

Gloria Cheng: The Edge of Light

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Gloria Cheng. Photo / Supplied

Gloria Cheng: *The Edge of Light* (Harmonia Mundi, through Ode Records)

I first reviewed American pianist Gloria Cheng in these pages more than a decade ago. The occasion was her second album, *Piano Dance*, an exhilaratingly eclectic collection of 20th century dances, running from Debussy's *Golliwog's Cakewalk* to tangos by Stravinsky and Samuel Barber.

Ten years on, her latest release, *The Edge of Light*, is a less extrovert affair, the bulk of it being a collection of dreamy *Nocturne*-like pieces by Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992).

Messiaen's eight *Preludes*, dating from 1928, look back to the world of Debussy, with fanciful titles like *A Reflection in the Wind*.

Cheng's sense of poetry is infallible, catching the dominant mood of introspection and, when the atmosphere ignites in the third piece (*The Light Number*), releasing a fiery virtuosity.

These two extremes find echoes in a couple of pieces by the contemporary Finnish composer, Kaija Saariaho. Subdued in dynamics, but not in spirit, the dense and sometimes foreboding textures of a 2006 *Prelude* mesmerise, broken only by Cheng's volatile keyboard eruptions.

An earlier *Ballade* from 2005, elegantly delivered, inevitably acknowledges Chopin in its chromatic sheen.

The Calder Quartet joins Cheng for two works, including a minor 1991 Messiaen Piece, a curiosity from the cutting-room floor.

Saariaho's 2003 *Je sens un deuxième cœur* is something else altogether. This is an emotionally and politically charged piano trio, tracking the narrative of her opera *Adriana Mater*.

This 2008 stage work explored the subject of physical and sexual violence in the sort of civil war zone that confronts us every evening on television news reports.

The urgency translates very well to a chamber music setting, most vividly in the fourth movement which portrays the rape of the protagonist with hard-edged musical rage. Cheng and her colleagues lead us, with the skill of stage performers, to this mighty storm and provide us with a moving and thought-provoking spiritual conciliation in the final movement. It is here that the significance of the work's title becomes apparent - *I feel a second heart beating next to mine*.

It is nothing short of scandalous that such a major composer remains unrepresented in our concert programmes. And so recorded performances such as this are an invaluable connection to the very life force of today's music.

Verdict: "American pianist reflects on the light and dark of French culture."

Stars: 5/5