CD Review

Narongrit Dhammabutra: Quintet for the Spirits of ASEAN

Kjell Skyllstad[+] Editor in Chief

Could you ever imagine a European composer setting himself the task of composing a chamber music work to honor the EU, building on the music traditions of all EU nations? Is there in fact a common musical theme that could catch the spirit that inspired those courageous statesmen in 1961 to overcome national differences in seeking a new common future for the nations of wartorn Europe. The Council of Europe thought they had found one in the mighty Finale of Beethoven´s *Ninth symphony* and two hundred years after Friedrich Schiller in 1785 wrote the *Ode of Joy* celebrating the brotherhood of man, the EU heads of states and government adopted as their common official anthem this unique fusion of text and music as a celebration of their unity in diversity and the values they share

Catching the spirit of a regional union of nations through composing a musical dialogue built on cultural traditions of its member states has up until now been seen as an impossible task. Sensing in the first round the need for an anthem that would reflect ASEAN dignity, cooperation and solidarity and the diverse cultures and ethnicities of its member states the ASEAN announced a competition to select a new anthem. On Nov. 20, 2008 the song *The ASEAN way* with lyrics by Payom Valaiphatchra and music by Kittihun Sodprasert and Sampow Triudorn was selected among 99 finalists from all 10 ASEAN countries;

[+] Kjell Skyllstad, University of Oslo, Department of Musicology, Norway. email: kmskylls@yahoo.com.

Raise our flag high, sky high
Embrace the pride in our heart
ASEAN we are bonded as one
Lost – in out-ward to the world
For peace, our goal form the very start
And prosperity to last

We dare to dream, we care to start
Together for ASEAN
We dare to dream,
We care to share for it´s the way of ASEAN

It may be that it was just the call from the ASEAN leadership to express the diverse cultures and ethnicities of it member states in music that motivated the leading Thai composer Narongrit Dhamabutra to venture into his most ambitious undertaking, composing his Quintet for the Spirits of ASEAN.

I set out to listen to this fascinating work in the same way that I a decade ago approached the East-West musical fusion introduced by Eugene Cinda Grassi (1881-1941) composing in the times of King Chulalongkorn V. Here I encountered a composer trained in Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century determined to create his own style independent of the orientalist vogue and taste of his times, lifting the compositional technique to serve a new level of embarking with the listener on a journey of cultural discovery.

It is this way of up-lifting the listener into a shared spiritual landscape that directs the listening to Dhamabutra´s Quintet even without any previous contact with or knowledge of South East Asian culture or his other works.
Each one of the 12 movements while representing a unique contribution to a transposition of a specific culture by means of the musical resources of the string quintet, inviting the listener to dream and share as asked for by the ASEAN anthem, in its own right also becomes a valuable contribution to the expansion of the expressive means of contemporary musical idioms.

The Prelude introducing the unanimous voice of an ASEAN theme immediately engages through a lyric outpouring associated with the hymn like nature of other works like the *Bhumipol Adulayadej Maharaja Symphony* or *the Choral Symphony Piyasayamintra*.

The following 11 movements: *The Chant of Rattanatri, Lam Sipandon, Gala,Gajal Lesung, Kakula, Kyo, Borobodur, Inle Lake ,The Gong Ensemble by Hmong,* and *Postlude,* each in its own right all draw their inspiration from specific cultural resources of ASEAN member states. Together they constitute a remarkable opening of the hidden treasure chest of the cultures of ASEAN nations. All in all the *Quintet for the Spirits of ASEAN* is no doubt one of the most remarkable artistic works of our century by one of its most innovative composers.