

Mike Heffley Interview with Jason Kao Hwang

I had the pleasure of playing with Jason Kao Hwang in one of Anthony Braxton's groups at a Wesleyan University concert that was released as *Small Ensemble Music (Wesleyan) 1994* on (Splasc(h) Records (CD, 1999).

From his [website](#):

Jason Kao Hwang (composer, violin/viola) has created works ranging from jazz, "new" and world music. He recently released his octet CD, *Burning Bridge* (Innova), commissioned by Chamber Music America/ New Jazz Works, featuring Chinese and Western instruments. In 2011, he released *Symphony of Souls* (Mulatta), performed by his string orchestra *Spontaneous River*, and *Crossroads Unseen* (Eunonymus), the third CD of his quartet *EDGE*. The 2012 *Downbeats Critics' Poll* voted him "Rising Star for Violin." In 2011, *EDGE* toured Poland and the critics' poll of *El Intruso* voted him #1 for Violin/Viola. In 2010, the NYC Jazz Record selected *Commitment, The Complete Recordings, 1981-1983*, from a collective quartet that was Mr. Hwang's first band, as one of the "Reissued Recordings of the Year." Mr. Hwang's opera, *The Floating Box, A Story in Chinatown* was named one of the "Top Ten Opera Recordings of 2005" by *Opera News*. Mr. Hwang has received support from US Artists International, Meet the Composer, the NEA, and others. As violinist, Mr. Hwang has worked with Reggie Workman, Pauline Oliveros, William Parker, Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill and many others.

Afterbirth [This 1982 film "examines the personae of American born Asians, looking at the unpredictable relationship between inner identity and external pressures to be "Asian," and/or "American." Including footage of an "African Chinese" and a "Caucasian Chinese," "Afterbirth" portrays cultural and national identity as nonabsolute concepts." –Producer / Director: Jason Hwang]

MH This was 25 years ago. I'm curious about what it means to you now after all those years. How have the personal and social issues it raised changed in your mind and in your music-making since then? (Re: its recent re-release.)

I got a sense of who most of the people were from the case's back matter; I was especially curious about the European-looking woman and African-looking man who spoke Chinese. I took the contrast between them and the Asian-American people who all spoke regular American English. It made me think of this: as a direct response to being so involved with African-American musicians who were digging into their African-history roots, I got the urge to dig into my own German heritage in the '90s. It felt like the same kind of personal thing to me—but as a part of a European-American ethnic majority, I wonder about the differences between my experience and that of ethnic American minorities. What do you think about that?

JKH Our common interest reflects the concerns of our generation. We're fairly close in age, aren't we? We followed the pioneers who challenged the Vietnam War and fought for Civil Rights. This was a time when people, especially American minorities, questioned our conditioned notions of self, politics and music, while seeking self-empowerment and fulfillment.

Afterbirth was conceived through my dialogues with Will Connell, Jr., who is immersed in Buddhism and the Sutras, as well as Asian American advocates like Jack Tchen, Richard Oyama, and Fay Chiang of Basement workshop. Basement was a pioneering Asian American Arts center located at 199 Lafayette. (Ironically, when the lease was lost, the space became a garment sweat shop.) Identity issues were at the fore in the Asian American community and especially significant to the 19-year-old me. *Afterbirth* challenges notions of cultural essentialism, as evidenced in language and religion, and proposes a spiritual path transcendent of popular definitions.

Today, racism is an almost exhausted debate. Many have been comforted by a Utopian view of a multi-cultural America that has progressed to the point where race doesn't matter. Of course, this involves a whole lot of forgetting and turning away from inconvenient truths.

I find *Afterbirth* relevant to this debate, despite and because of its poetic conclusion.

Reflecting upon the years, I feel like I've lived a couple lifetimes. Accumulated with each incarnation, my music expresses a growing knowledge of my history and being, which includes not only ethnicity but many "other" emotional and intuitive vibrations. "Asian American" doesn't possess or represent any set of beliefs or qualities. Humans are too complex and defiant of doctrinal definitions. A few words won't do. Perhaps multiple generations of poems, novels, essays and music will approach the task. I am what I create. We are what we create.

