

Review: Project Copernicus goes East

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August 29, 2007

A new-music concert can be a sometime thing, but this past weekend, [Project Copernicus](#) presented an afternoon of fresh composition that was as inspired as it was fascinating.

The South Miami-based chamber orchestra, performing at [Holy Trinity Episcopal Church](#) in West Palm Beach, presented four works inspired by Asian culture, all of them written by composers under age 30. The range of these pieces was impressive, reaching from an intense, quasi-tonal exploration of color to a piece that veered on salon swing, all of it played surpassingly well by a very talented group of young musicians.

The most immediately engaging of the four was *L'Ours Chinois (The Chinese Bear)*, by the Hawaiian-born composer and bassist [Randy Wong](#). This mini-concerto for violin and small chamber ensemble featured Wong's fiancé, [Helen Liu](#), a wonderful player with a huge sound and a sure technique.

Wong's piece, originally written for a four-piece band, helps itself to a variety of musical styles, from kitschy exotica pop to Chinese folk, Fritz Kreisler and Maurice Ravel (whose String Quartet was briefly quoted in the middle). And it does so with immense charm, beginning with a bubbly opening section in which the solo violin scampered and sparkled above a catchy rhythm in the orchestra.

The slower section that followed took the music to an entirely different place: the unadorned world of the Chinese folksong, as Liu offered a plaintive, beautiful melody that sounded authentic amid what was designed to be pastiche. And that is the merit of *L'Ours Chinois* — it's the work of a composer who knows how to express himself even when he's only trying to express how much he likes certain kinds of music.

Frankly, although this composition works quite well as an aperitif, there's plenty of evidence here that Wong could write a full-scale concerto for Liu based on this material. It's one of the few truly successful crossover pieces I've heard in many a day.

Also on the program was *Empty Mountain, Spirit Rain*, a piece by the Chinese-American composer [Angel Lam](#), who was in attendance Sunday. This chamber orchestra tone poem, written for the [Silk Road Project](#) led by cellist [Yo-Yo Ma](#), makes good use of silence and sharply etched rhythm, starting with the big bass-note punctuations with which the piece begins.

Lam's piece blossomed into something much more intense after the spare opening, speaking a sinewy language of folkish motifs over an insistent pulse that hinted at jazz. There was standout playing by alto flutist [Eboney Thomas](#) and cellist David Bebe, who soared together to vigorous effect in the work's climactic pages.

This, too, was an impressive piece, full of power and color, and a good amalgam of Eastern and Western styles.

The concert, which was ably directed by conductor [Chung Park](#), opened with *GEN*, an exploration of tonal shading by the Japanese-born composer Ryojiro Sato. Although Sato told the audience Sunday that this piece wasn't based on melody, it had recognizable motifs, from the little flute figure that opened and closed the work to the regular hammer-blows in the percussion that marked off sonic space as effectively as any major orchestral peroration.

Sato said his piece was inspired by the images you see with your eyes closed, and I found listening to it that way was effective because it had a way of suspending normal expectations for what should happen next in the music. *GEN* is a collection of interesting effects (linked through much of it by the high whine of a bowed metal disc) that would probably reveal more subtleties on repeated listenings.

Copernicus co-founder and house composer [Steve Danyew](#) contributed the other work on the program, *Lhotse*, a piece for tenor and alto saxophone designed to evoke the Nepalese mountain near Mount Everest. Altoist Jason Kush joined Danyew on tenor for this effective study in multiphonics and other exotic saxophone sounds.

Danyew's music painted persuasive pictures of the remoteness of the lamaseries at the top of the world, with imitations of bells and sounds amid the empty spaces. The saxophones often burbled along in rapid-fire figurations in harmony, which made their one very brief unison statement more striking.

Like the other composers on the program, Danyew made much of nervous rhythms, lending this piece a jazzy undertow at times. That also helped enliven the atmospherics of his challenging, interesting piece.