









In the Northwest Pacific around Taiwan, where violinist Hsinwei Chiang was born and raised, there is a powerful force of nature called the Kuroshio Current — also known as the Black Stream. Chiang sees that warm, north-flowing Pacific current as almost a part of her, an anchor of identity after her move to New York in 2013 to study jazz at Queens College. Black Stream has another meaning as well: it signals Chiang's embrace of African American musical culture and values, from the standpoint of a classically trained violinist developing her own voice in jazz and improvised music. "Black American culture is the inspiration for how I think of life and how I approach the music," Chiang declares.

At the time she recorded Black Stream, this magisterial four-volume set of open, exploratory improvisations, Chiang was based in the South Jersey town of Pennsville, getting ready to return with her new family to Taiwan after nine years in the States. She'd soon be coming full circle, back to the Kuroshio Current, the Black Stream itself. She knew it was time, before she left, for a summative document of her New York sojourn. Why not gather some of the most extraordinary musical personalities to help on this occasion? Enter vibraphonist Patricia Brennan, bassist Hilliard Greene and drummer Nasheet Waits for a one-day session at Sound on Sound Studios, with an engineer, James P. Nichols, who is an extended family member. Nichols' significant other, Mem Nahadr is the guest vocalist we hear on the three-movement "Dancing Earth," her stark and powerful entrance a sudden departure. Her voice trails off to just breath to end the first movement, then picks up with improvised spoken word in the following two sections, creating some of the most alluring moods of the set.

Though Chiang didn't know Brennan, Greene and Waits intimately before the session, it didn't take long for her to foster that all-important feeling of family as they got to work in the studio. She had been deeply impressed by Brennan's 2021 debut album *Maquishti*, an innovative odyssey for solo vibraphone, and looked forward to incorporating Brennan's unique approach to sound on Black Stream. Greene, too, caught Chiang's attention with a solo album: *Spirituals*, his 2019 outing for unaccompanied upright bass. "Hill asked me to play an improvised session with Daniel Carter," Chiang recalls, "and from that first time I felt so comfortable playing with him. I also started to figure out how to incorporate my classical sound in improvised contexts. I realized I could still sound like me, that I don't have to abandon it. That's the journey I find myself on, and I know with Hill I can be really flexible with the different things I want to express."

Nasheet Waits, longtime drummer with Jason Moran and The Bandwagon and son of legendary drummer Freddie Waits, brings a remarkable sense of dynamic range and control to every piece he plays on Black Stream. His duets with Chiang, titled "Looking for the Breeze" parts I & II, were the very first things to be recorded that day. "I admire Nasheet so much," Chiang says, "and I wanted to figure out how we could 'talk' to each other musically right away."

She pursued a similar duo strategy with the others as well: Greene on "Falling" and "Walking/Tripping," Brennan on "The Chilling Wind Comes," "Misty Dew Pearl" and "Whispering Cicada." She is poised and highly melodic on her two solo violin tracks, "Asking" and "Searching," and she leads off the collection with three pieces for trio without vibes. At every step, Chiang finds ways to vary the combinations and the voices that make up Black Stream. The four volumes — divided into Summer, Winter, Spring and Autumn — veer between moments of hushed contemplation, sonic abstraction, undulating rhythm and swing (e.g., "Glare"), lyricism within dissonance and even a primal intensity at times reminiscent of Nasheet Waits' work with Peter Brötzmann.

While she is obviously not the first composer to employ the four seasons as an organizing tool, Chiang brings the freshness of her own international perspective to that time-honored theme. Her most direct inspiration is classical virtuoso Gidon Kremer's 2000 album *Eight Seasons*, which juxtaposes the Vivaldi Four Seasons with Astor Piazzolla's "The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires." "I respect the



tradition of using bowed string instruments to describe nature," Chiang says, "and I was also fascinated by all the different ways to interpret the same subject, especially by someone with an entirely different cultural and geographic background."

Chiang also notes that "instead of four seasons the Chinese calendar has 24 different periods, or 'solar terms,' and the titles 'Lixia,' 'Xiaoman' and 'Mangzhong' are the first three solar terms of summer." As a whole, her Summer suite is meant to evoke high humidity, which is "literally the connection for me between New York and Taiwan," Chiang quips.

"Drift Wood and Fossil Fuels" and the two-part "Thunderstorm and Rainbow" were inspired by another related experience: Chiang's first trip to the eastern coast of Taiwan (she hails from the west coast). "When I went there I heard music made by indigenous people who had a jam session. It was my first jam session, and not a jazz jam session. I think that experience really started my musical career. There was also a huge typhoon while I was there, and it locked everybody down in that little village. It was a really special event in my life. After the festival I drove back to the west coast and all along the coast all you could see was this driftwood washed up from the storm."

Another factor in creating "Thunderstorm and Rainbow," one of the set's more structured pieces, is Chiang's interest in Max Roach's groundbreaking percussion ensemble M'Boom. Both Freddie and Nasheet Waits played with M'Boom, Chiang notes. "I also had a chance to interview Warren Smith last year — he told me about what he'd do with his students, imagining a rainstorm and using body percussion to make that rainstorm. M'Boom would do these kinds of things, so it was very special to play something based on that concept."

Autumn, Black Stream's final chapter, devotes ample time to an especially rich combination: the three aforementioned violin-vibes duets. These provide a closer encounter with Brennan's off-center harmonic logic and of course her work with sound manipulation (analogous perhaps to the reverberating waves and bends Mary Halvorson achieves on the guitar). That moment of shared laughter at the end of "The Chilling Wind Comes" is a delight; so is the energy of "Opening the Ghost Gate," which could perhaps recall Albert Ayler's "Ghosts" but is in fact another reference to the Chinese calendar.

"There's a cultural element there," Chiang says, "with these two events in the traditional calendar: the ghost gate opening around August, and then the whole month that follows is ghost month. And at the end of autumn in North America, people do Halloween, so ghosts, death, life, those types of things. I have two kids and they make me feel like Halloween is the best holiday ever. I was watching them play hide and seek and so I asked the players to play hide and seek on this final piece 'Halloween,' using the dirge as the motif to count down in the game. You count down to zero and when it stops, we begin this chasing sequence. I wanted a New Orleans feel to end it, because for me Mardi Gras is almost like a spring Halloween. I'm inspired by the second line and the New Orleans funeral tradition which is one of the most beautiful things."

The most beautiful things: what a worthy goal to aspire to, emulating the models that have come before while reshaping traditions and improvisatory processes in one's own image. On Black Stream, in each of its four volumes and in its extended arc overall, Hsinwei Chiang deftly does this, taking risks and encouraging the best from herself and her colleagues. One can discover and re-discover its nuances over many listens.

All compositions by Hsinwei Chiang (ASCAP)

Produced by Hsinwei Chiang

作曲與製作 | 江忻薇

Violin by Hsinwei Chiang, Vibraphone by Patricia Brennan, Double Bass by Hilliard Greene, Drums by Nasheet Waits, Vocal by Mem Nahadr

演奏 | 江忻薇 (小提琴)、帕璀霞 · 部芮南 (鐵琴與效果器)、赫利雅德 · 格令 (低音提琴)、納西 · 威慈 (爵士鼓組)、夢 · 吶哈知 (人聲)

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