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Classical CD reviews

By Bradley Winterton / Contributing reporter

Symphony No: 3 Taiwan and Cello Concerto No: 1, Gordon Chin, Taiwan Philharmonic, conductor Lu Shao-Chia Naxos 8.570615

Double Concerto and Formosa Seasons, Gordon Chin, Kansas City Symphony, conductor Michael Stern Naxos 8.570221

Gordon Shi-wen Chin (金希文) is considered by many to be Taiwan's leading classical composer. Now aged 58, he's created a wide range of works including four symphonies, a double concerto for violin and cello, a cello concerto, Formosa Seasons for violin and strings and a major opera, The Black Bearded Bible Man. His music is colorful, frequently highly percussive, and modernistic without being abstract. Two important works, his Third Symphony (subtitled "Taiwan") and his Cello Concerto, have recently been issued on the Naxos label, and they form a useful introduction to his work. They're performed by Taipei's

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Symphony No: 3 Taiwan and Cello Concerto No: 1, by Gordon Chin

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dramatic than the symphony. Also, the presence of a solo instrument helps lead the mind into the music by giving you something to concentrate on; the cello is like a life-line, as it were.

The First Movement contains many styles in quick succession, while the Second Movement is altogether more leisurely. It has the title *Dreams Trapped inside the Mirror*, and on the whole the dreams seem to be bad ones. Indeed, Chin quotes the 17th century French philosopher Blaise Pascal: “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me” in connection with this movement. It continues darkly, but when we reached a passage where the cello is seemingly hit, scratched and scraped I could only collapse laughing. And then it

National Symphony Orchestra (NSO), called here for political reasons — no mention of “national,” in other words — the Taiwan Philharmonic. (Naxos is based in Hong Kong).

What sort of music does Gordon Chin produce? I would call him a modern Taiwanese Stravinsky — modern because Stravinsky’s most famous work, *Rite of Spring*, dates from over a hundred years ago now, and Taiwanese because Chin is always eager to use East Asian instruments and cadences.

Of the two works available on this new CD, listeners are probably more likely to enjoy the Cello Concerto. This is because, while not very dramatic, it’s more

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was over.

As with the other two movements, the Third Movement conveys no very distinct emotional world, and ends unexpectedly, with no attempt at anything like dramatic closure. It too has a quotation attached to it, this time from the UK's Samuel Johnson. "Reason deserts us at the brink of the grave and can give no further intelligence." A somber thought indeed. Yet this isn't "difficult" music; instead it appears to occupy a space somewhere between enjoyment and challenge. It's as if Gordon Chin is opting not to go out of his way to be hugely popular, but doesn't want to put any obstacles in the way of such an eventual outcome either. Yang Wen-sinn (楊文信) plays with notable decisiveness throughout.

This isn't an instantly recognizable sonic world, but rather an amalgam of various modernistic elements. It seems to me, therefore, that Chin needs to either court real popularity, or else plow a more distinctive and individualistic furrow. At present he does neither, but occupies some indeterminate territory in between.

An older near-contemporary I would contrast him with is Philip Glass. Glass's music is immensely popular, and yet at the same time instantly recognizable, effortlessly spanning popular and classical worlds. His style, moreover, appears fitted for both introspective works like Solo Piano and for ambitious operatic projects such as Satyagraha (revived by New York's Metropolitan Opera in 2011). Chin's opera The Black Bearded Bible Man, by contrast, received a distinctly mixed review in this newspaper [Taipei Times, Dec. 1, 2008] when it was given its world premiere in Taipei in 2008.

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