



NIRMALI FENN

The Clash of Icicles
chamber music

Hong Kong New Music Ensemble

KAIROS



NIRMALI FENN (*1979)

- [1] The Clash of Icicles Against the Stars
for flute, accordion and sheng 13:53
- [2] A Highwire Act
for violin, violoncello and piano 12:17
- [3] Scratches of the Wind
for solo alto flute 07:26
- [4] Through a Glass Darkly
for clarinet, trumpet and accordion 12:26
- [5] The Ground of Being
for flute and alto flute 09:16
- [6] A Reaction in Force
for solo oboe 06:54

TT 62:17

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- [1] Cheryl Lim *flute*
[3] Daniel Havel *flute*
[1] Ho Kwan Kevin Cheng *sheng*
[5] Malgorzata Hlawsa *alto flute*
[4] Chu Shing Leung *clarinet*
[6] Jan Souček *oboe*
[4] Casper Billington *trumpet*
[4] Xu Xiaonan *accordion*
[2] Conrad Harris *violin*
[2] Alexandr Starý *piano*
[2] Andrej Gál *violoncello*

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Recording supervisor: Boolu Hui

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Mix and producing engineer: [2] Terence Cho, [1] [3] [4] Sylva Smejkalova

Score producer & contractor: [1] [3] [4] Bohdan Hilash

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Final CD-Mastering: Christoph Amann

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**HONGKONG
NEWMUSIC
ENSEMBLE**
香港創樂團



Compositional influences

The spatial conditions of my environment affect the way I build my music. For instance, in Singapore, where I am currently based, there are incredible thunderstorms, the deep, reverberant sounds of which are seeping into my current pieces. The pieces on this CD were written between 2008–2014 when I was living in Hong Kong, New York, Norway and Australia.

Living in Hong Kong made me realise the experience of living in high vertical blocks. I was living on the 27th floor of an apartment that overlooked the sea in Tin Wan on Hong Kong Island. Living up so high gave me an opportunity to experience a horizon that seemed unusually elongated, in which huge container ships shrunk in the distance. *The Clash of Icicles against the Stars* was created whilst living in Hong Kong and, I hear in its spidery-thin lines, this phenomenon – the higher the building, the more expansive the horizons. Musical lines expand straight to a point where they ultimately bend.

New York is often paralleled with Hong Kong in terms of the nature of the urban environment, but I don't hear them as the same. On the ground, Manhattan has a distinctive blend of siren and car-horn sounds that appear to bend because of the many street corners; Hong Kong has much longer streets. People move at a frenetic pace in both cities, each moving in their separate orbits in tune with their individual agendas, but because of Central Park, NYC is a city of walkers. *A Highwire Act* was written in New York. At the time of writing the piece, I was interested in the feats of Philippe Petit, a French tightrope walker, who walked between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre. During my time in New York, I was very interested in casting my gaze to the edges of the tops of buildings and imagining aerial footpaths.

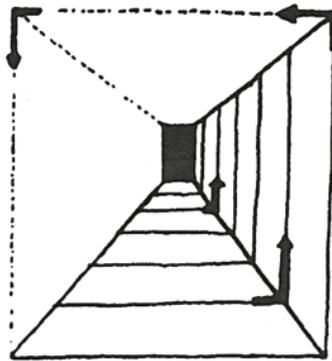
The spark for *Through a Glass Darkly* came to me in Norway. It happened on the Fløibanen Funicular that hauls itself up Fløyen Mountain, Bergen. I could see to the bottom of the tunnel of the railway as the train pulled further away from the speck of light in the station. The music of *Through a Glass Darkly* recalls this pull from my base

as well as the starkness of the surrounding landscape. The air in Norway is crisp and, on the mountain, one can hear sounds with such clarity due to the spaciousness and lack of noise clutter.

My love of the natural environment comes from growing up in the “wide, brown land” of Australia, where sounds have so much opportunity to resonate that their decays seem prolonged. For instance, the singular sounds of the bellbirds are very audible in the Australian countryside and, if you stand still in one place long enough, you can imagine their flight paths among the trees and deduce the height and density of the trees surrounding you. It was in Australia that I wrote *A Reaction in Force* and it was written for the oboe, an instrument that played a strong part in shaping me as a musician.

Descriptions of compositions

A Reaction in Force was written with this illustration from Paul Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (page 37) in mind:



From this picture, I was interested in pin-points of sound and the reaction of forces bouncing towards and away from the viewer, from the one who hears.

The Clash of Icicles Against the Stars was written in collaboration with choreographer Pun Siu Fai, who approached me to create a 90-minute production for the Guangdong Modern Dance Company. *The*

Clash of Icicles Against the Stars was one of a number of pieces from that production. My main inspiration for *The Clash of Icicles against the Stars* was the Chinese concept of Qi, which means breath, air, or gas, and can be described as an energy-flow that provides the fundamental element of existence in life. The piece explores the various “air chambers” of the instruments within the piece: the accordion compresses and expands its air chamber to manufacture sound; the sheng, the oldest wind instrument in China and the ancestor of the accordion, uses reed vibration; the embouchure of the flute provides the basis for timbral experimentation.

