

## KUI DONG (B. 1967)

“I do not think excessively about tools and techniques while composing. Instead I listen for what best fits my overall concept for the piece of music. Each sound has a color and shape as well, which I am always looking for.”

The natural, instinctive side of Kui Dong’s artistry is well balanced by her extensive technical training and impressive range of musical experiences. Born in Beijing, Dong studied composition at China’s Central Conservatory of Music. Early works include a full-length ballet score for orchestra and numerous scores for film and television. After moving to California in 1991, she pursued graduate studies at Stanford University, where her teachers included Leland Smith in composition and John Chowning and Chris Chafe in computer music. She received her Ph.D. in composition in 1997. Dong is also a pianist, whose group improvisations with Christian Wolff and Larry Polansky have been featured at concerts in Beijing, San Francisco, and in a documentary on Wolff for German television.

Among contemporary composers, Kui Dong holds a special place through her combined interests in electronics and in Chinese instruments and their traditions. In works like *Flying Apples* (1994), an algorithmic composition for two (or more) tape channels, she uses computer programming to conjure a sense of space and to capture “an unfinished childhood dream . . . a walk through a colorful and unspoiled world.” The influence of her background is also apparent in pieces such as *Three Voices* (1998) for erhu (Chinese violin), zheng (zither), and bamboo flute and *Pangu’s Song* (1998) for alto flute and percussion. Such compositions display an interest in heterophonic writing, sectional forms, a respect for the silences between sounds, a certain melodic economy (limiting the number of pitches in a given melody), and especially an appreciation for fine nuances of tone color and subtleties of articulation, which Dong has linked to traditional Chinese music and art. Electronic and antique worlds are combined in works like the multi-media *Youlan, Long Winding Valley* (1997, produced with artist Ruth Eckland), and *Crossing* (1999), a radio piece using modern digital processing to combine and transform the sounds of ancient Chinese instruments, folk materials, Chinese opera, and electric bass.

Dong's oeuvre and interests are shaped but not limited by her own heritage and technological expertise. Dong observes, "As a listener, I am aware of all kinds of sounds in the environment, especially when I travel. Perhaps this is a direct result of my early field trips collecting folk songs in China. I like ethnic music, early music, classical contemporary works, some rap, and jazz. I like watching jazz performer's gestures when they play." The cross-cultural intelligibility and appeal of performance gestures remain significant components of Dong's compositional aesthetic. She has just completed a substantial solo piano work for Bay Area pianist Sarah Cahill, and is currently finishing a piece for the Dale Warland Singers (Minneapolis). She is also at work on the score for an abstract animation film by David Erlich, and a composition for Music from China Inc. (New York) juxtaposing Western instruments with their Chinese counterparts: (violin with erhu, for example), encouraging listeners to compare their timbres.

Truly an international artist, Dong has received First Prizes at Beijing's National Art Song and National Music and Dance Competitions, awards from Italy's International Music Competitions of the Val Tidone and Austria's Ars Electronica and, in the United States, honors from ASCAP, the Djerassi Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, the Asia-Pacific National Fund, the Dickey Foundation, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, and Meet the Composer/USA. Her music has been performed by the Symphony Orchestra of the Central Ballet of China, the Beijing Dance Institute, the Symphony Orchestra of Theatre-Studio, the Windsor Symphony of Canada, Argentina's LIMP, the New York New Music Ensemble, Music from China Inc., Miami's Society of Composers Inc., Earplay, Composers Inc., and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. Her works have been featured at the Other Minds Festival, the Pacific Contemporary Music Festival, the Bonk New Music Festival, the International Festival of MusicAcoustica (Beijing), the Festival of International Modern Symphonic and Chamber Music (Tashkent), Sound Box 2.0 (Helsinki), and Festival Synthèse 99 (Bourges), among others.

Dong is currently Assistant Professor of Music at Dartmouth College.