The music is still about the soul, about being true to oneself and generous to others through self-empowerment. I think I have struggled with but not strayed from the path of my youth.

MH *Caverns*

Your *Caverns* CD came out right around the time I was working with my Northwest Creative Orchestra in Oregon. Lawson Inada was a big help to me then, in getting grant money and performance opportunities for a project with Andrew Hill; I heard he later became poet laureate of Oregon.

I'd like you to fill me in on your connections with him and the other names mentioned in Richard Oyama's liner notes to *Cavern*. Borah Bergman is another

one mentioned there I got to know pretty well, play with and write about. And of course Braxton.

Basically, I'd like the answer to this question to be a sort of supplementary expansion on your press kit accounts of your entrance into the music family we've both grown into from our different backgrounds, starting from your childhood. I'm looking for points of both resonance and difference with my own non-Asian arc into the same world.

JKH Richard Oyama, who's about five years older, introduced me to Lawson's *Before the War*, poems that inspired the Asian American community, especially the Japanese American re-dress movement. Lawson also co-discovered and helped publish John Okada's novel *No No Boy*, a searing indictment of the Japanese American internment. What a great on Richard and I! During my college years, Lawson Inada visited Basement Workshop several times and I took his poetry workshops. I'm not surprised that he helped you with your orchestra. I remember Lawson told me he was bassist and loves loves music.

Richard Oyama and I forged a life-long friendship in those early years. We hung out a lot, going to loft concerts and parties. As members of the Basement Workshop Poets, which also included Fay Chiang, Teru Kanazawa and Helen Wong, we gave poetry readings all over the scene – St. Mark's Church, Nuyorican Café, colleges, forgotten lofts.

For *Caverns*, Richard was initially reluctant to write about music. At that time, he felt inexperienced and unqualified. But I persuaded him because I knew that he understood the where and why of our music. His liner notes gave our music a contextual vision, inspiration and purpose.

I remember meeting Borah Bergman at Roulette in the mid-'80s, after playing a Butch Morris gig. For number of years I would jam with him and listened to his entertaining pontifications. I learned a lot from Borah, who can be incredibly funny, insightful and scathing. Most especially, I learned from the example of his most formidable playing. Borah knows all about the romanticism of free improvisation, to play from the genius of instinct. But his standard of virtuosity along with an imaginative intellect took him to the next level. The independence of his left hand and his unique, often poignant harmonies vitalizes an original music that should have gained greater critical recognition. Back then, and even now, we've encouraged each other. Without Borah's kind words to Sound Aspects Records, I don't think *Unfolding Stone* would have been released. That validation came a crucial point in my life, so I'm very grateful for his help.

Joe Fonda introduced me to Anthony Braxton around 1997. Of course I knew of AB, but I wasn't completely familiar with either his philosophies or great body of work. So I didn't know what to expect, which is the best way to meet his

imaginative Zen mind. He's a great artist with a passion that inspires everyone around him, without exception. I heard a set at Iridium this past year that was absolutely profound and beautiful. I believe it was recorded and will be released soon, if it hasn't already.

MH I know you grew up with a Western music training. Was any traditional Asian music in that mix, from childhood or later? I'm not too familiar with most of the AIR guys and the other Asian-named poets these notes mention...but enough so to have a sense of them as part of the same music & arts family I am familiar with (Threadgill, Butch, etc.). This book is going to put the Asian & Asian-American musicians at the center, so I want to get a sense of the network from every possible angle.

JKH My parents didn't listen to music much. Never saw them buy a record. Maybe they liked listening to music on TV variety shows... My exposure to Chinese music, other than my father dragging us to the Chinese opera in Chicago a couple times, was via language. Because my two older sisters, who were initially bi-lingual, had assimilation problems in school, my third sister and myself were taught only English. This was the "melting pot" era, and being one of two Chinese families in Waukegan, was not conducive to learning Chinese. Later, my parents would bring us to Chinese school in another suburb, on weekends. But us kids resisted. Why learn Chinese? Being Chinese was the cause of schoolyard torments. My parents spoke English to their children, but Chinese to each other. I always tried to glean meaning from their sounds. This was my exposure to "music," the music of spoken Chinese. The meaning of sound within language, not of the language.

