

— Department of Music Presents —

MUSIC

The Universal Connection

PHYLLIS CHEN: A Mini-Portrait

Studley Theatre

Tuesday, September 27

Pre-Show: 7:00 p.m.

Main Event: 7:30 p.m.

PHYLLIS CHEN: MINI-PORTRAIT

Program

Floating Verses (2018-present)

for music boxes and playback

featuring students from Experiments in Composition class

Phyllis Chen (b.1978)

When Mist Turns to Sea (2022)

for shakuhachi and carillon

Tone Grove (2021)

for manipulated music boxes and playback

Pianofall (2020) *for solo piano*

SumiTones (2020) *for solo piano*

Pulse (2020) *for layered pianos*

Through The Thicket of Stars (2022)

*for layered toy piano, toy harp, bowls and electronics/home-made
sampler, music box, projection*

I. Girl for 2 toy pianos

II. Tiger for toy piano and bowls

III. Phoenix for sampler

IV. Turtle for toy harp and toy piano

V. Dragon for toy piano and sampler

VI. Finale for music box and playback

Grace Lin, visual artist

Program Notes

Floating Verses is a global community music-art piece. Using a series of music box workshops, participants design and create their own music box strips. Eventually, these strips are connected in a quilt-like fashion to a continuous scroll that turns into music. Floating Verses is an ever-evolving piece, hopefully reaching many people of diverse ages and backgrounds around the world. The current version of Floating Verses is a 30-minute sound installation that includes participants from University of Ioannina (Greece), Oqaatsut Schoolhouse (Oqaatsut, Greenland), Morris Museum (Morristown, NJ), Philly Magic Garden (Philadelphia, PA), Ben Franklin Institute (Philadelphia), SUNY New Paltz, and Abrons Arts Center (NYC).

When Mist Floats To Sea is written for shakuhachi flute and carillon. The work was commissioned by the Franco Committee of the Guild of Carillonneurs in North America. The shakuhachi (Japanese zen flute) was historically used as a form of meditation by Zen Buddhists from the Fuke sect. The instrument's traditional works were created by monks as a form of breath meditation. The relationship between bells and shakuhachi stems from an ancient legend. It is said that esteemed Buddhist priest Chang Po wandered the streets ringing a bell and chanting. A young novice monk, Haku, heard the bell and attained enlightenment, immediately running home to make a shakuhachi flute and playing it. He is said to have made the sound of the bell on the flute, creating one of the first works in this tradition "Kyotaku," which translates to mean "empty bell."

During the pandemic I felt a need to return to my first instrument, the piano, where I created a series of solo works. Pianofall is inspired by a quote by Thich That Hanh: "Flow as a river, not a drop of water..." This simple and beautiful saying was poignant to me at a time when we were deeply separated from one another, reminding me of how interdependent we all are.

SumiTones was written as a collaborative piece with shodo artist Masako Inkyo. The Japanese word “sumi” means “black ink” and refers to a particular style of calligraphy painting introduced by Zen monks centuries ago. Water is mixed with sumi (charcoaled tree bark) to create gradations of grey used in the painting. Sumi calligraphy paintings traditionally aimed to capture the “spirit” and “essence” of a subject, rather than an exact imitation. This piece was my attempt to distill the purity and beauty of the piano resonance.

Pulse

Using your left hand, find your pulse on your neck.

Matching the speed of your pulse, play each note once for each pulse beat.

The bracketed number indicates how many repetitions of one particular pitch should occur.

Play the piece with your right hand, while continuing to tune into your pulse with your left hand.

Try to match your pulse rate/speed as precisely as possible.

Your playing should reflect small changes in your pulse speed that naturally occur.

For 14 days, record yourself playing this piece every day.

After compiling 14 recordings, layer all of them into one.

Listen to your composite recording.

This piece was written and realized during a 14-day quarantine in March 2020.

Through The Thicket of Stars is a multimedia piece inspired by a commissioned scroll painting by Taiwanese-American author/illustrator, Grace Lin, a Caldecott Award recipient, Newbury Honor Award recipient and New York Times best-selling author. Lin has created pictures and stories that have become near and dear to my family. Many of her stories

resonate with my own childhood as a Taiwanese-American growing up in the US during the 1980s. In this particular piece, Grace paints a scroll of the four mythological creatures represented in Chinese constellations. Each of these animals have a sound sketch to depict their character and energy, culminating in a music box ending that reveals Grace's scroll painting.

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