

Unsuk Chin



Unsuk Chin Photo © Priska Ketterer

An introduction to the music of Unsuk Chin by Paul Griffiths. This iridescence, where does it come from? Colours shimmer, float and weave over Unsuk Chin's music, and their sources are multiple. They are produced by harmonies that reflect natural resonance, building up, as in her Violin Concerto, from the basic acoustic facts of octave and fifth. More directly, these colours derive from chimings built into the music: the sounds of the piano, of bells and of the large, delicately handled percussion sections that feature in Chin's scores for orchestra or ensemble. They arise, too, from the rapid flutterings between different instrumental sounds that have been characteristic of her music since her breakthrough piece Akrostikon-Wortspiel of 1991-93. In part they are imaginary presences, like the twisting or hovering beams of light in her magical symphonic score Rocana. But they depend on a supreme technique that can have sound projecting from a solo horn into a complex mixture of piano, percussion and string ensemble (to mention just one of the cascading wonderful moments in her Double Concerto) and so discover the colours between instruments. With her mobile sound, sound evanescent and perhaps illusory, she makes ear and mind race – and be glad to race through such gleaming soundscapes. Just as the colours on a butterfly's wing come from light diffracted by pattern, so Chin's seem to have developed from a productive interference she brought about between two vital musical streams she encountered growing up as a composer through the 1970s and 1980s. As with the spectral composers of Paris, her work in electronic music deepened her awareness of how sounds could be constituted and transformed by purely instrumental means, and so of how the orchestra could be again the magic box it was for Rimsky-Korsakov or Ravel. At the same time, the ostinatos and oscillations of small melodic cells, drawn from Balinese gamelan music, became ways to define chords on musical courses that dart along through harmonies of complex lustre. Her aural imagination, her mastery in counterpointing instrumental lines or rival rhythms, and her dexterity in relating the seemingly unlike (whether sounds or compositional practices) must all have been helped by her studies with Ligeti, whose lessons her music has – happily – retained in its clarity, fascination, capricious energy and sheer sonic beauty. But listen, she knows a different kind of darkness, of strength and of memory. Her music makes no parade of national flavour: her preferences for the sounds of plucked or struck strings, for slowly drifting glissandos and for arrays of bells and gongs all carry no specific cultural overtones, and that indeed is one of her strengths. Even when she goes back to childhood memories of street theatre, in the strange and brilliant Gougalon, it is to find another place in a fantastical invented geography, a location nowhere on earth. It is not surprising she should

have been drawn, among writers, to other highly precise fantasists – not least Lewis Carroll in her opera Alice in Wonderland. Nor is it surprising she should, time and again, have seized opportunities to actualize fantasy as virtuosity, whether from groups in her startling ensemble pieces or from soloists in her concertos, among which her Cello Concerto and Šu, with solo sheng, are strong and atmospheric successors to the violin piece that sealed her reputation. Music for her is amazement and play, and communication that can be tender or fizzing: wild worlds without words (or with them). Paul Griffiths, 2012 (Writer of books on music, novels and librettos)