MH Another big motif of the book will be the relationship of words and music. Can you talk about your work/self-image as a writer, and how it does relate to the music side of your life and work? Can you send or tell me how to get your published writing?

JKH Thanks for the compliment, but I don't consider myself a real writer. I only write when I have to! Otherwise my creative energy goes into the violin and composition. Anything that I've ever published is on my web site.

Recently I wrote a poem "Within Moments," that I scored for baritone singer Tom Buckner and the Montreal-based Quasar Saxophone Quartet. It was commissioned by Mutable Music and premiered a few weeks ago in Tim Brady's "Montreal-NY Festival."

MH Talk about your first and subsequent trips to Asia, especially China, mentioned there, and how it influenced your band and musical vision, and your life. Talk about your work in *M Butterfly*, as soundtracker for PBS documentaries

[can you send me tapes of those?] and any other musical work besides the CDs I know about here.

JKH (The following was adapted from my writings from the “What’s New” panel alongside J.D. Parran and Russ Gershon for Bill Shoemaker’s Point of Departure [(<http://www.pointofdeparture.org/archives/PoD-14/PoD14WhatsNew.html>)]. I hope that’s okay.)

I began to understand and therefore, imagine my identity, while touring South Korea with vocalist/choreographer Sin Cha Hong in 1992. This was my first trip to Asia. The experience was startling, both radically familiar and foreign. Though I’m of Chinese decent, simply seeing, for the first time, streets bustling with heads of black hair was an inexplicable *déjà vu*. I remember witnessing myself in the dance mirrors of the Samul Nori studios, rehearsing with Korean musicians and dancers. The body language, smiles and laughter all seemed familiar. Being American-born Chinese, this was the first time an environment appeared to reflect at least some aspect of my being. I looked like I belonged, though I didn’t. At the same time, very few people in the project spoke much English. Also, I couldn’t read Korean. Paradoxically, I could not participate socially in all that looked so familiar. The inability to communicate is perhaps the ultimate foreign experience. Music was our only language.

I returned to the States with a new understanding of my commonalities with my parents, who came from China in the 1940s. Good grief, I realized I sneeze and laugh like my father! Looking back, I also recognized how I responded to various life events emotionally, like one or both my parents. It is this mass of “micro-learning” ingrained into my personality, not Asian scholarship, that defines my cultural self. These realizations generated insights about the shape, sound and phrase of my violin improvisations and compositions. In my sound was evidence of who I am.

What defines “non-Western” is complex and nuanced, far beyond simple markers of musicology, like pentatonic scale.

This perspective inspires my collaboration with Sang Won Park, who plays the kayagum, ajeng (Korean zithers) and also, sings in the pansori (Korean opera) style. In 2006 we released our duo CD, *Local Lingo* (Euonymus), a strong document of the empathic listening we cultivated throughout performances over the past 16 years. Sang Won is an amazing improviser. The spectacular timbres that emanate from both his plucked kayagum and bowed ajeng (with a resined stick), inspired alternate approaches to my violin. I found colors produced by extreme changes in bow pressure and sounding points created bridges to his sound. Corresponding to his deep “vertical” vibrato, I broadened my violin’s vibrato using a full range of wide arm/hand movements to narrow/rapid finger fluctuations, with a rapidity and combination that spoke in our lingo. This allowed

the inflections of our phrases to resonate as one. Through expressive intent and intuition, that is our “vibe,” we also developed our own system of intonation. Though not of Western temperament, we stay “in tune.” For my compositions, the notational elements for *Local Lingo* are distilled to initiate a full and detailed improvisational development.

