

HWANG: The Floating Box

□ *Ang, Kim; Zhou; Rivas. English text.*
New World Records 80626-2 (2)

It's obvious, from the first five seconds of this piece, that composer Jason Kao Hwang has a startlingly original voice. Hwang's peer group of Chinese-American composers — the likes of Bright Sheng, Tan Dun and Chen Yi — have mined brilliant results by fusing Chinese folk-music traditions with contemporary

Western classical techniques. What Hwang adds to this already vibrant mix is an anarchic, downtown, jazz/fusion-influenced sensibility, honed in the New York music scene throughout the 1970s and '80s, when Hwang played experimental jazz as a violinist. Though his topic here is quite serious — the often harsh experience of Asian immigrants in contemporary urban America — Hwang's bold, in-your-face *mélange* has the rebellious, impudent quality of Thomas Adès.



The protean chamber orchestra Hwang uses for *The Floating Box* employs eight instrumentalists, who play piccolo/flute/alto flute; B-flat clarinet/bass clarinet; vibraphone; *pipa* (a Chinese lute); accordion; percussion (including Tibetan chimes, singing bowls, whirling air tubes, Chinese tom-toms and a Buddhist fan drum); cello; and a family of two-stringed violins collectively known as *huqin*. (One of these, the *erhu*, becomes a plot element, because it is the instrument played by the father before he tragically abandons it.)

Originality spills out of every measure of *The Floating Box*, and the polycultural combinations of instruments produce a dizzying variety of colors — each of which has an acutely evocative impact. Ellie M. Hisama's perceptive notes describe the music as ranging from “atonality to blues to Broadway to Chinese opera to chromaticism, impressionism to jazz to pop,” but Hwang's own distinctive, potent style is always at the forefront. Hwang also composes melodic lines that are vocally sympathetic — an ability that eludes many practitioners of contemporary opera — and he knows how to keep a catchy rhythmic groove

going, whatever the instrumentation.

A remarkably gifted cast of three, undaunted by the score's considerable challenges, brings realism and poignancy to the universal themes of alienation, family tragedy and reconciliation. As Eva (or Yee-Wa, in Chinese), Sandia Ang has a flexible, attractive soprano, which she deploys with musical intelligence and emotional directness. As her mother, Ryu-Kyung Kim elicits all our empathy in an extended, atonal, mostly a cappella aria, during which she tries to rouse her despondent, recently unemployed daughter. And Zheng Zhou's gripping delivery of the father's extraordinary aria, describing his plunge into the ocean to save his *erhu*, captures the agony of a proud, dignified man who has been wounded deeply. Catherine Filloux's libretto, based on more than forty hours of oral histories she and Hwang recorded in New York City's Chinatown, is vivid and concisely poetic. All of the extraordinary players in the chamber orchestra are solo-caliber artists, and the precise rendering of the unceasing musical complexities surely also owes a debt to conductor Juan Carlos Rivas. Hwang spins his tale with a confident dramatic pacing that is sometimes deliberate and measured but never tedious; his is a voice that demands to be heard.

JOSHUA ROSENBLUM