

Superstitions, Specters and Spirits

Some are light-hearted and fun-loving, others severe and deathly serious. They can be ignored, relied upon, laughed at or leaned into. We can choose to allow them to guide our decisions, or simply shrug at them before moving on. Their personalities can terrify or inspire, and in some cases, both. All are at the heart of the directions and vibrations of the music found on this double album.

Superstitions...

The ancient Far East game mahjong and, more specifically, its guiding mystical aspects, feature prominently in the writing of the six-movement suite *Invisible Guests*. As a child I went to large Filipino community gatherings where the sounds of the tiles crashing together created the backdrop for our hide-and-seek adventures, baseball, and video games. We children never gave it a second thought, but the elderly people came to *play*... and for serious money. In fact, mahjong has a seemingly endless number of house rules and variations, almost all serving to increase the pot, making winnings bigger and losses steeper. Eventually, I learned how to play and encountered the forceful superstitions driving the game—the winds colliding from all directions, battling each other, while the fleeting gestures of luck and loss intertwine. More than the actual game itself, the tales of dragons snatching away a win, flowers earning you riches or birds eating cake captured my fancy.

Invisible Guests not only reflects the nature of chance and kismet, but also captures the personalities of the players and their shifting strategies. In preparation for writing the suite, I made a video recording of an actual game of mahjong which I played with my family. Then, while writing, I paid special attention to surprising turns, unexpected moves, and when specific tiles were drawn or thrown. Certain themes in the suite represent musical depictions of completed hands; others are reappearing leitmotifs which describe the apparitions of fate and blessings which conspicuously changed the direction of the game. The four competitors are represented by the string quartet. These rivals make niceties until the piano—embodying the veiled visitors Luck and Ill Will—announces itself boldly near the end of the first movement. It twists, turns and whirls through the players' moves, sometimes helping but more often hindering them. The game I played ended in one of the most dramatic ways possible, with the victor (who happened to sit in the West Wind position) using the very last discarded tile before a stalemate. *Catching the Fish from the Bottom of the River*, as this win is called, earns top dollar for its rarity, and draws shaking heads, if not curses, from all competitors. The titles for all the movements in the suite evoke the traditional superstitious concepts of karma and virtue so vital to winning.

Of course, you can ignore what I've written above and listen to *Invisible Guests* without the contextual clothing. The members of Mivos and Matt Mitchell—all of whom I'm proud to call colleagues and friends—brought levity to the animated moments and gravity to the improvisational sections. The latter occur when competitors and swirling fortunes meet at critical junctures, and reveal their fighting spirits. These territories are granted by a power even further off and higher up: the ultimate director of fortune. That director is the first thing you hear and the last thing in existence when every other voice fades away: the soprano saxophone.

I had already started the process of integrating my solo soprano saxophone language into a larger ensemble context when I wrote *Vignette for Mouthpieceless Soprano Saxophone and String Quartet*. Pitting the provocative vocabulary from *Inaction is an Action* (2015, Irabagast 005) against the rich sonorities of a string quartet seemed to be the perfect primer for *Invisible Guests*. We recorded *Vignette* twice: the first time as originally intended (with no mouthpiece) and the second with the soprano fully intact and in full improvisational mode. The results are completely different emotionally and philosophically, so I decided to bookend the *Invisible Guests* suite with this strangely asymmetric pair of works. The soprano has its say as overseer, beyond divine will and the four human adversaries.

Specters...