Last fall, 2007, at Symphony Space, Music From China premiered my composition for string quartet, *In the Garden of Morning Glories*, which features erhu(2-string violin), pipa(lute), yanqin(hammered dulcimer) and my violin. This work is my first experience with yanqin and also, incorporating improvisations by “traditional” Chinese instrumentalists.

Wang Guo Wei(erhu) and Li Sun (pipa) are superb, fluent in both Chinese and Western notation. Generally, earlier generations in China, from the pre-conservatory era, had some knowledge of Western notation, but little applied experience. The excellent Helen Wong (yanqin) is American born and a thorough cosmopolitan.

For this work, Western notation is the bridge. Improvisations are placed within a narrative musical structure that includes completely notated, extended passages. For my violin, I’ve developed a tremelo pizzicato to blend with the pipa and yanqin. The erhu’s characteristic portamento and shorter bow length influence my phrasing. They also adapted to my instrumental voice on their instruments.

Because I cannot read Chinese orchestration texts, I primarily learned Chinese instrumental technique directly from the musicians themselves. I also absorbed CD recordings and video clips on youtube, to observe the physical practice, color, phrasing and rhythmic language of these instruments. Understanding the intrinsic “finger memory” of these musicians helped me compose music that they will find naturally expansive, rather than contrary to their background. We recorded the work after the concert. I haven’t completed the mix yet.

Though through different modalities, creating *In the Garden of Morning Glories* was not so different from the music of *Local Lingo*.

I had gigged with percussionist Yukio Tsuji a few times before we got the “M Butterfly” gig. Yukio, with his shakuhachi and unique array of percussion, introduced me to Asian musical sensibilities. He is a brilliant, lyrical, evocative artist who has an original feeling for color and imagery. Playing the show with him for three years developed our sound.

I first heard Sang Won Park at Cobi Narita’s Universal Jazz Coalition of Lafayette Street. He played an amazing solo set. We were surprised to learn that we lived only a block apart, he on East 5th and me on East 6th. Later I hired him to play on my score to J.T. Takagi’s documentary about North and South Korea, “Homes Apart.”

After my trip to Korea with Sin Cha, I called Sang Won and Yukio to form The Far East Side Band. This was around 1991.

My first major PBS score was the 60-minute program, "The Emperor's Eye, Art and Power in China," in 1989 I think. Lisa Hsia, who is now a VP of News at NBC, directed this. It's the first time I composed for pipa, played by Tang Liang Xing and guzheng, played by Ann Yao. This score led to my first feature documentary, Sue Williams "Born Under the Red Flag," third in her remarkable trilogy about China in the 20th century. Tan Dun had scored the first two. These were my first forays merging traditional Chinese and Western instruments. I worked round the clock for both these films, tackling a host of new challenges, both musical and technical. After the public screening of "Born Under the Red Flag" at Asia Society, I was hired by the Phillip Glass team to score about ten minutes source music for Martin Scorsese's "Kundun." The music was to evoke sounds of the Cultural Revolution and included cues for mixed, men's and children's choir, with Chinese and Western orchestra. For the adult choir, I hired a contractor to call every Chinese-language singer in the tri-state area. He found fifteen. I worked with the Episcopal Church in Chinatown to organize fifty children for the on-camera shoot, from which I selected a choir of twelve for the recording. I worked with Music From China to assemble an ensemble of 8 traditional musicians. The Glass team contracted the Western orchestra of about 16 musicians. We made multiple overdubs to approximate the mammoth Cultural Revolution music productions. For the choir, it was around a dozen overdubs each, and this was in the days of ADATs. Looking Glass Studio had a ton of ADAT machines. Collaborating with a lyricist, I scored Chinese lyrics phonetically. Also, my copyist, an experienced orchestrator, proofed my scores to ensure efficient recording sessions. All this was accomplished in three weeks. Quite intense.

I'm sure the crucible of these media productions influenced my personal music. The experience also enhanced my overall skills, as both artist and producer, that proved helpful years later while creating *The Floating Box*.

Info and samples of some these scores are on my web site. I don't have "The Emperor's Eye" on the site because the later scores are much better examples of my work.

