

Silk Road Ensemble Thread Their Way Through New Lands and Sounds

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OK, so it's not Van Halen moving on without David Lee Roth or Genesis keeping things going after Peter Gabriel's exit. But the vaunted Silk Road Ensemble have clearly taken their first recording foray without founder Yo-Yo Ma as an opportunity to strike out in some exciting new directions.

With the famed cellist surrounded by a revolving cast of international, multinational virtuosos and composers, the non-profit Silk Road Project has since 1998 expanded its concepts of following the musical threads of the eponymous highway with various weavings of sounds and traditions from China, Central Asia, India, ancient Persia and the modern Middle East. On the Ensemble's new album, 'Off the Map,' with Ma sitting it out, four works commissioned from inventive young composers point the compass in the other direction, bridging East Asia to the Americas. But with the uncharted explorations taken here, the album title 'Off the Map' seems perhaps too prosaic. This is not about geography but rather more about an aesthetic abstracted from the literal Silk Road's illustrious history.

Take the first piece, 'Ritmos Anchinis,' by young Berkeley, Calif. born-and-raised composer Gabriela Lena Frank, which brings the Chinese pipa (played by the renowned Wu Man) and sheng (by Wu Tong) with the Brooklyn Rider string quartet that formed within the original Silk Road project. Here the Asian sounds weave with Frank's highly personalized extractions from her mother's Peruvian heritage and her own Latin-American cultural experiences. The short first movement, 'Hirawi Para Colquipocro,' sets the tone for what follows on the album:

Silk Road Ensemble, 'Harawi Para Colquipocro'



"They knew I had not written for Asian instruments before," says Frank, whose 'Inca Dances' was nominated for this year's Latin Grammy contemporary composition award, of her initial commission from Silk Road in 2006. "I believe they purposefully approached composers who had not written for Asian instruments. They threw out a few at me: 'How about you do something for pipa and sheng?' I didn't even know that the pipa was a lute instrument. In Spanish it means 'pipe.'"

What they didn't know is that there is some Chinese heritage in her mother's lineage, as well. Frank embraced the challenge, intensively studying the instruments with the featured players and others as to their capabilities and limitations — making a paper cutout of a pipa fretboard to keep at hand for reference when she didn't have an actual pipa close by — and finding a way of expressing something through them that is, in the end, true to herself.

"I bought a lot of CDs and went to a lot of concerts and finally had to put it all aside," she says of the process. "I was terrorizing myself with it. Good to do all that research,

but I even worked on a completely different piece to clean the palate. Mark Twain worked that way — my father was a Twain scholar. One thing I like to do is sleep on stuff, go do something else and what survives the distance of time are the meaty ideas. Sounds carried through, but nothing I was consciously trying to hang onto. I thought that would be a lot of artifice and no way in a few months could I grasp on to a thousands-years-old tradition. Can I treat the pipa as just a bunch of wood and strings? What would happen? Just see it as sounds and colors — what would you come up with? Difficult."

What she did come up with, she says, was a relationship between the pipa and the Andean strummed instrument the charango and between Asian and Latin American scales.

"I did work with Asian influences but not aim for Asian results," she says. "I think that's what Silk Road wanted by asking non-Asian composers to come on board: With understanding of the traditions, try to take it new places."

That's just as true for all the pieces here: 'Empty Mountain, Spirit Rain,' by Angel Lam — born in Hong Kong and raised both there and in California — incorporates the Japanese shakuhachi of Kojiro Umezaki with violin, cello, bass, marimba and Middle Eastern percussion in a piece inspired by her childhood memories of her grandmother's death. 'Sulvasutra' has Evan Ziporyn, a longtime member of the cutting-edge Bang on a Can All-Stars and a composer well versed in Balinese gamelan, composing for the first time for Indian tabla (played by Sandeep Das in a setting with Wu Man and the Brooklyn Rider strings. And the closing 'Air to Air,' by Osvaldo Golijov — born and raised in Argentina with Russian Jewish heritage and arguably the best known of the composers

here — brings in, well, just about everything, from Persian master Kayhan Kahlor's *kamencheh* to Cristina Pato's electrifying Galician bagpipe to Jeremy Flower's laptop, a sample from a ritual performed in Mexico of the Festival for the Holy Mother Guadalupe and some inspirations from Arabic Christian services for Good Friday.

"All of the pieces pay a lot of respect to the traditions that they draw from but never become derivative in any way," says Johnny Gandelsman, Russian-born violinist for Silk Road and Brooklyn Rider (whose 'Silent City' collaboration with Kahlor was covered in an earlier *Around the World* column) and the co-executive producer of this album. "It creates like a new genre — these four pieces are a new genre of music to me, the new world music or world chamber music. It just expands the world of small-ensemble music of chamber music into the world."

Gandelsman says that the composers were given no real instructions or mission statement for their work, which the composers say was both liberating and perhaps a little frightening.

