

## **Teriver Cheung & Ensemble Transience**

### ***Episodes***

Since moving back to his native Hong Kong from New York in 2015, guitarist and composer Teriver Cheung has shown continual growth and a willingness to tackle daunting challenges. His 2012 quartet outing, *My Nocturne*, revealed not only a player of uncommon fluidity and melodic depth, but also a composer and leader of promise, able to marshal the considerable talents of alto saxophonist Andrew Gould, bassist Linda Oh and drummer Ross Pederson to highly compelling musical ends. That document stands up beautifully in retrospect. But since then, the scope of Cheung's ideas has only grown.

Immersed in the New York scene for six years (starting in 2009), Cheung gained pivotal playing experience with Eddie Gomez, Billy Drummond, George Garzone and Antonio Hart, among others. Then an opportunity arose: Cheung was invited to take part in the 10<sup>th</sup> annual Hong Kong World Cultures Festival, curating a multimedia concert event called "Hong Kong Episodes" in partnership with fellow composer Fung Lam. Each composer was asked to write six pieces for a 16-piece ensemble with hybrid jazz and classical instrumentation. Each piece would represent a time frame within one virtual day.

The resulting live performance, featuring acclaimed pianist Jean-Michel Pilc, involved immersive video projections of Hong Kong created by visual artist and architect Anthony Lai: mesmerizing aerial views of its urban geometry, awe-inspiring time-lapse footage of clouds hugging tops of skyscrapers, as well as more abstract light formations and sequences. "We thought of it as the opposite of a movie soundtrack," Cheung says, "because in this case the video would set up the mood for the music."

Following the premiere, the ensemble went on tour (with personnel changes), playing in China, Taipei and London — about 10 shows in all. The program tightened up, winnowed from 12 to 8 selections. Cheung spent a number of months refining his four pieces and ultimately formed his own 13-piece unit, Ensemble Transience, to record it. And now the album has arrived: *Episodes*.

"The tour was such a rare opportunity to allow the music to grow beyond playing the notes," Cheung recalls. "The bond between the jazz and classical musicians grew stronger. It was magical, and it got quite emotional when it was coming to an end, so I knew it was time to get into the studio to document it. I think the music finally reached a point where it could inspire visual imagination by itself."

Sam Minaie, bassist on the project from the beginning, remained on board as co-producer, handling mixing and mastering as well. Mark Ferber, drummer on the tour, returned to give Ensemble Transience a strong and supple rhythmic backbone. And pianist Chok Kerong, from the tour as well, brought extraordinary virtuosity and invention to *Episodes* at every turn. A superb organist and composer as well, Kerong has featured Cheung in his own chamber-jazz project *Eleven*, an ambitious work that premiered in Singapore in 2015. The bond runs deep.

In addition to this core quartet, Ensemble Transience features a string quartet and a small but significant wind and brass contingent (two of each). Yuhan Su, an award-winning Taiwanese vibraphonist (and percussionist) currently based in New York, opens up added dimensions of tone color and harmony. Bringing it all together is conductor

Ang Shao-Wen of Singapore, who had worked with Cheung in Kerong's *Eleven* ensemble. "He understands both the classical and jazz musicians' languages," Cheung says. "He expended a lot of effort working on the rhythm and groove aspect, making careful decisions about how to reconcile the amplified and acoustic instruments. Some pieces move from loud solo sections to expressive string passages, and it's very tricky to handle. We experimented and found the best solution for each instance. Shao-Wen is a very passionate person and he came to know my music better than I do."

Cheung's wide-ranging influences manifest themselves in many ways throughout *Episodes*. The orchestral and chamber-jazz works of Billy Childs, Maria Schneider and Gwilym Simcock have left a deep imprint. So have Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy. In the free-form entropy of the intro to "Morning Before Departure," Cheung points to the example of György Ligeti, although the sonorous theme that soon emerges takes inspiration from the early piano music of Henri Dutilleux. The longest and most involved movement, "Into the Blue," reveals a debt to Debussy as well as the Pat Metheny Group. But whatever way these threads emerge, they take their place in a musical fabric that has become distinctively Cheung's own. And the clarity and drive of Cheung's guitar, a blond thinline D'Angelico, is refreshing every time it leaps confidently into the foreground of an arrangement.

One can gauge the emotional temperature of *Episodes* from Cheung's poetic texts elsewhere on this sleeve. To boil the themes down to their essence: "serenity," "questioning," "observing," "wandering" — these are states of mind that Cheung and the ensemble capture so adeptly, from the unfolding of the first movement to the lyricism of "Stillness," to the haunting chords of "Into the Blue," to the rich and elusively gorgeous string writing of "Neon." About his harmonic approach on that final movement, Cheung comments: "This is something I want to develop in the long run, writing solely based on intervals and voice-leading, instead of thinking about chords. I try to write melody first and set destination points, connecting them solely by voice-leading, balancing dissonance and resolution in the bigger picture. I don't really have a systematic approach. The result is usually still tonal in some way, but it opens me up not to think in a traditional box."

It was important for an album that began as a visual concert presentation to retain a strong visual element. To that end, Cheung articulated his ideas about Hong Kong, his life experience and the music to Andy Yang, who responded with the abstract painting you see herein on *Episodes*. What's more, the graphic design, by Yang's partner Errol Tan, deconstructs the painting in various ways on the different panels. It's a fitting representation of a project that's inescapably about the confluence of idioms, disciplines, practices, art forms. It's as multilayered, colorful and complex as the artist's life itself.

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