MH The 1970s (mentioned by Oyama) were a while ago. How do you think of the way the spirits and issues of the times in the Asian-American cultural community as he described them in the liner notes have developed since then, both personally in your life and in the larger society?

JKH Generally we seem to be in a new “melting pot” era. Ethnic identity issues have been marginalized and the art world realigned to aesthetic divisions. Many young people are expressing their issues within their desire to participate in popular culture. Civil rights passion is no longer associated with an avant-garde aesthetic like in the days of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Improvisational music is more detached from the community than ever, becoming largely perceived as art music.

Times have changed, but essentially, I’m on the same path.

MH I recall reading or hearing you talk about your background as including Korean in among the Chinese. Am I right? In any case, tell me how you describe your ethnic identity, and talk about the ways, both musically and any other, the Chinese relates to the Korean, Japanese, and other backgrounds generally lumped under “Asian” in America (for example, the different dynamics/aesthetics/nuances that emerge in working with the different people from the different countries and/or [if American] family backgrounds). Do you have any relatives you’re still in touch with in China?

JKH Nope, I’m of pure Chinese decent, pure Han. Hazrat Inayat Khan in “The Music of Life” explains how all life energies are vibrations. Whether learned or essential, we inherit physical and emotional qualities from our past. How I construct an identity, aesthetic and music from my history and self, is an act of imagination. Asian America is an evolving definition created by the collective imaginings of each generation. The key element of “imagination” seems to be scientifically invalidating. But I think Asian America is as real as anything else.

Pan Asian American unity was an ideal of the Basement Workshop era, and was comprised primarily Chinese and Japanese and some Korean. The history of WW II, the Korean and Vietnam wars along with exclusionary immigration laws and experiences of discrimination, was a basis for unity. Today’s Asian America comprises many more cultures.

In Beijing when I played the jazz fest in 1996, I met uncles from my mother’s side. Others have visited my mother in America. But my lack of language prevents the cultivation of a real relationship with my Chinese relatives.

MH Spirituality is always interesting to talk about. Any particular personal and/or musical connection with religions or philosophies Eastern or Western, from childhood on?

JKH Though Western missionaries educated my parents, their outlook was Confucian. Setting a good example, respecting parents and teachers, etc. There must be some Confucianism deep in my bones, but not consciously.

The practice of yoga and Satchidinanda's interpretation of the Sutras has had a big impact on me. Both lead the mind to the truer self, a musical existence.

MH Any connections to Native American culture or music? Generally, how would you describe the influence of nature in Eastern and even Western sides of your own original music?

JKH No connections to Native American culture. Yes to nature, perhaps because I'm an urban dweller. It's human nature to want what we don't have and wish to be where we're not... I noticed many of the titles of my compositions refer to nature.

Well, the totality of experience influences my music – nature, language, voices, sounds, dance, paintings, poetry and all kinds of music. I would have to stop and think about what influences the Asian or Western sides of me. But I don't want to stop and think with music. I practice flow!

The Floating Box

MH The liner notes to this are extensive enough that I don't need to ask you much about it. Since I've also interviewed Min Xiao-Fen, and she is a fellow New Yorker, I'm curious about any musical relationship you might have had with her over the years, including as a listener to her music.

JKH Xiao-Fen is a wonderful musician, and I thought about her sound and phrasing while composing *The Floating Box*. I heard and met her at Merkin Hall shortly after she arrived from San Francisco in the mid-80's. In addition to the opera, she recorded on my film scores and chamber works.

I'm glad she's composing her own music for her own Blue Pipa Trio now. She also sings now. Have you ever heard her sing "Satin Doll?" Fantastic!

MH I'm also curious about the influence of any other Chinese or Chinese-American composers, outside the Downtown milieu, of contemporary art music.

JKH I enjoy and respect the work of all my colleagues. I especially enjoy the music of Chou Wen Chung, Chinary Ung and Bright Sheng.

MH How has your work over the years as a teacher fed your music?

