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Su Lian TAN *Jamaica's Songs*.^{1,2,3,4} *U-Don Rock*.⁴ *River of the Trunk*.^{2,3,5,6} • ¹Brenda Patterson (mez); ²David Bowlin (vn); ³Darrett Atkins (vc); ⁴Donald Berman (pn); ⁵Szilvia Schranz (sop); ⁶Margo Garrett (pn); • ARSIS 9317 (63:12 )

The young Malaysian composer Su Lian Tan is new to me. Far more than just a composer, but also flutist, conductor, and teacher, this complete musician has written for the Takács Quartet and the New Juilliard Ensemble. Although her *Moo Shu Rap* has been previously recorded, this album appears to be the first disc entirely devoted to Tan's compositions. I like the symmetry of this album, with two read-out texts and Tan's setting bookending a short piano work. More than just a gathering of recent compositions, this feels like a thought-through, hour-long recital.

We start with *Jamaica's Songs*, Jamaica Kincaid's heartfelt poem about her recently deceased mother. It is not especially well read by the author, but it makes a startling comparison to the various musical solutions Tan has brought to adapting this emotionally complex text. Set for mezzo-soprano and piano trio, this eight-part song cycle makes the most of Kincaid's motifs and startling imagery, such as the mother's body lying on the caretaker's aluminium tray, or the corpse becoming part of the earth again. Although the trio writing is edgy and tonally complex, the vocal writing is essentially lyrical, excluding the effective use of whispering and *sprechgesang* in the literally adapted "Whisper" section.

The "Lullaby" movement starts with a frenzied violin squeak, a motif that then interrupts the melodic lines, as each nightmarish image of the mother occurs in her dreams. The sense of fear in the voice, and the dark, broken accompaniment create a chilling anti-lullaby of grief. The final section is a touching celebration of the mother's life, a sea that is now calm. Here Tan's music cleverly becomes resolved and more forward-looking, the consolidation of grief. It is very well-written for the mezzo voice, and Tan has found an ideal performer in Brenda Patterson. Her light, warm mezzo is used imaginatively, and her diction is good, not relying on vocal beauty

alone, as befits the text's sudden emotional leaps.

Written for Donald Berman, the jokey piano work *U-Don Rock* gives him the freedom to improvise, alongside Tan's influences of Ives and Scriabin as well as various pop rhythms. There is maybe too much crammed into the 10-minute piece. Sudden bursts of atonality jostle with the sardonic jazzy feel. Gamely played, it is a knowing, bustling, anarchic work of fun.

Again rather cautiously read out by the author, John Elder's *River of the Trunk* inspires Tan to her most innovative and unsettling. Adapting a text of changing seasons and natural forces, the same combination of voice and trio is here a lot more raw and uncomfortable. The high soprano writing and sparing, percussive use of piano creates an edgier sound world, depicting Elder's bare, snowy landscapes, even if some calm is found in the flowing second movement, with the hopeful glimpses of spring in the finale. Ultimately, though, it is a work of grey and white landscapes, beautiful but dangerous, and well sung by the engaging, text-aware Szilvia Schranz.

Documentation is extensive and sound is open and clear, even if the piano sounds a little submerged. These are refined, cultured compositions, with performances to match. Rewarding to everyone, and certainly worth a detour for a singer desperate to find something different to put in a song recital. **Barnaby Rayfield**

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