

NEW FOCUS RECORDINGS

These five works for string quartet by **Lei Liang** draw on some of his longest standing sources of inspiration, highlighting the depth of his connection to diverse musical traditions. Featuring several of today's most critically acclaimed string quartets (**Brentano**, **JACK**, **Mivos**, and **Formosa**), the collection is a wonderful opportunity to hear Liang's aesthetic versatility in music for an iconic instrumentation, as well as his reverence for the music cultures which have significant meaning to him.

Track List

1. Claudio Monteverdi, arr. Lei Liang: **Lamento della ninfa** 6:04
Brentano Quartet
2. **Gobi Gloria** 11:07
JACK Quartet
3. **Song Recollections** 22:18
Formosa Quartet
4. **Serashi Fragments** 7:09
Mivos Quartet
5. **Madrigal Mongolia** 18:42
Brentano Quartet

Total Time: 65:20

Program Notes

This collection of string quartets by Lei Liang provides a window into some of his most meaningful sources of inspiration, with a special focus on Mongolian traditional music which has captivated Liang's imagination for many years. The album is also an opportunity to hear Lei Liang realize his aesthetic goals using an instrumentation that has brought out the best of so many composers since its codification in the 18th century. Lei Liang's breadth of musical curiosity and openness is matched by his depth of investment in immersing himself in the traditions from which he draws, an involvement that grows from a study and personal connection alike.

The album opens with an elegant setting of Monteverdi's **Lamento della ninfa**, a madrigal which is set as a dialogue between a lamenting nymph and three sympathetic male voice parts. Lei Liang revels in Monteverdi's voice leading and changes of pace in the opening section, taking advantage of the Brentano Quartet's impeccable ensemble playing, as the group breathes as one. Cello pizzicato supports the solo violin line (a stand-in for the nymph) in a lilting Chaconne progression, while other voices enter with embellished imitation and poignant suspensions.

Lei Liang: String Quartets: Live

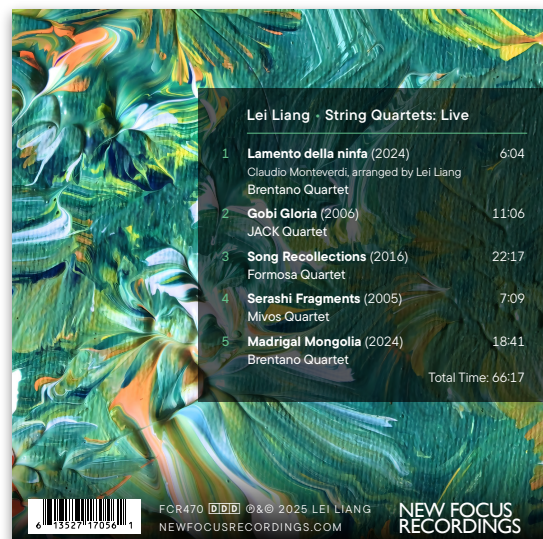
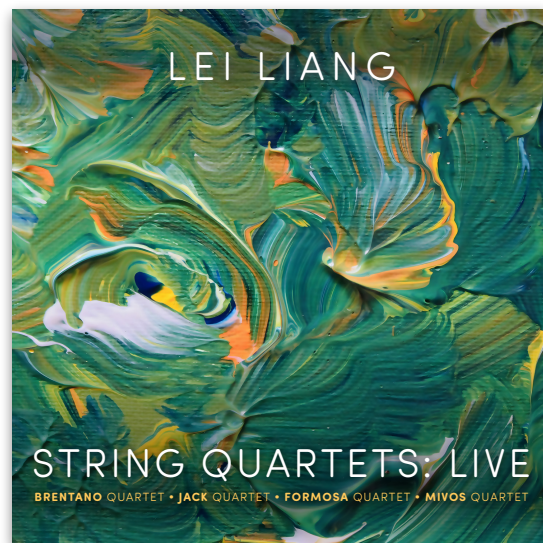
Five works for string quartet by composer Lei Liang

