

***Glistening Pianos***. Music by Alice Ping Yee Ho. Featuring Piano Duo 2X10 (Midori Koga and Lydia Wong); Susan Hoepfner, flute; Adam Campbell, percussion. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 19714, 2014. 1 compact disc (57:05). Contents: *Glistening Pianos* (15:43) – *Chain of Being* (11:16) – *An Eastern Apparition* (11:12) – *War!* (7:24) – *Heart to Heart* (11:20).

Composer and pianist Alice Ping Yee Ho is well known in the world of new music, both in Canada and internationally. Born in Hong Kong and trained in several countries, she settled in Toronto after completing her studies at the University of Toronto with John Beckwith. A prolific composer in many forms, Ho writes music that reflects her cosmopolitan background and environment. It is wide-ranging in its influences and outward looking in its ideas. Last year, percussionist Beverley Johnson featured Ho's *Woman Who Runs with Wolves* on her recording of the same name (Centrediscs 18913), but until recently surprisingly few of Alice Ho's compositions had been available on CD. This fine new album represents a major event in bringing Ho's music to a wider audience. It was recorded in the summer of 2013 at the University of Toronto's Walter Hall and features the superb Canadian duo of Midori Koga and Lydia Wong, known collectively as Piano Duo 2X10, performing five works composed over a twenty-year period.

The disc opens with the title track. The piece is based on "She Walks in Beauty," Lord Byron's poem of love at first sight. In her notes, Ho describes the pianos as symbolic of the two pronounced forces involved in the poetry, light and darkness, and the subject's internal and external—*glistening*—beauty. This 2009 work begins with pianists Wong and Koga reciting the opening lines of the poem before settling into this virtuosic piece, producing shimmering waves of sound, interposed by moments of calm. The Duo commissioned the piece and the success of this collaboration between composer and performers is evident throughout this recorded performance.

The next two pieces draw on aspects of Asian cultures. In *Chain of Being* (1999), Piano Duo 2X10 is joined by flutist Susan Hoepfner who plays in a style that suggests a shakuhachi. The piece is based on a philosophical concept that has the three instrumentalists representing three separate subjects of existence: humanity, nature, and "the mysterious force that governs the universe." The title of the next piece, *An Eastern Apparition* (1992), refers in part to the ghost role often found in Chinese opera which may represent both positive and negative aspects of a character. In this piece, Ho explores aspects of yin and yang through the two pianos. As she writes, "while one part surfaces, the other part emerges as a counterpart from the other world."

The two final selections are the most widely contrasting. Commissioned by the new music ensemble, Toca Loca, *War!* (2008) was inspired by an anti-war poem of Ho's daughter, Bo Wen

Chan. In addition to those lyrics and the playing of Piano Duo 2X10, this powerful piece features electronics and percussionist Adam Campbell. With the final piece, *Heart to Heart* (2011), the CD closes with a nod to the opening track, as Ho again finds inspiration in the work of a nineteenth-century poet. In this case it is Emily Dickinson's poem, "Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart." While Ho's piece is instrumental, its structure is connected to the poem, with each section of the music corresponding to "certain emotions found in the four stanzas of the poem: questioning, hope, self-reflection and yearning for reassurance." In contrast to the virtuosity of *Glistening Pianos*, the often fragmentary and quietly intense *Heart to Heart* is the most accessible piece on the CD in terms of its musical language.

*Glistening Pianos* is an important addition to Alice Ping Yee Ho's discography. The selections give a good sense of her range as a composer for small groups of instruments and her skill in writing for the piano. Long a mainstay of the concert world, the piano duet is once again shown to be alive and well as a medium of contemporary expression in the hands of performers as capable as Wong and Koga. Producer David Jaeger has drawn inspired performances from all four of the artists on the recording. Recording engineer Peter Olsen's sound has both depth and clarity. And, as usual, this Centrediscs album includes an informative, bilingual booklet. The only caveat might be that the notes on the compositions are restricted by the space limitations of the booklet. This could easily be remedied by providing more details on the composer's website to help lead more listeners to these beautiful and challenging compositions.

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