

Unsus Chin



Unsus Chin Photo © Woenki Kim

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. On other occasions they are imaginary presences, like the human voices that seem to sound through the glowing sonorities of the orchestral monument *santika Ekatala*. Elsewhere again they spring from her instrumental matchings, her skill in projecting sound 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 in discovering the colours between instruments. Music for her is 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. She has left home now. She is moving on.

Paul Griffiths, 2003
(Writer of books on music, novels and librettos)