## ***The Blue Melody (1993)***

*for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano*

At the heart of the *Blue Melody* is Dong's strong interest in heterophony: the simultaneous presentation of more than one version of a melody—for example, superimposing a simple tune with a more elaborate or decorative variant of the same tune, or combining statements of a tune that are slightly “out of sync” with one another. This type of melodic treatment occurs in many kinds of group improvisation, and Dong's interest resonates with her own experience as an improviser, and with what she calls the beauty of “building density and complexity out of sameness.” But heterophony also characterizes much of the world's folk music. Says Dong, “This piece was a reflection of my experience as a conservatory student, witnessing a group of women singing in a funeral in a remote village in Southern China. It was the way they sang that impressed me the most. One started with a single melodic line, and the rest of the group slowly joined in with the same melody slightly off-beat or in alternation.”

The composer has also described *The Blue Melody* as an “attempt to cross the heterophonic Chinese instrumental musical tradition with that of Western polyphony.” The sound world of Asian instruments has clearly influenced Dong's decisions about timbre; her attention to tone color is apparent from the very opening measures. The striking glissandi and fluttering vibrato effects are reminiscent of Chinese classical music for erhu (Chinese violin) or bamboo flute. Later in the piece, finely inflected pizzicati recall the subtle nuances that mark Chinese ch'in (zither) music. The piece is much more than a play of timbres, however. While the work begins and ends in tranquility, between these resting points it alternates moments of gentle delicacy and great force. The varied interactions between instruments—sometimes cooperating, sometimes competing—have been described by music critic Edward Green as embodying qualities that members of a family might strive for, and which take on special meaning in a compositional context of East-West exchange: “to agree and disagree in an honest, friendly manner; to get along deeply with each other, and yet, at the very same time, to be utterly individual and free.”

*The Blue Melody* received First Prize at the 1994 Alea III International Competition for Chamber Music Composition, and was premiered by the Alea III New Music Ensemble under conductor Theodore Antoniou.

## STEVEN MACKKEY (B. 1956)

“The qualities of his music—its originality, freshness, dazzling invention, a certain impertinence—strike the listener like an unusual stone discovered on a rock-strewn beach; we are not quite sure where it came from, it really catches the eye, doesn’t quite belong, and seems to stand out in bold distinction from its neighbors . . . On closer examination we start to marvel at its features. Who would ever have thought to combine these particular qualities—this is not how things are usually made, but what a good idea for a rock.”

So writes eminent composer Paul Lansky on the music of his respected friend and colleague, Steven Mackey. In recent years, Mackey has earned a name for himself as one of his generation’s most compelling composers. An active performer on classical guitar, lute, and especially electric guitar, he builds bridges between genres and styles—from classical chamber scores to theatrical experimental music, and from the Renaissance to rock’n’roll. His music is “unlike anything else being written today . . . brilliantly executed, uniquely American, and accessible to a new group of listeners.” (Lansky)

As Lansky suggests, it is Mackey’s creative combinations that makes his work unique. *Journey to Ixtlan* (1985) seems to seek some distant cultural past in its myriad percussive sounds and mysterious wordless chorus. Even more strikingly, in *Indigenous Instruments* (1989, commissioned by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players), the composer creates an intense interplay between familiar sounds and invented instruments, capturing, in his words, “a kind of vernacular music from a culture that doesn’t actually exist.” Such imaginative, quasi-anthropological sce-

narios provide one key to understanding the vitality of Mackey's scores. His experience as a rock guitarist provides another explanation for his music's rhythmic energy and some of its melodic effects (slides, vibrato techniques). Mackey has created a virtually new medium—contemporary “classical” music for electric guitar. Beginning in 1991 with *Myrtle and Mint* (for electric guitar and narrator) and his internationally successful works for string quartet and electric guitar, *On the Verge*, *Troubadour Songs*, and *Physical Property*, the composer has unabashedly collided rock and classical idioms, and drawn on rock's power and dazzling sonic effects to delight his audiences. Such qualities permeate *Lost & Found* (1994), originally scored for four guitars but re-orchestrated for Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony who gave its world premiere in 1996.

