and it is becoming increasingly clear that Western music in general, and American music in particular, would not have turned out as we know it today without a significant influence from Asia.



Born in Montreal in 1901, McPhee received a typical East Coast education for the time, studying in Montreal and Toronto, at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore and in Paris. He settled in the United States in 1926, and became active in the New York new music scene, writing first in a Neo-classical style. Varese and the machine age soon motivated him to make his rhythms more complex, his harmonies more dissonant and his instrumentation more clangorous. Then, around 1930, McPhee heard a French recording of a Balinese gamelan, and the sound of its gongs and bells ensnared him. In 1930, he married Jane Belo, a young student of ethnology from a well-to-do family, and by 1933, they were off to Bali. They had intended upon a two week holiday but stayed several years. While there, McPhee formed a gamelan, learning to play each instrument and becoming the first Westerner to take up the study of this music seriously. He discovered that one possible tuning is the one we have for our piano, and he used this to transcribe Balinese melodies for two pianos after he got back (and which Benjamin Britten enjoyed playing with McPhee). Fearing the threat of war, and without income following his divorce from Belo, McPhee left Bali in 1937.

But Bali never left him. His music and life remained haunted by the island. Back in the U.S., he found remarkable ways to make Western instruments imitate the sound of a gamelan, and he combined traditional Balinese melodies and rhythms with his own innovations and with Western forms. He lived, however, in physical pain as a lingering result of a malaria he had caught in Bali. And he suffered an equally painful creative crisis in his last years, unable to develop any style of music that wasn't Balinese, yet feeling pressure, nonetheless, to conform to the European tradition. In 1964, he died an alcoholic who had thought himself a failure. Ironically, though, that was just about the time of the early experiments in Minimalism, which was influenced by Asian musical techniques and which became one of the most important and lasting musical styles of the late twentieth century, McPhee was, in fact, a prophetic musician; and *Tabuh-Tabuhan*, his first orchestral piece to incorporate Balinese music, a ground-breaking score. He

began it while on a brief 'vacation' from Bali in 1935, at the suggestion of Carlos Chavez, the Mexican composer himself noted for the inclusion of Indian elements in his scores, Chavez led the premiere in Mexico City with his Orquesta Sinfónica de Mexico in the summer of 1936.

The name *Tabuh-Tabuhan*, McPhee explained at the time of its composition, was a collective term for different drum rhythms, metric forms and drum punctuations; and the music offers a stunning melding of transcriptions of Balinese melodies and Western structural techniques. Called by McPhee a toccata for two pianos and orchestra, it is conceived as a concerto grosso in three movements, with the solo group - two pianos, celesta, xylophone, marimba, glockenspiel and two Balinese gongs - forming a 'Nuclear gamelan' that is pitted against the standard orchestra. McPhee's general construction is based, in part, upon the Balinese preference for stringing melodies or sections together, although he does find himself tempted to add, or at least imply, the Western preference for closure through recapitulation. In the first movement, *Ostinatos*, he uses a collage-like technique interlocking various transcribed Balinese melodies and rhythms. In *Nocturne*, McPhee embellishes native melodies in more typically Western orchestral settings, often straying far from the pure source material. For the *Finale*, McPhee returns to the interlocking parts and dance-like rhythms of the opening movement, but here he does so without recourse to direct transcription.



The composer who has most devotedly taken up McPhee's Indonesian torch is Lou Harrison.

Harrison, who recalls that he had enjoyed McPhee's cooking, his books and his company for quite a number of years and remembers McPhee's 'beautiful imagination', was born in Portland, Oregon in 1917, Around the time McPhee was writing *Tabuh-*

Tabuhan, Harrison was studying in San Francisco with Henry Cowell, who inspired Harrison's life-long interests in percussion, in Asian musics and in tuning systems. Also around this time, Harrison met John Cage, then a young composer working in San Francisco, and the two composers formed a percussion ensemble. Harrison's career then took him to Los Angeles, where he studied with Schoenberg, and to New York, where he became associated

with Charles Ives and Virgil Thomson. In 1954, he returned to California, settling in Aptos, about a hundred miles south of San Francisco, where he remained until his death in February of 2003.

A composer of astonishing prolificacy and variety, he has written a great many works based upon Indonesian and Korean music, sometimes utilizing the American Gamelan, sometimes employing Western instruments, and sometimes making various combinations of the two types. In a preface to the score of the *Suite for Symphonic Strings*, a work from the second category, Harrison wrote, "I think that any sound that can be generated by a musical instrument is legitimate, so long as the method does not injure the instrument." *Suite for Symphonic Strings*, which was given its first performance by the Louisville Orchestra under Robert Whitney in 1961, demonstrates one of Harrison's approaches to combining Asian music with old Western forms. The score is also an assemblage of some older Harrison material, and he dates it from the perspective of its composition looking back, 1960-1936. The music combines exploration of structural technique (there is abundance of fugue and canon) and conventional forms (soul, lament and the Renaissance stamping dance from the South of France called *estampie*), but Harrison also said that he considered the suite to be a 'story-line' composition.



Chinary Ung, who was born in Cambodia in 1942, comes not just from the other side of the world, but he comes to the orchestra from the other side of the musical spectrum as well. He did not hear an orchestra until he was seventeen years old and, though interested in composition in his youth, he never even realised that there was such a thing as notated music. One of the first graduates from Cambodia's national musical conservatory, Ung moved to America where he eventually earned a doctorate from Columbia University, studying with Chou Wen Chung, the Chinese-American composer. Another strong influence was George Crumb, with whom Ung taught on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania from 1980 until 1987. Since then he has served as associate professor of theory and composition at Arizona State University in Tempe and is currently Professor of Composition at the University of California, San Diego . While *Inner Voices* contains no specific Cambodian music, listeners will immediately recognize the Asian voice. *Inner Voices* was commissioned by The Philadelphia Orchestra and

premiered in 1986 under Dennis Russell Davies. Ung represents a new generation of composers for whom multiculturalism is not self-conscious, who not only don't need to defend their practices, nor even find them particularly worthy of attention. In fact, it is the outer voices, or the 'external sounds' themselves, those sounds that had seemed so revelatory to McPhee, that Ung thinks of as being of less significance than the image he imagined behind the music. That image, he has explained, came from the memory of an old woman his family used to visit years ago. She collected scraps of cloth, which she sewed into a beautiful patchwork quilt. Seeing a similar quilt hanging at the Museum of Modern Art, Ung says, gave him the idea of using groups of ensembles to produce overlapping colors, and to write a piece made up of different scenarios and moments, but that still conveys a “form of unity within the plurality of multi-colors”. Although Ung manipulates the orchestra with mastery, his inner voice retains a poetic Asian soul, revealed in Ung's description of the work's coda: “The violin solo with the strings underneath is like glittering drops of water on a lotus leaf caught in a sunbeam. The surface of the pond is moving slightly, it looks like mercury.” *Inner Voices* was the 1989 recipient of the Grawemeyer Award for Music.

Mark Swed