

Project Copernicus: East meets West

By Lawrence Budmen

Special Correspondent

August 28, 2007

The fusion of Eastern and Western musical modes is the main focus of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project. Angel Lam's *Empty Mountain, Spirit Rain*, a piece commissioned by the Silk Road Ensemble, was the most effect work in a survey of musical ruminations *From the Land of the Buddha*, which the innovative chamber orchestra Project Copernicus performed Saturday at St. John's United Methodist Church in Miami Beach.

Lam, a doctoral candidate at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory, lists contemporary music icon Osvaldo Golijov among her mentors. Like Golijov, she combines modern instrumental timbres with world music elements to produce a heady brew.

Wielding the brush of a master tonal painter, the composer delineates a childhood vision of the day of her grandmother's death in her native Hong Kong. The alto flute sings a plaintive song in deep, vibrato laden tones. A big melodic thread that could have been written by Dvorak emerges in the cello while the violin line abounds in minimalist figurations a la Steve Reich. The bass acts as a neo-Baroque continuo.

Flutist Ebonee Thomas evoked poignant sadness with exquisite flights of tone. David Bebe brought felicitous energy to the prominent cello part. Elizabeth Galvan and William James (on marimba) were provided an expert, varied percussion battery. Musical director Chung Park conducted with clarity and transparency of instrumental texture.

GEN by Ryojiro Sato achieved a meditative stasis by eschewing melody in favor of color and rhythm. Dark and eerie in tone, the score is a veritable percussion concerto with pitched water and gong joining conventional instruments.

Marguerite Lynn Williams excelled in the gleaming harp solos. Jerome Gordon imparted the fiendishly complex viola writing with richly burnished tone and noble, incisive phrasing.

The ascending line of *Lhotse* by Stephen Danyew, the ensemble's composer-in-residence, was meant to evoke mountain climbers on the last peak before the seemingly impossible summit of Mt. Everest.

But the partially microtonal score (for two unaccompanied saxophones) owes more to the jazz sax innovations of Charlie Parker and the lonely night music of Bela Bartok than to non-Western musical sources. Danyew and Jason Kush were saxophone virtuosos par excellence, making the instrument sing as well as shout.

L'ours Chinois by Randy Wong, the group's bass player, seemed out of place on this program. An unsophisticated violin piece that quotes Ravel's String Quartet and Fritz Kreisler's *Tambourin Chinois*, the score could be an effective addition to the pops concert repertoire.

Helen Liu exuded Viennese schmaltz, capping the extravagant violin solo with brilliant technique and lightness of touch.

Lawrence Budmen can be reached at lbudmen@msn.com.

Copyright © 2007, [South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#)