As if stealthily climbing over each other, the instruments in *A Highwire Act* run a gauntlet of crossing and exploring the extreme regions of their strings. The piano, violin and cello generate sound by way of vibrating strings or vibrating wires (hence, the title of piece). Some of the musical lines in *A Highwire Act* effectively create “wires”, accompanying an instrument as it does its high wire act, while other lines pull and tug at the “wire” with the hope of destabilizing the balancing act.

Metaphors such as weights and “tugging and pulling” capture the essence of much of the musical motion operating in *A Highwire Act*. As I imagine it, moving along a high wire would generate its most tension at outer edges of the wire, the point that connects the wire to the vertical structural blocks. Where the tension is most exposed in this piece is in the very slow violin glissando that incrementally ascends. With the soaring of these fragile solo violin transitions, *A Highwire Act* reminds us of the beauty of being on the edge.

In the *Ground of Being*, the two flutes attempt to destabilize each other’s melodic cells. This is music that moves incrementally “sideways”, in that phrases oscillate between two notes, and the displacement of this frame, sends the motion forward. The oscillation-like movement establishes the ground before rising to the highest registral ethers. After the uplift, the sideways motion begins again, but the intervallic space between the flutes has increased. It is as though the experience of the uplift makes the ground deeper. The first two letters of the word “being”, i.e. B, E define the pitch frames of the oscillations that occur before the uplift.

For now we see through a glass darkly:
My interpretation of St. Paul’s statement in his letter to the Corinthians is that if a “glass darkly” is pierced, as dramatised in the beginning of *Through a Glass Darkly*, each individual, or in this case instrumentalist is required to confront the challenge of passing through a threshold, thus discovering how that both transforms them individually and the way they operate within a group. It is the accordion and its physical construction that shapes the drama of the piece. The stage choreography and the stark, forceful instrumental lines are designed in such a way that the clarinet and trumpet musically pierce through the box-like shape that is the accordion. Towards the end, trumpet and clarinet are both effectively absorbed by the accordion’s box as all instruments combine in pitch and timbre. This piece is a journey where three instruments shatter the glass darkly in order to bring about a unification of the trio. A special characteristic of the alto flute is its breathy sound, and with *Scratches of the Wind* one feature I am focusing on is the acoustic qualities of the sound of breath. The body of the flute acts to amplify breath inhalations so that

flute is always “performed” in this piece, regardless of whether a pitch is created. The title of this piece is taken from a line of Henri Michaux’s *Darkness Moves*.



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Nirmali Fenn

Curving back within myself,
I create again and again

*Anonymous,
The Bhagavad Gita*

Until the age of five, I was in an orphanage in Colombo, Sri Lanka. My mother had come from the class of the “untouchables” and, after my businessman father had left her unmarried with child, she approached the Catholic order of the Good Shepherd who, not fazed by the caste system, took me in. In those orphanage days, my character was left extremely withdrawn – I curved back within myself.

I saw my mother twice over 5 years – once to receive a gift of bananas through the orphanage gates, and the other during the

court case attended by my adoptive Australian parents. There, the judge asked me to stand by my mother, and I chose the Australian one. In 1990, I returned to visit Sri Lanka. At the time, Sri Lanka’s civil war was at its fiercest, but my parents wanted me to connect to a culture from which I had been dislocated. My adoptive parents never acknowledged our striking difference in appearance, and they instilled within me the belief that I belonged to a family, whose surname of Fenn harked back to the fens in England. Growing up in Sydney’s leafy southern suburbs, I was quite often the only dark skinned child throughout my school years. This lack of diversity did not mean that Australian society had a well-formed sense of an identity. For, without an unbroken current of tradition, there was no way to define whether you were inside or outside a culture in Australia. Self-definition could be constructed through being receptive to a multitude of cultures – you could have a sense of belonging, without roots. The Sri Lanka my parents took me too was not one I would have known from within the confines of the orphanage. I remember the first street experience I had with my

adoptive parents as a 5-year-old: cigarette butts, nails, any trinket-like discard was either sewn onto or attached to my dress – the street was a banquet of potentially precious curiosities. As an 11-year-old, I reeled from the stress and sensual overload of those same streets. I craved the plod of life in Sydney. Because of the war, we were not allowed to venture north. It was fine for my parents, but not for me – I was of both Tamil and Sinhalese descent. Never before – and since – has my movement been restricted due to racial lineage. It was a relief to have my Sri Lankan passport annulled. My family home was far from silent. Western classical music played from morning to night. This was because my father turned on the radio to accompany his breakfast, only turning it off when he returned home from work for the news on TV at 7pm. And, being a deep listener, one who was struck by every sound, I absorbed a gamut of music. Somewhat ironically, my first composition – a symphony – came to me at the age of 10 because I shut my bedroom door to seek solace away from the radio. My ears were ringing with sound – and I wrote that down.