Like the other three composers on tonight's program, Mackey has strong ties to the Bay Area. He began his compositional career as a student at U.C Davis (before attending SUNY Stony Brook and Brandeis), and has fostered and maintained inspirational working relationships with several Californian ensembles. In 1997, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players were joined by soloists Bill Frisell and Joey Baron in performing Mackey's concerto for electric guitar and drum set, *Deal* (1995), which had previously been premiered in Los Angeles under Esa-Pekka Salonen. During its 1998-99 season, the San Francisco Symphony performed Mackey's *Eating Greens*, a work praised by the New York Times for its “qualities of orchestral imagination, compactness, elegance, charm, uproariousness and sense of humor.” *String Theory*, commissioned by the Kronos Quartet for its 25th anniversary season, received its premiere on the San Francisco Symphony's contemporary music festival. In March 1999, Mackey's award-winning musical theater piece, *Ravenshead*, enjoyed a month-long run at the Berkeley Repertory Theater.

A student of Andrew Imbrie, John Lessard, David Lewin, Donald Martino, and Martin Boykan, Mackey has received commissions from the Chicago and San Francisco Symphony Orchestras, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Kronos Quartet, soprano Dawn Upshaw,

cellist Fred Sherry, the Concord String Quartet, and the Fromm and Koussevitsky foundations. Honors and awards include Guggenheim, Lieberman, and Tanglewood fellowships, a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Columbia University's Joseph H. Bearnese Prize, and awards from BMI, the International Society of Contemporary Music Composition, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

Mackey is currently a Professor of Music and co-director of the Composers Ensemble at Princeton University.

### ***Micro-Concerto (1999)***

*for percussion, piccolo/flute/alto flute,  
clarinet/bass clarinet, violin, cello, and piano*

In writing about his *Micro-Concerto*, Mackey recalls: "Several years ago my wife (a marimba specialist) took me to The Percussive Arts Society National Convention. There I witnessed a ninety-minute clinic on state-of-the-art techniques for playing crash cymbals. I confess that there was something humorously esoteric about the event, but I left inspired to imagine particular ways to coax sound out of pieces of wood, metal and skin instead of simply hitting things. It also woke me to the fact that the first step in writing for percussion is to invent the instrument and a playing technique. Percussionists tend to have an adventurous attitude about this: if they can reach it with an arm or leg, or hold it in the mouth it is fair game. I'm fascinated by the one-man-band mentality of juggling contrasting timbres produced by a gamut ranging from finely crafted instruments to kitchen utensils and hobby shop paraphernalia."

The virtuosity and delicacy required of both the percussion soloist and the ensemble complement lent Mackey's *Micro-Concerto* its name: ". . . the main movements focus on small moves and subtle distinctions. They are full of fussy descriptions of how to play some hand-held 'toy' just so. This micro-management of small muscle groups, and the fact that the concerto soloist is accompanied by the smallest orchestra imaginable, suggested the title." In the first of *Micro-Concerto*'s five movements, "Chords and Fangled Drum

Set,” the percussionist takes lively center stage over a background of rolled piano chords and brusque interjections from other instruments (pizzicato strings, “stopped” winds). The third movement’s title, “Click, Clak, Clank,” appropriately reflects its elaborate and rather motley percussive palette—Asian drum, cowbell, guiro, bean pod rattle, clickers, Chinese gong, bottles and cans, among other things—all of which Mackey combines imaginatively with other instruments to evoke “a contextualizing and interpreting narration spoken in some imaginary tongue clicking language.”

Rhythmic dexterity yields to melody in movements II and IV, designated by Mackey as “interludes.” There is a hint of blues in his “lyrical ballad” for vibraphone (II), and the fourth movement presents a lovely instrumental exchange as it explores a “co-dependent” relationship between marimba and cello. Mackey writes, “In some sense they are a single instrument, with timbres no more disparate than the clickers and samba whistle that are part of the percussionist’s instrument in movement III.” This interlude flows directly into the spirited last movement, “Tune in Seven,” allowing listeners to relish in turn both the melodic possibilities of percussion and its more familiar (and perhaps primal) role as a catalyst for rhythmic and timbral invention.

*Micro-Concerto* was composed for percussionist Daniel Druckman, who premiered the work in New York in 1999. It was jointly commissioned by the New York New Music Ensemble, the California E.A.R. Unit, and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, with a grant from the Meet The Composer/Reader’s Digest Commissioning Program.