JKH As a teaching artist for Young Audiences/NY, I worked at all grade levels, kindergarten through high school. At New York University I taught "Asian American Music," a course I created for the Asian/ Pacific/ American department. Teaching made me reflect upon my own youth. Interactions with young people are always energizing. Their hopes are sincere and passionate, not yet beaten

down by the smallness of this world. I still lecture each summer at Queens College for their gifted high school students.

MH Generally, your music has developed along with the cinematics of film and the linguistics (phonetic, literary) of poetry and literature; Chinese traditional music has also had strong connections with poetry and calligraphy. Is there a conscious connection between those two in your own mind?

JKH Sometimes it's helpful to conceive of a programmatic idea or formal correlation or structure, to drive the creative process. The fulfillment of those ideas might be highly abstract, and the knowledge of process inconsequential to the listener because the language and emotions of music are unique. Instead of thinking I'll play through a Bb dominant 7, B diminished to a C7 flat 9, you can hear the changes, have 'em in your hands, but be thinking of wind blowing through trees, then an antelope amongst buildings or some past experience.

Working on films has sensitized me to the visual and literal influence of timbre within music. Orchestration choices are always influenced by the meanings of image and text. All musical elements are harnessed to enhance or support the dramatic beats and visual rhythms of a scene.

I love calligraphy, the inner energy and dynamic gestures, surging within the meaning of words themselves. I also appreciate the poignant economy of Chinese poetry. But I don't draw from the sources self-consciously.

Edge

MH Talk about your relationship with Asian Improv Records (AIR, the label for *Edge*). [Trumpeter] Taylor Ho Bynum is one of my fellow students from my Wesleyan years with Braxton, and will be featured in this book too, so I'd be curious about anything you might have to say about your work with him, especially down the common Chinese background line.

JKH I can't say enough good things about Taylor! Very talented and generous musician. I just returned from Europe touring with his Spider Monkey Strings.

Taylor took my friend, *erhu* musician Wang Guo Wei's Chinese Music ensemble class at Wesleyan. Wang is the Artistic Director of Music From China and has performed in my opera and chamber works, including In the *Garden of Morning Glories*. Perhaps because of our common association with Wang and Braxton, I always feel Taylor understands my compositions. But it's not anything that we talk about or try to work from directly.

Taylor, Andrew and Ken's interpretations of my compositions always fulfill and expand my intentions. The four of us work well together.

MH It's interesting that the same tune "Grassy Hills" has been recorded on several different CDs. Can you talk about the decision to do that? What's the story behind the piece? How do you experience it changing or deepening through the years?

JKH I wrote *Grassy Hills* when I was around 20 years old. The quartet Commitment (Will Connell, Jr. – alto sax, flute, bass cl., Zen Matsuura – drum set, William Parker – string bass, myself – violin, viola, composer) always closed out sets with *Grassy Hills*. The melody connects me to my beginnings and remains meaningful.

MH How do you relate personally and professionally (as a musician) to the rise of China as a strong global cultural and economic power these days, in the public consciousness? How do you relate to the dark side of it, in critiques of its polity as less than humane and liberatory (on Tibet and other such issues), in Western eyes?

JKH My ethnic pride of China's accomplishments is minimal. Not having lived through the Western exploitation of China, the wars, the Cultural Revolution and post-Mao era, I don't identify. My contact relatives from China has been brief.

Asian Americans are not necessarily Asia experts nor direct representatives of Asian culture. Our experiences in America are unique and diverse to the point that the term "Asian American" culture is no longer widely accepted.

Of politics, of course I desire dialogues of mutual respect and peaceful resolutions amongst nations and cultures. And of course I oppose any violence, inhumane treatments and cultural genocide.

The problems between China and Tibet involve a complex history and numerous factors that I don't know enough about to offer a serious opinion.

There has been ample documentation of China's rapid capitalist growth that has been spurred by rampant corruption and horrific environmental exploitation. Of course, China's shortcomings are complicit with other nations around the world. For greed, there is a common interest. So China as "the factory of the world" has to be assessed within the context of transnational capitalism. Again, I'm not expert enough to offer a substantive opinion.