

Momentum

CHEN YI

B. April 4, 1953, Guangzhou, China

Premiered on May 2, 1998 by the Peabody Symphony Orchestra at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall.

*Scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four French horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, plus four percussionists - bass drum, bongo drums, high cymbal, high Japanese wood block, high wood block, snare drum, tam-tam, harp and strings.
(approx. 10 minutes)*

Momentum was commissioned by the Peabody Conservatory of Music in 1997, during Chen Yi's tenure there. The work, she says, was inspired "by the power of ancient totems, the tension of the breathing lava (before it breaks up and begins to flow), and the gesture of the exaggerated dancing lines in Chinese calligraphy." It is one of her many compositions that brings together Western instrumental colors with Chinese pentatonic tonalities.

Chen Yi is a prolific composer who has an impressive list of awards, fellowships and grants to her credit. In addition, Dr. Chen has been commissioned to compose for dozens of international orchestras, chamber and choral groups, and prominent musicians such as Yehudi Menuhin and Yo-Yo Ma.

The contrasts of Eastern and Western, traditional and avant-garde, materialize in her music: a mélange of her broad experience both in Chinese opera and folk culture and with Western music. Chen Yi began violin lessons at the age of 3. Her parents, both doctors (and Christians in communist China), encouraged musical interest in their children, all three of whom are successful musicians.

The Cultural Revolution in China during the 1960s had a profound effect on her life and music. At age 15, when Red Guards searched their home, not only were her father's orchestra scores and recordings confiscated, but the family was separated as well, each sent to separate areas in China.

Chen Yi worked at a labor camp for two years carrying rocks and planting rice. She managed to take her violin and was allowed to play for the children, but only the official revolutionary songs. In secrecy, she continued to practice Western repertoire.

At 17, she was called to the Beijing opera in Guangzhou, where she performed and studied an array of Chinese instruments for eight years. When the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing reopened, in 1977, she began studies in composition. In 1986, she became the first woman in China to earn a master's degree. She moved to the United States and received her doctorate in composition from Columbia University.

This work takes its form from Chinese tradition, which is more concerned with "shape," rather than formal phrase structures. The musical drama is evocative; coupled with her description, one finds oneself on a journey moving between clear, open textures into dark jungles of dramatic brass and percussion. A mystical wind solo escapes from

the powerful advance of mythical figures, into a clearing where the solo violin slowly finds itself under a canopy of ethereal winds and strings, swirling like fireflies, now here, now flown away. The encroaching swelling, percussiveness, then siren blasts of the brass build in through a gradual, controlled momentum that moves from the powerful swell of the lava, the explosion, and the sparkling descent of ashes into a silence that morphs into a canvas for calligrapher's brush. The music of the flutes and winds bends and sways, in layers of Chinese operatic themes, like the whole body movements of master painters creating calligraphic motifs. A pensive cello finds itself in an increasing swarm of swirling creatures, circling and then flying away en masse. A sudden three-note motif from the harp is interrupted by explosive percussion that gradually fades away.

This performance is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of Chen Yi's *Momentum*.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Chen Yi, *Momentum*, Lan Shui conducting the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, BIS 1352.

Program note by Kelly Yoakam, master's candidate in Musicology at Michigan State University.