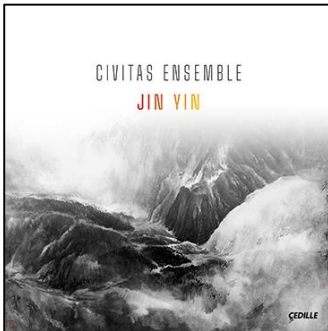




Colin Clarke – May/June 2020 Issue



Released on January 24 for the Lunar New Year, *Jin Yin* (Golden Tone) is a project that was led by violinist Yuan-Qing Yu, a founding member of Civitas and assistant concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony. It is only fitting to begin with the basics, and Zhou Long's *Five Elements* examines the five Chinese elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth) in turn. The five elements of Chinese culture are extensively used in Chinese medicine, with the "Metal" first movement finding its reflection in repeated metallic sounds from the percussion answered by a hard-edged chord on the pipa. The sound world is identifiably contemporary Western, but with pronounced Chinese/Oriental aspects that shine through with varying degrees of clarity. Wooden percussion instruments are foregrounded in the rhythmically exciting "Wood"; what is so striking (pardon the pun) is the sheer level of precision to the playing. Associated with winter in Chinese correspondences, "Water" indeed has a chilly demeanor; the sounds are rarefied and static, but exude the beauty of a December morn. It's interesting to note how, in the slower tempo, the elements of tuning between players are magnified as if under a microscope; and how when rendered exactly, as here, they sound glorious. Far more active is "Fire," a full-ensemble jam before the jaunty dance of "Earth," with its pronounced octaves and distinctly Oriental gait.

Another well-known Chinese composer is Chen Yi, whose tone poem *Night Thoughts* is inspired by a poem of that name from the Tang Dynasty (615–907). It was originally scored for flute, cello, and piano, but the current arrangement was made specifically for the Civitas Ensemble. There are fields of huge beauty, but also a helter-skelter *moto perpetuo* for piano and violin that is handled with consummate skill by Yuan-Qing Yu and Winston Choi. Of brighter gait is Lu Pei's *Scenes Through Window*, which seeks to unite rap music with Chinese folk music. Tremendous *fu* and bright as a button, it includes the flute of Emma Gerstein to add an edge to the sonorities. The repetition is not quite Minimalist but seems to want to head in that direction at times, reaching a fuller flowering later on. Of particular note also is the liquid clarinet of Lawrie Bloom. Interestingly, violinist Zhi-Jong Wang has recorded one of Lu Pei's *Fantasies on Chinese Folk Tunes* as a filler to the Sibelius and Stravinsky Violin Concertos, with the Philharmonia Orchestra under Thomas Sanderling (*Fanfare* 42:2). For violin and piano, Vivian Fung's lovely *Bird Song* is often virtuoso but has a deeper side: The final stretch is an *in memoriam* to Julian Rodescu, Artistic Director of Astral Artists in Philadelphia and a mentor and advisor to the violinist Kristen Lee, for whom the work was originally written, and who premiered it in 2012.

Finally, there is the sheer beauty of Yao Chen's *Emanations of Tara*, an extended piece constructed of "Beginning," "Ending" and five Taras of five colors in between ("Green Tara"; "Golden Tara"; "Blue Tara"; "Red Tara"; "White Tara"). Clarinet doubles bass clarinet here, with the pipa also being very much a part of the group. Inspired by a visit to Tibet, and by Tara, the female bodhisattva of compassion and virtue, the piece is brilliantly and evocatively scored, and full of surprises. Unison arrivals seem to open a veil before we go again into a world that seems very much one of dream or archetype. "Red Tara" is extremely animated: It is marked extremely *undertoned* but with turning sensation inside. Perhaps there is an analogy here with the red of Mars, the God of War? The "White Tara" movement is a huge contrast, a starry surface seeking to extricate the listener from the flow of time; it leads naturally into the quiet of "Ending."

All the performances are first recordings with the exception of the Zhou Long, which is the first recording of this particular arrangement. This is a superb disc on every level. The recording quality is of the highest caliber; the performances are consistently beyond criticism.