I visited Oslo for the first time a decade ago, around the time I started laying the initial groundwork for recording a solo saxophone record. I came across the tale of the famous Vigeland Brothers, two artists in stiff competition with each other. Gustav, the older of the two (1869-1943), was a sculptor who achieved international fame with his more than two-hundred obsessive and monumental sculptures in Oslo's Frogner Park, likely the world's largest single-artist sculpture installation. He also designed the Nobel Peace Prize medal, further cementing his legacy as a national hero. His brother Emanuel (1875-1948), seven years his junior and primarily a painter, competed for attention and needed to: he was never, and is still not, as well-known. Oddly, Emanuel's last work became simultaneously magnum opus and *coup de grace*: a grand mausoleum whose walls and ceiling are covered by an enormous fresco with harrowing scenes of life, love and death and a floor displaying sculptures of women giving birth. When you enter the Tomba Emmanuelle, a low door gives way to windowless darkness. As your eyes adjust, the fresco appears: ghostly shadows, infants atop human skulls, half-buried women, a dead couple copulating as a pillar of smoke and children grow from their backs, apparitions, haunting wraiths. Creation! Death! Christianity! The artist's original intention was for this large space to display many of his paintings and sculptures—a kind of personal museum and final "statement"—but as time went on, he realized that this building would best serve not just as a resting place for his artworks, but for *him*. The original windows were permanently closed and filled in with granite, while the fresco was coated with several layers of wax, which made the concrete walls impenetrable. The awe-inspiring sonic result: a pervasive and fascinating thirteen-second reverb, with the echo maxing out at over eighteen seconds at lower frequencies. And, as a morbid kicker, the artist instructed that an ovary-shaped stone urn containing his ashes rest right above that tiny entry door, so as you exit, you have no choice but bow to him. Emanuel Vigeland thus wins the war against his brother.

Spirits...

Several weeks before I began work on *Inaction is an Action*, I had the rare and intriguing opportunity to play Eric Dolphy's Selmer Super Balanced Action alto saxophone. I don't normally play anything like Dolphy, but there was something in that horn that contorted my lines into jagged phrases and wide-intervalled altissimo leaps. Is Dolphy's spirit still in that horn, or did that horn's personality create that signature sound? Or some combination of both? This has been a topic of lively discussion among my musician pals, with some scoffing at the mysticism and some drawn to the notion of a horn's "soul." In recording *Inaction is an Action*, I came to realize that my soprano saxophone actively directed me to areas that my alto or tenor had never explored. Sneaking suspicion turned into certainty: each of these instruments have their own spirits that power them. Each has *volition* and my job as a musician is to discover their directions, respect them, and meld them into my own visions of music. The Dolphy alto and the soprano experience made manifest this idea, and explained why my trajectory with each horn was increasingly diverging. The extended techniques I discovered using the soprano were added to the other saxophones *ex post facto* and in a hurry, but I never would have even found those zones without the soprano; and I learned, gladly, that other horns sometimes fight back against foreign approaches.

The obvious next step was to discover what new paths might open when adding yet another horn to my practice. Around that time, by happy accident, I came across a mezzo soprano saxophone in F, an ill-fated, short-run instrument that the Conn company released in the late 1920s, just on the verge of the Great Depression. Add in the fact that there was absolutely zero repertoire for the horn, and its fate was sealed. The Conn house repairmen used almost all of the unbought mezzos as horns on which to hone their craft, effectively destroying them. However, several dozen mezzo-soprano saxophones did survive, and when I obtained one, my first objective was to discover its personality, and then to merge it with mine. After years of continuous conversation, I now know that this mezzo-soprano saxophone is a more melodic, less rambunctious instrument than the soprano. The mischievous mouthpieceless extended techniques I utilize in *Vignette* just don't resonate with the mezzo's personality. Instead, she's a stately spirit, carrying a sense of wonder, awe and continuous beauty. Overall, she's attached to more subtle, hushed and peaceful sounds, but in recording *Dark Horizon* I realized her independence: interacting with the seemingly never-ending reverb of the Tomba Emmanuelle, she found a partner to her own voice—choosing at times to work with it, at other times to fight against it, and at times to attempt to completely obliterate it. She's a fascinating, independent sprite and I love her for it. Recording her bright-eyed spirit against the ruminating ghostly shadows throughout the crypt was exhilarating, exhausting and unnerving. I wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

Jon Irabagon, 3 March 2019