## **ELLEN HARRISON (B. 1956)**

**B**orn and raised in Illinois, Ellen Harrison received her doctorate in composition from the University of California, Berkeley, where her teachers included Edwin Dugger, Richard Felciano, Andrew Imbrie, and Olly Wilson. Supported by U.C. Berkeley’s Prix de Paris, she spent two years residing in

France from 1992-94. She has also studied with Milko Kelemen at the Musikhochschule in Stuttgart, and with Thomas Frederickson and Paul Zonn at the University of Illinois.

Penned for instrumental and vocal ensembles of various sizes, Harrison's compositions have been inspired by diverse experiences and circumstances. With such evocatively titled movements as "Masks of Regret" and "The Furies Unleashed," her recent chamber work, *Masques et Visages* (2000, premiered by members of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra), seems to dip into distant and antique sonic realms to portray "a series of contrasting characters much like the many and varied expressions of the masks one might see at a Venetian masked ball." By contrast, *Cité du Globe Captif* (City of the Captive Globe) takes its title from an architectural project by Rem Koolhaas focussing on modern urban life in New York and intended to depict "the capital of Ego, where science, art, poetry and forms of madness compete under ideal conditions to invent, destroy and restore the world of phenomenal reality."

Harrison's music has been performed in both the United States and Europe, and her works have received numerous honors and awards from organizations such as the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau, June in Buffalo, the Aspen Music School, the Ohio Arts Council, the Darmstadt Summer Music Courses, IBLA European International Competition for Composers, and the American Guild of Organists. Harrison is currently composing a string quartet for the Amicus Quartet and teaching at the University of Cincinnati, College Conservatory of Music Preparatory Department. She is a former staff member of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players.

### ***Seven Devilish Pieces (1996)***

*for flute/piccolo, oboe, clarinet/bass clarinet,  
violin, viola, cello, and piano*

The alternation of aggressive instrumental figures and more lyrical utterances gives an appealingly capricious character to Harrison's *Seven Devilish Pieces*. The composer recalls: "Its title, as well as its

inspiration, stem from a comic situation that occurred during my residency in Paris. During a conversation with several colleagues, a casual remark referring to ‘this devilish piece’ was interpreted as ‘seven devilish pieces.’ This misunderstanding sparked my imagination, and led me to investigate the devil’s portrayal in various disciplines, which, in turn, triggered a multitude of musical ideas.”

Indeed, this piece’s seven movements present an extraordinary variety of textures, melodic materials, and expressive gestures. The juxtaposition of impetuous activity with infernal calm occurs at multiple levels. In general, even-numbered movements display a greater melodic breadth and harmonic intensity, while odd-numbered movements are characterized by high energy and unusual performance effects. Harrison comments: “Although the structure is highly sectionalized, I have tried to create an organic form in which musical ideas return in different guises and with different functions.” The fact that there is no pause between movements three/four and six/seven enhances the impression of creative continuity from the tense tranquility of the second movement (“Put Those Devils to Rest”) to the virtual witches’ sabbath of the final movement (“Hot Times”). The latter movement bears the Shakespearean epigraph: “Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.”

In addition to “otherworldly” performance techniques required from the instrumentalists (at times reminiscent of Paganini’s supposedly diabolic virtuosity), listeners may also notice the prominence of melodic lines built on the interval of the tritone (diminished fifth), once considered representative of “the devil in music.” “The biggest challenge while writing this work,” Harrison comments, “was to create contrasts while remaining devilish, i.e. extreme, excessive, energetic, reckless and, perhaps, mischievous. At no time was it my intention to create a devilishly difficult work, but rather, as one conductor so aptly stated, to create a work through which everyone could have a ‘devilishly good time.’”

*Seven Devilish Pieces* was commissioned by the Fromm Music Foundation for the ensemble Parnassus, who premiered the work under Anthony Korf in 1997.

## **PABLO ORTIZ (B. 1956)**

Citing stylistic influences from Franz Josef Haydn to Luciano Berio, Argentine composer Pablo Ortiz once described himself as “a hybrid person.” Growing up in Buenos Aires, he took early lessons in piano from his mother, an accomplished musician. While a student at the Universidad Catolica Argentina, Ortiz sang and studied Gregorian chant, and was fortunate to have the mentorship of the influential composer and pedagogue, Gerardo Gandini. Ortiz describes his early compositions as “a funny cross between medieval music and Morton Feldman.” These are quiet, delicate pieces with transparent textures that owe something to the music of Anton Webern, although they are not in a twelve-tone idiom.

