

## Yoonseung Cho, Brooklyn Rainfall

Can you discern compositional form in weather patterns? The thought made sense to pianist Yoonseung Cho as he emerged from The Bunker Studio in Williamsburg, having just recorded five tracks for Brooklyn Rainfall, his debut album. “I didn’t know much about Brooklyn,” Cho recalls, “but I got a strong impression from the heavy rains happening right after the session. The weather seemed to be rearticulating my song form — it had an Intro-Theme-Solos-Interludes-Head Out-Coda, and that’s how the title Brooklyn Rainfall came to be.”

We get a sense of that narrative arc in just the first two minutes of Cho’s leadoff title track. The mood is tempestuous, the harmony Phrygian in flavor, the meter in 6/8, the structure ebbing and flowing thanks to the close rapport shared by Cho and his highly sought-after trio partners, bassist Vicente Archer and drummer Marcus Gilmore. “It was one fresh first take on that rainy day in Brooklyn,” Cho says. And it set a high bar for everything that was to follow.

Born in Seoul in 1973, Cho grew up under the influence of his father Sangkook Cho, a jazz drummer. He immigrated to Argentina in 1986 with his father and grew up learning various genres of South American music, along with his intensive classical piano studies. After attending Berklee College of Music and New England Conservatory in Boston, he became the first Asian full-scholarship student to attend the prestigious Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz (now the Herbie Hancock Institute) in 2001. He has performed with jazz masters such as Dave Grusin, Herbie Hancock, Terence Blanchard and Wayne Shorter, as well as New York Voices, Gary Novak, Cathy Segal Garcia, Laura Fygi, Eric Benet, Renee Olstead and more. For eight years, until 2010, he served as a professor at Musicians Institute in Hollywood. Currently based in Seoul, he is a composer, arranger, producer and festival director who is active within the K-pop scene.

Brooklyn Rainfall, the sum of two different recording sessions, reflects all these life experiences in myriad ways. The five cuts with Archer and Gilmore establish Cho’s authoritative, individual approach to the piano trio idiom. Another three songs, recorded two days later at Samurai Hotel Studio in Queens, are solo piano, with Cho employing more of a Western classical conception on the original “Book of Kush” and an intriguing adaptation of Liszt. But “Astoria Blues,” named for the area where Samurai is located, highlights Cho in a hardbop vein, calling the ancestors on “a traditional 12-bar blues form with many unusual chord changes,” he explains. There’s an old-school wisdom in this tune and the way that Cho executes it, reminding this listener of the atmosphere of Bradley’s in the ’80s and ’90s.

The one non-original trio piece is Benny Golson’s “Whisper Not,” also from deep in the tradition, including Golson’s original coda. The track opens with rubato solo piano and moves into a gliding 3/4 supported by Gilmore’s poetic brushwork. “I barely use any II-V patterns in this arrangement,” Cho observes. “There are some advanced harmonic changes, pedal points, static structures and hybrid chords, but my intention was for all of this not to distract the listener because Golson’s melody is so strong.”

While jazz vernacular is at the heart of Brooklyn Rainfall, Cho draws as much from “the harmonic systems of impressionistic composers such as Scriabin, Fauré, Debussy and Satie,” he notes. “But I’ve started opening myself more and more. I want to stop thinking about style and genre and just play ‘the music.’”

And who better to play the music with than Archer and Gilmore, whose combined sideman credits include John Scofield, Chick Corea, Nicholas Payton, Robert Glasper, Chris Potter, Vijay Iyer, Ambrose Akinmusire and many others. “Vicente is like an anchor in a heavy storm at sea,” Cho says. “He was so relaxed and calm in the studio, but his playing and interpretation were incredibly exciting, always with a perfect balance of complexity and simplicity. And he saved me a couple of time during solos — thanks Vicente!”

Gilmore, one of Pat Metheny’s first-call drummers of late, brings an astonishing fluidity and range to Cho’s compositions, from the mysterious midtempo “Sultan Room” and the clave-based rhythmic dance of “City Night Drive” to the intricate hits and relaxed swing of “East River Sunrise.” “I took a picture of Marcus’ setup to see the coordination of cymbals and toms and how he makes such great choices of tone and timbre,” Cho says. “He was using the flat ride as a crash cymbal to avoid the overtones, like [his grandfather] Roy Haynes. That’s why he could bring the intensity to a peak and still keep the sensitivity that you need with a trio. I feel like Marcus has his own internalized mixer in his ears and hands. He also makes me comfortable to take more choruses when I solo. We talk without words and communicate with musical signs and telepathic messages. It seemed like we were together in some ‘unknown zone’ where our responses were so immediate. For me it was the happiest time in my life.”

When you’re as gifted with a poetic imagination and a sense of the complete artistic picture as Cho is, it’s possible to forecast continued happy times, playing with and leading some of the greatest musicians in the world. Yoonseung Cho has hit that sweet spot with Brooklyn Rainfall, and more inspired music is sure to follow.

- David R. Adler