

JASON KAO HWANG / EDGE

TAYLOR HO BYNUM • ANDREW DRURY • KEN FILIANO



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1. NO MYTH
2. THREADS *
3. PARALLEL MEDITATIONS
4. GRASSY HILLS

TAYLOR HO BYNUM – CORNET, FLUGELHORN *

ANDREW DRURY – PERCUSSION

KEN FILIANO – STRING BASS

JASON KAO HWANG – COMPOSER, VIOLIN



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Jason Kao Hwang has a wonderful story about a yoga retreat. "There was a laughing meditation," he recalls, "where someone led the group in laughing for 10 minutes straight. And I listened to the laughter as music. Laughter is a highly individual sound. Each person's physiology and history produces a unique explosion of rhythmic overtones, timbres and melodies. In *The Music of Life*, Hazrat Inayat Khan said that everything is a vibration, not just scientifically in terms of atoms and molecules but also emotions. You hear that in laughter. You can hear someone's whole life in his or her laughter. If we create music as expressive as our own laughter, we will discover our souls, our inner truths."

Hwang takes a step closer to that goal with EDGE, featuring a resourceful new quartet. His partners—cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum, bassist Ken Filiano, drummer Andrew Drury—are all noted figures on New York's creative music scene. They delve into Hwang's compositions with open ears but also a dogged sense of precision. In the vibrant play of timbres, tone colors and fragmented rhythms, they sketch their notion of an inner truth, one rooted in the free jazz vernacular but stamped with individuality. "We're called 'EDGE' because we're in between many worlds," Hwang says. "That's where our vibration is, in between the expectations of ethnicity, culture and genre."

From the age of 19, when he got his start in the New York loft scene (1976-85), Hwang has looked to music as a means of exploring his Asian-American heritage. This imperative has informed several of Hwang's recent projects, most notably his ambitious chamber opera *The Floating Box: A Story in Chinatown* (New World Records), not to mention his work of over a decade with Sang-Won Park, Joseph Daley and Satoshi Takeishi in The Far East Side Band. With EDGE, however, Hwang sidesteps overt Asian references, even as he brings the totality of his experience to bear on the encounter. More than any cultural concept, he explains, "this band is about the people. I wanted to work with people whose voices as improvisers interested me and I knew would push my imagination."

The result: four varied pieces played by four strong improvising personalities. Hwang anchors each piece with a fair amount of structure, although the players convey a sense of looseness and open-ended invention. Employing a metaphor from the opera, Hwang says: "Each composition is an architectural narrative providing various stages for musicians to extemporaneously sing their chapter of the story. The written music, like lights, set and props, is context, an energy that compels the improvisations forward." He speaks of the "extraordinary vocal quality" of Bynum's horn, the "amazing power and arco ability" of Filiano, the coloristic and rhythmic sensitivity of Drury. We can add to that the haunting, microtonal cry of Hwang's violin (which can also be heard on Bynum's 2005 release *Other Stories*).

After approximately four gigs around the city, Hwang's "EDGE" quartet proceeded to record. They led off with "No Myth," which shifts subtly from 5/4 to 6/4 and has a rhythmic texture that Hwang likens to a talking drum. He also compares the final section to "a Greek choir's commentary on what came before." "Threads" has a more "ritualistic," Eastern quality, with Hwang creating a "woodblock or clave-type sound" with his high D, and later a tremolo figure that uncannily resembles a pipa. "Parallel Meditations" boils over with rhythmic drive and tension, as Hwang and Bynum turn in incendiary solos over loose but propulsive grooves. "Grassy Hills," the oldest piece, dates back to Hwang's tenure in the band Commitment, alongside William Parker, Zen Matsuura and Will Connell, Jr. Again, Bynum and Hwang solo evocatively in succession—first unaccompanied, then over ostinato bass lines. Filiano handles all of Hwang's material with poise and power; Drury's stick and percussion work is exacting yet marvelously unconstrained.

One is struck by Hwang's refinement, in terms of instrumental prowess, compositional craft and expressive clarity. He draws on a broad range of experiences: studying for a time with Jimmy Giuffrè at NYU, working with such luminaries as Butch Morris, Henry Threadgill, and Anthony Braxton, making common cause with AsianImpro cofounders Francis Wong and Tatsu Aoki, along with other like-minded figures in Asian-American diasporic music. From all these sources, Hwang distills a music as expressive as laughter. And we, too, are part of the creation. As Hwang maintains, "All of us, whether playing or listening, are instruments."

David R. Adler

All compositions by Jason Kao Hwang. © Flying Panda Music, BMI, 2005
Recorded May 6th, 2005 at Kaleidoscope Sound, Union City, New Jersey

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