My formal musical education was with the Australian composers Gordon Kerry and Brenton Broadstock at the universities of New South Wales and Melbourne respectively. Being in Melbourne meant being away from home. This feeling of exile triggered the impulse to leave Australia, to which I have never permanently returned. In 2006, I was awarded two scholarships to read a doctorate in music at Oxford University. My supervisor for the next 4 years was the British composer Robert Saxton, whom I revered. During that time, he was writing his opera *The Wandering Jew* – we both felt like exiles. Oxford was a place brimming with intellectual discovery and from there, I landed my first commissions at Royaumont in Paris and residencies as a composer for the Saxophone Habanera Festival in Poitiers and the Lakes District Summer Music Festival. The French newspaper *Le Monde* reviewed my songs on madness as “standing out in the genre of ‘songs’ of today”. My pieces were also performed by the Arditti Quartet, Ensemble Cairn, Ensemble Linea and I was further mentored by Wolfgang Rihm and Brian Ferneyhough. One of the pieces on this CD, *The Clash of Icicles Against the Stars*,

had been a selected finalist for the APRA Professional Development Awards (2013); another, *A Highwire Act* was highly commended for the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition; *Through a Glass Darkly* received the second prize at the 26th Concorso Internazionale di Composizione, Italy and *Scratches of the Wind* was the prize-winner for La Società Italiana di Musica Contemporanea Concorso. Since leaving Australia in 2006, I have been an island hopper. After the UK, I have been a member of music faculties at the University of Hong Kong (2010–13), New York University (2013–14), University of New South Wales (2015) and Yale-NUS College, Singapore (2015–2019). Each island I live on provides an opportunity to realign myself to new cultures, and create new understandings of the world and of human experience.

In returning to Asia, I felt as though I was seemingly edging towards Sri Lanka – curving back, but with twists. In Hong Kong, I became steeped in Chinese Daoist philosophy, writing the 5-elements into a dance piece for Daniel Leung from the City Contemporary Dance Company. The *I-Ching*

was the focus of a dance-theatre collaboration with veteran choreographer, Pun Siu Fai. Our production *Duchamp and the I-Ching* opened the 9th Guangdong Dance Festival in Guangzhou, China. Through both projects, I struck up a close relationship with the Hong Kong New Music Ensemble who have premiered many of my works – they also performed *Through a Glass Darkly*, which can be found on this CD. In Singapore, where a harmonious diversity exists between Western, Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures, I have currently been discovering ways to synthesise Hindustani classical music in my own. This musical development was explored in a Composer Portrait of my music at Die Akademie für Tonkunst, Darmstadt, and in a politically charged vocal piece *Pokój w Pokoju* performed at Kirche am Steinhof in Vienna.

I hear the embodiment of the wanderer resounding in my musical language. Each “end” of a piece only brings forth the beginning of a new one.

www.nirmalifenn.com

Hong Kong New Music Ensemble

Founded in 2008, the Hong Kong New Music Ensemble (HKNME) is hailed as “one of Hong Kong’s most progressive groups of musicians” (CNN). Widely praised for its innovative programming, the Ensemble’s productions include concerts, educational outreach events, and interdisciplinary collaborations and research projects with artists from different artistic fields. The HKNME currently consists of twelve core members and several ensemble associates who perform in versatile combinations in a variety of settings. Over the years, the HKNME has performed masterpieces of the contemporary repertoire as well as numerous premières by composers from Hong Kong and overseas, including many commissioned by the HKNME itself. The HKNME has been featured in prominent showcases for the New Vision Arts Festival (2010, 2014, 2016), Tongyeong International Music Festival/ ISCM (Korea, 2016), Freespace Fest (2014), Le French May (2014, 2015), Macao Arts Festival (2016),

Macao International Music Festival (2010), ECHOFLUXX Festival of New Media, Art and Music (Czech Republic, 2016), Maerz Musik (Germany, 2011), MONA FOMA (Australia, 2011) and Hong Kong Arts Festival (2014, 2015, 2017). The Ensemble has collaborated with renowned organisations such as Zuni Icosahedron, the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, Guangdong Modern Dance. Company and Alice Theatre Laboratory. The HKNME has also been invited to organise events in partnership with the Hong Kong Arts Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, Spring Workshop, Asia Society Hong Kong Center and the Goethe Institute Hongkong. A regular collaborator with music departments of all tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, the HKNME has been Resident Company at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (2013 to 2015). The HKNME has been annually funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council since 2012, and twice received project grants from the Arts Capacity. Development Funding Scheme of the HKSAR Government to present The Modern Academy.

www.hongkongnewmusic.org

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