At the age of twenty-seven, Ortiz made his way to the United States to study with Mario Davidovsky at Columbia University, where he earned his Ph.D. Other notable teachers have included Jack Beeson, Chou Wen-Chung, Jacques Louis Monod, Fred Lerdahl, and Roberto Caamano. From Davidovsky, Ortiz gained not only a meticulous concern for detail, but also a powerful sense, that has stayed with him to the present, that “music is like religion.” Subtle nuances figure prominently in a work dedicated to Davidovsky, *Trazos en el Polvo* (Traces in the dust). Ortiz has also composed many works of a specifically religious nature, including a mass, a number of motets, and most recently a large piece for Paul Hillier's vocal ensemble, Theatre of Voices. He seems drawn to certain qualities of human experience that find unique expression in religious music: a feeling of urgency in the subject matter combined with a deep humility.

Ortiz has written solo and chamber music, vocal, orchestral, and electronic compositions, as well as music for plays and films. Regardless of genre, he believes that music “has to have some kind of drama in it” and that each piece is a kind of musical storytelling. He cites Richard Wagner as an important influence, though Ortiz's music tends to be more introverted, with contrasts happening in terms of nuance rather than dramatic outburst. On the other hand, his music occasionally takes on a more extroverted tone, with a

larger scope and a heightened sense of rhythmic drive, including elements of tango.

After arriving in the Bay Area in 1994, Ortiz developed a particular fascination for the culture of Mexico. This soon led to *What about Maximiliano?* (based on episodes from the life of the Emperor Maximilian) for the Mexican harpist Mercedes Gómez and the U.C. Davis Symphony. In 1997 and 1998, the Centro Experimental Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires commissioned two chamber operas from him: *Parodia* (based on Monteverdi's *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*) and *Una voz en el viento*, a chamber opera for puppets based on texts by Tito Lorefice. He is currently working on a commission from Fideicomiso para la cultura Mexico-US to write children's songs on texts by the famous Chicano poet and Mission artist, Francisco Alvaron.

Ortiz's compositions have received international recognition, and performances by the Arditti String Quartet, Speculum Musicae, Continuum, the Buenos Aires Philharmonic, the Ensemble Contretemps of Geneva, Music Mobile, the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, Earplay, and Ars Nova. He has been honored with a commission from the Fromm Foundation, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1996. After being a fellow at the Composers' Conference at Wellesley College in 1986 and 1988, Ortiz taught at the University of Pittsburgh and directed its Electronic Music Studio from 1990-94. He is currently Associate Professor of Composition at U.C. Davis, where he recently composed incidental music for a performance of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Der Besuch* (The Visit), directed by Sheldon Deckelbaum. The work on tonight's program, *Raya en el mar*, is a Koussevitzky Foundation commission for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. The Players previously performed his *El Agua Incierta* in 1993 and *Story Time* in 1998.

## ***Raya en el mar* (2000)**

*for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, French horn, two percussion,  
piano, two violins, viola, cello, and bass*

The composer writes:

“*Raya en el mar* sounds beautiful in Spanish. I could attempt to translate it as ‘trace in the sea,’ suggesting the (ever so) elusive act of writing on moving waters. I took it from a song by Many Chao, describing the fate of a North African immigrant in Europe. The character says, ‘soy una *raya en el mar*’ and later ‘My life I left (somewhere) between Ceuta and Gibraltar’ (*raya* could also mean *stingray* in Spanish, giving the phrase an unexpected turn). Not too far from Ceuta, Paul Bowles wrote: ‘Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place than to the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the earth to another.’

“The piece attempts to overcome the futility of writing over moving waters by stubbornly returning to a passacaglia-like motive, contrasted and sometimes obscured by other (related) music.

“I would like to thank the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the Koussevitzky Foundation at the Library of Congress, Donald Palma and Adam Frey for their support.”

—*Program notes by Beth Levy (Dong, Mackey, Harrison)  
and Maxima Putnam (Ortiz)*