

**Daniel Asia: Music as an Encounter with the Sacred**  
**BY PETER BURWASSER**

The music of Daniel Asia represents an especially potent solution to the challenge to a generation of American composers to find a distinct language amidst an unprecedented panoply of choices. "It is something I have actively, musically and intellectually sought—to broaden my musical palette to include material formerly thought to be from highly delineated camps." The remarkable quality about Asia's music, noted frequently in reviews of his concerts and CDs (including one by this writer on these pages) is the synthesis, with nary a nut or bolt showing. The language is generally accessible, which is not to say pandering. He will use outright atonality when, for example, he wishes to be "appropriately shattering" or revert to full-blown tonality when reaching for something "beautiful and transcendent. My music is rarely functionally tonal in the nineteenth century sense, but I am not setting out to create a new language, like Schoenberg. The question of issues of tonality and dissonance is largely a done deal. They are now both part of our past, and thus part of our present. They are handled differently by different composers, and I think the only real issue is quality, truthfulness, and individuality of the compositional voice. My music relies on old world concepts of dissonance and consonance, having a beginning, middle, and end, and creating a sense of journey."

While Asia tends to eschew labels in matters of tonality or harmony, he is quite conscious of his identity as an American composer. When I suggested to the Seattle native that there is something of a cowboy song lilt in his Violin Sonata, he did not concur with the specific influence, but suggested that I might be reacting to something else in the writing that marks it as American. "The rhythmic sensibility of American music derives from our folk music. Our current folk music is American vernacular music, rock, pop, the blues, and jazz. Rhythm in these musics rarely puts the emphasis on the first beat of the measure, syncopation is rife, and playing against the beat is the norm. These practices are all profoundly un-European."

This is not at all to say that Asia elevates popular music to a level of importance on a par with classical music, a sentiment he expresses with bluntness and passion. I asked him about some of his contemporaries (he was born in 1953) or, for that matter, the manner by which such masters as Bartók, Kodaly, and Copland used folk music in their work. "They took folk material and erected structure, architecture, gave it a depth the original music does not have. Is sophistication a bad word? I find American and pop music repetitive and trivial. It doesn't have a lot of resonance. It is the nature of high art as opposed to folk art. High art has more to teach us. We live in a time when the prevailing ethos is that everything is equal in value. Pop is ephemeral, art music is made to last. That pop garners a larger audience is of little relevance. More people read *People* magazine than Saul Bellow. I don't think this means that the former contains richer writing than the latter."

All of which is not to say that Asia does not have faith in the ability of audiences to appreciate interesting and even challenging new music. He is passionate about the subject, even at the risk of aiming at a sacred cow or two when he perceives audiences being pandered to. "I decry the attempt to see all musics as equal, usually justified because of our liking something, and therefore raising it in value. I consider this to have occurred with the realm of movie music and movie composers. Most movie music fulfills the goal of furthering onscreen action, or supporting emotional states. It rarely has inherent musical value of its own, and is rarely idiosyncratic or personal. That a composer like John Williams has been able to cross over from the film domain to serious music I consider cause for great concern. He is a talented craftsman, who can copy other composers' styles like nobody's business. His orchestrators do a great job. But what is simply never present is a true compositional voice. His music is, quite simply, bland, faceless, and usually banal. That he is taken seriously by some in the musical establishment is a travesty."

His own experience as a composer backs up his words. "I've rarely had a bad experience. Generally people like my music, although my first critic was my mother, who always thought my music

was too long. On the West Coast, there are committed conductors in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle playing lots of new music. Audiences are ecstatic. The experience should be like going to the theater or an art gallery. Do you like all of it? Of course not. I think it is an absolute fact that younger audiences like new music, and orchestras that do not get it are fooling themselves. It is pure and utter laziness for orchestras not to program new music.”

Although his newest Summit release is chamber music, Asia himself has written a good deal of symphonic music, especially during his stint as the composer in residence at the Phoenix Symphony. (He and his family have made the Southwest their home, and Asia currently heads the composition department at the University of Arizona.) His newest venture is into the world of opera, and not surprisingly, he has a few opinions on the subject. He is not a big fan of many contemporary operas, which he contends have misplaced priorities. “Operas are still in the repertoire because there is something in the music—not the story.” This notion has not stopped Asia from engaging a highly literary choice for his own in-the-works opera. “The subject matter is a setting of the poet Paul Pine’s book *Tin Angel*. It contains a plethora of low class people doing bad things. There is murder, sex, drugs, and there are Hispanics, Jews, a holocaust survivor—it’s got everything!”

Asia’s strong opinions are a reflection of a man of passion and conviction. He comes across as a person of humor and optimism, and yet, one with a deadly seriousness about the role of art and the artist in the life of the community at large. “Music can transport us and take us to a place that is beyond the physical, to an encounter with the sacred. If you do not understand that, you do not know what art is.”

**ASIA Piano Trio.<sup>1</sup> Violin Sonata<sup>2</sup> • Franti\_ek Sou\_ek (va),<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Fortin (vc),<sup>1</sup> Richard Ormrod (pn),<sup>1</sup> Curtis Macomber (vn),<sup>2</sup> Christopher Oldfather (pn)<sup>2</sup> • SUMMIT 509 (57:02)**

This CD consists of two substantial chamber-music pieces that both exhibit strength and beauty, but expressed in different ways. The Violin Sonata, from 2001, is notable for an especially taut structure, a five movement arch with many elements of symmetry. There is a sprightly, even dance-like energy in the outer movements that suggests the neo-Classical Stravinsky, countered by shorter, somewhat quirky layers surrounding a weighty, reflective center. Asia shows notable authority in his slower music, which tends to proceed with firm confidence in the ability of the assembled components to carry the day. The simplicity of expression is deceptive; the composer works with very carefully crafted manipulations of harmony, rhythm, and dynamics. The whole work imparts a satisfying sense of form and substance, as if an interesting story is being related. That quality is strongly enhanced by the superb playing here, especially the vital and strongly communicative violin-playing of Christopher Macomber.

The Trio, written in 1996 as a memorial commissioned by Philip Vance for his wife, Jeannette Mahoney Vance, also conveys a bigness that belies the intimate instrumentation. Jaunty, motoric outer movements surround a serene, large-scale slow movement, which proceeds deliberately, even dreamily. Asia uses the vowels of Jeannette’s name to form a motif for the cello, based on E, A, E, GT, and G. After the introduction, whole-tone progressions on the piano, accompanied by a rocking pattern on the violin, give the music an Asian sensibility (no pun intended). This morphs into a lush, lyrical passage, which abruptly returns to the sparse music that preceded it, before launching into a sweet coda.

Daniel Asia is a prolific, relatively young composer who has developed a distinctive voice that, at this point in his career, transcends technical considerations and allows him to express himself in a direct and confident manner. This CD is an excellent sampling of that art, and there is a lot more where this comes from. Stay tuned.