"Actually, I got the commission in Bali in the summer of 2005 in Ubud, a village I'd been in a lot since the early '80s," Ziporyn says. "The first time I was in Ubud there was barely any electricity. But there I was now in an Internet café and got an e-mail from Silk Road asking me to do this piece. Perfect! The world has changed! All they said was they wanted a piece that could feature Sandeep and should have some programmatic content. Other than that they left it wide open. They wanted something they could engage Sandeep on at a level they hadn't been able to do before. Since he doesn't read music, he was adept at finding something great to do in music they already had, but they knew they weren't tapping his full potential. So I think they asked me because I had worked a lot with musicians who didn't read music and found ways to have them do complex composed music. For me, it was like a kid in a candy store, particularly with someone like him."

With 'Ka,' the opening movement of his

'Sulvasutra,' it's easy to hear his excitement in the musical relationships.

Silk Road Ensemble, 'Ka'

Ziporyn stresses that he had no intent or interest to write Indian music or even something that evoked that sense.

"No, that would be pointless," he says. "It's about commonality. I met Sandeep, talked about things, improvised a little together and got the sense of what his musicality is. Then I put that aside and made the piece I wanted to make. In this case, I knew exactly who I was writing for. Not only not writing an Indian piece but not a tabla piece, either. Writing for him and Wu Man and Johnny and the strings."

Lam, in contrast, sought to fully use her Asian sensibilities for this, readily identifying herself as an Asian composer.

"I do, because I feel that my music always carries strong emotions and mood and atmosphere and I wanted to take the listener back to a certain place and time for the experience," she says. "I think that is a very Asian concept. Some people say I also express East Asian femininity. There are very few East Asian female composers writing feminine music. I go to school at Yale right now and a lot of my colleagues, mostly male, don't write music like this."

Lam actually won her commission in a competition for Silk Road done through Carnegie Hall. If her relative youth and lack of experience in the spotlight left her at all intimidated in this company, it doesn't show in her work. Even being assigned the *shakuhachi*, again by design an instrument she had never written for, was inspiring, but in a very personal way that sets her work apart from the others here.

"I grew up listening to it as a child," she says, explaining that Japanese culture is common in Hong Kong. "The sound of that always intrigued me. So I went and listened to *shakuhachi* very carefully, needed to understand how it works and breathes and expresses itself. I had the player send me some music he played and really personi-

fied the instrument and found that it triggered and activated a childhood memory for me — this incredibly brassiness and spiritualness it evoked, the sound that's so unique that you can't find it anywhere else in the world."

The story is simple and sweet, and ultimately universal: "I was really young and had no idea what death was about, so to me it was just my grandmother moving to another place. I just need to communicate with her through a letter, and that's through the *shakuhachi*."

The first of two movements, 'Silent Field,' captures that child's innocence.

Silk Road Ensemble, 'Silent Field'

As with the other pieces, Lam's is not about interpreting any specific folk tunes. But she did very much echo specific sounds in the music of that region.

"In the very opening, the bass plucking the strings, I wanted to convey a Chinese zither or Japanese koto," she says. "I was just looking for something that came out naturally to bring the most beauty out of the instrument."

For the most part, the sense of place and culture is less specific, at least in a purely musical sense.

"The opening is in some ways about how much space there is between the notes," she says. "And silence and the importance of silence in the first half is very East Asian. Some ancient aesthetics stress that, particularly in painting. That, to me, has transcendence in that search of meaning between life and death."

The process for the composers hardly ended with the writing, though. They all gathered with the ensemble in 2006 for intensive, lively workshops at the famed Tanglewood music retreat/venue in Massachusetts under the guidance of Yo-Yo Ma himself — no, he didn't leave Silk Road but just stepped out of the performing role for this project — and brought the compositions to

full realization.

“It really is a family,” says Frank. The workshops were wonderful and intense. Yo-Yo may not have played, but his stamp is all over it. And we all ate meals together, kept talking about music.”

It’s an experience that’s carried on to other works. Lam was commissioned to write a cello concerto for Ma for premiere by him and the Atlanta Symphony this week. Ziporyn has just debuted an elaborate opera, ‘A House in Bali,’ based on composer Colin McPhee’s 1930s memoir and featuring Bang on a Can, a full gamelan orchestra, dancers and singers and is now working on another project featuring Sandeep Das via the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, set for a premiere next fall. And Frank, who has just finished a vocal piece for the King’s Singers, is starting work on an ambitious project combining traditional Andean instruments and classical players, and is eager to write more for pipa.

“I told them, ‘Let me write for the pipa again!’” she says. “Now I’m going to write you a magnificent piece!”

And of course, every challenge and innovation for the composers was a challenge for the musicians.

“In Osvaldo’s piece — he loves chaos, harmony and chaos together, beautiful chaos,” Gandelsman says, noting that each of the pieces pushed the musicians into not just new ways of playing but new ways of thinking.

But it’s together that they keep the players completely on their toes.

“One of the things that is tricky when we were performing these pieces in concert is to very quickly find yourself in those worlds, stepping from one world to the next, because they are quite different,” he says. “But that’s also the fun of it.”