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Gobi Gloria, performed by the JACK Quartet, is the first of three works on this recording that is inspired by Mongolian music. One of Lei Liang's priorities in his adaptations of folkloric material is a diligent understanding of stylistic subtleties, arrived through exhaustive study. We can hear this reverential approach in the detailed ornamentation and embellishment in *Gobi Gloria*. Lei's treatment of a primary melody utilizes contrapuntal techniques that would have been familiar to Monteverdi (or at least certainly Bach, Schoenberg, and Babbitt!), subjecting it to inversion, retrograde, and retrograde-inversion treatment. Glissandi, trills, timbral shifts, and sweeps of harmonics color the evocative texture. At the work's first climax, waves of sound cascade and crest, coalescing into a cathartic dance, while a culminating subsequent peak ushers in the work's close joyfully, with jaunty rhythms in the high strings and spiky accented pizzicati in the low strings, setting a melody from the Nei Monggol region as a kind of cantus firmus.

Lei Liang turns to the music of Taiwan's Aboriginal tribes for source material in ***Song Recollections***, performed by the Formosa Quartet. He draws on several songs from this tradition in the work, treating each like its own landscape through which the listener travels. This approach highlights Liang's vibrant vocabulary of colors in his string writing; we hear grainy ponticello timbres, circular and ricochet bowing, percolating pizzicati leading into evocative slides, delicate tremolo articulations, and halos of ensemble harmonics. The quartet plays staggered pizzicati, its sonic drops fusing together to become a midday rain shower; rich, vibrato-laden lines intertwine to sound an expansive anthem. Expressive microtonality shades the harmonic and melodic content within a hazy, amorphous frame in select sections, while elsewhere, broad pentatonic harmony is a counterpoint, providing the basis for energetic timbral and motivic development.

Serashi Fragments is a tribute to Serashi, a 20th century performer on the Mongolian two-string fiddle called the chor. Liang is careful in his program note to write that the work is not an imitation of Serashi's playing style, or the music of Mongolia. Instead it represents an abstract impression Serashi has made on Liang, and is the most experimental music on the album. The work opens with a dialogue between brazen, accented chords and fragile gestures emerging from a charged silence. A dense texture follows, with furious double stops supporting accumulating tremolandi and glissandi. The negative space in the work is full of potential energy, set up by dramatic truncated phrases. The overall character of *Serashi Fragments* is one of pent-up intensity, released in short, explosive bursts in quiet and loud passages

alike, save for the ending, which diffuses that energy in a squirrely ascending passage.

In contrast, the material in and spirit of ***Madrigal Mongolia*** is very intentionally grounded in the music of Inner Mongolia. Lei Liang cites a friend of his family in childhood and Mongolian scholar, Wulaji, as the source of his lifelong love for this musical tradition, as well as the enduring influence of Professor Chou Wen-chung. The music reflects Liang's abiding love for this tradition, as the piece opens with a meditative series of homophonic chords that swell and recede like inhalations and exhalations. A rich melody in the cello is accompanied first by light pizzicati in the ensemble and later by soaring sustains in the high strings. A contrasting section of fleet, bracing chromatic passagework and angular accents follows. Beginning at 9:58, once again we hear Liang's sensitivity to stylistic elements in a powerful passage that highlights subtle embellishments and ornamentation, adapting the string instruments to inflections of traditional vocal singing. The work closes as it began, with a resonant chorale in the quartet, an homage to the resilience and timelessness of an ancient culture.

Bio

Lei Liang is the winner of the Rome Prize, the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Koussevitzky Foundation Commission, a Creative Capital Award, and the Goddard Lieberman Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His concerto *Xiaoxiang* for saxophone and orchestra was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2015. His orchestral work, *A Thousand Mountains, A Million Streams*, won the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition in 2021.

Lei Liang was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, the Fromm Music Foundation, Meet the Composer, Chamber Music America, among others. Lei Liang's sixteen portrait albums are released on prestigious labels. He authored and edited ten books and published more than sixty articles. As a musicologist, Lei Liang leads projects that help preserve the music of the Mongolian choir (two-stringed fiddle) and uttin duur (long song), the Qing dynasty literati sanxian (three-stringed plucked instrument), and Peking Opera.

He is Chancellor's Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego. His catalogue of more than a hundred works is published exclusively by Schott Music Corporation (New York).