

This century is still young, too young, perhaps, to proclaim any performance as among its defining symphonic works. Based on the artistic trajectory of the previous millennium, however, it should be seen not as enigma, but as prerequisite that that set of exemplary works should include some authored by musicians firmly anchored in the language and sensibilities of jazz. Similarly, the new symphony must be able to play at the boundary between formal notation and other ways of “writing music” in a way that opens the communicative potential of the ensemble to a real time flux. In *Symphony of Souls*, Jason Kao Hwang (as composer and soloist) and the Spontaneous River ensemble have come together as a community of spirit to instigate just such a musical work.

Spontaneous River grew out of an all-strings orchestra assembled in 2007 by Hwang and Patricia Parker to perform a memorial tribute to violinist Leroy Jenkins who died in February of that year. Seeking 50 strings to perform Jenkins’ *New York Ballad*, Jason was overwhelmed by the response to his call. “I had emailed about 20 string players I knew, and the outreach went a little viral. I had over sixty responses, which because of schedule, became an orchestra of around 40.” After a successful performance of Jenkins’ work conducted by Billy Bang at Vision Festival XII, Jason put his own composition – an early version of this symphony – in the hands of the orchestra along with an idiomatic methodology for conducting the work that allows for real time arrangement and the fluid integration of composed and improvised components.

First performed in July, 2008 at the Living Theater where the ensemble was first billed as Spontaneous River, the score and Jason’s strategy for conducting it went through a series of refinements and revisions over the course of four subsequent performances presented by Deanna Relyea/Edgefest, Manhattan New Music Projects/Darmstadt, the Vision Festival and Project Reach. Jason’s role as band leader was informed by his previous work in large groupings going back to the 1980s when he was a part of Dr. Makanda McIntyre’s CAAMO (Contemporary African American Music Organization) and Henry Threadgill’s Society Situation Dance Band (where he played violin alongside Leroy Jenkins and Charles Burnham). “Both Henry and Makanda treated the scores as set structures with conducting establishing the feel and duration of improvisations.” Also in the ‘80s, Jason began working with Lawrence D. “Butch” Morris. “For most of these concerts, we had no written music, as Butch over the years developed a tightly controlled conducting language to create spontaneous collage.” More recently, Jason has played with big bands headed by Steve Swell, Adam Rudolph, Anthony Braxton, Sabir Mateen, Ras Moshe, and William Parker. “Adam conducts various written cues, some inspired by Yusef Lateef’s harmonic grids and different ‘world’ grooves, to frame improvisations within an improvised structure. Steve, Sabir, and Ras create improvised arrangements, designating solos, duos, and trios to facilitate energy flow. Anthony employs hand signals and icons to shift the music into different logical systems while William also conducts with his hands, but more often, from his bass. We can feel what to play from what his bass is telling us.”

The final version of *Symphony of Souls* (the one closest to this recording) was presented at the invitation of Fay Chiang of Project Reach, a youth crisis and advocacy center serving Manhattan’s Chinatown and Lower East Side. Jason agreed to teach

workshops for the center's kids in exchange for a date which featured Parker and her dancers. Inspired by descriptions of Sun Ra's lavish ontological carnivals, Jason remembers the concert as a "very wild night". The next day, April 24, 2010, Jason Hwang and Spontaneous River went into Brooklyn-based Systems II studio to record this album.

What can we expect of a symphony of souls? Jason named the work after hearing this recording. It does, in fact, live up to the promise of a musical interrogation of what ancient Jainists called *jiva* – the individual embodied soul. Fittingly, the work begins in the solitary grip of a sapiential (if brief) soliloquy. I have been privileged to hear Jason as an instrumentalist in a wide variety of settings across a dizzying topography of moods and colors and can say that this opening benediction is something quite different. These opening forty-five seconds of terse, insistent psychospiritual vivisection are a singular artistic offering from a gifted player and set a very high bar for the brilliant performances to follow.

The orchestra is then summoned to explore *soul* conceived as both a nexus of dialog and as the motive force compelling action and interaction. "I felt in the one unified sound, I could hear the voice of each soul," Jason recalls, "It was like the music was a whole tree, but you could hear each individual leaf in motion."

The propulsion that helps to make *Symphony of Souls* move is largely a contribution of Andrew Drury (drums) and Ken Filiano (bass) – the rhythm section from Jason's quartet Edge. "Both of them guided the orchestra with their deep understanding of my music. Beyond the specificity of the written cues, Andrew had the freedom to play or not play, his instincts contributing mightily to the tension and release of the music. With his bowed cymbals and extended technique, he could sing linear sounds with the strings, or shift to a percussive role, as he interacted with the improvisations." With a string section of some three dozen voices, Spontaneous River is top heavy in that timbral spectrum most associated with the Western orchestra and swings with a certain iconic authority. This is also the spectral range where the instruments most approximate human voice. Engineers Jon Rosenberg and Paul Zinman are to be credited with the complex microphone placements and precise mixing that allow this multi-layered texture to be heard as a breathing sonic plenum.

As a conductor, Jason works with a language of gestures designed to be clear, expedient, and immediately accessible. "The arrangement was improvised in real time," he explains, "however, I knew the journey we would take and organized the score progressively, with the ability to revive and re-contextualize earlier themes and motifs." *Ear 1*, for example, foregrounds a series of sustained intervallic steps heard in the fourth track and is cued by holding the left hand to the ear along with the index finger of the right hand. *Ear 5* is heard in the second track and features a line of dotted sixteenth notes. The movement through the material is deliberate and organic (which is not at all to say *deliberately organic*). Each player makes a contribution to the subtle exposition of Hwang's *jiva*-centric music. In the end, the listener is returned to the custody of Jason

as soloist whose receding coda lacks the tortured intensity of his opening salutation and suspends the journey of soul somewhere between isolation and communion.