



Dim Sum
Min Xiao-Fen (Blue Pipa)
by Kurt Gottschalk

Pipa player Min Xiao-Fen has run parallel paths for over a decade since leaving her native China (where she was a well-regarded classical player) and relocating to San Francisco then New York and discovering the alternate trails of jazz and free improvisation along the way. She cut her avant teeth in a cold-call session with free improv granddaddy Derek Bailey in 1998 and has since worked with Wadada Leo Smith, Randy Weston and others, merging her traditional background with various strains of Western discoveries. Recordings under her own name have been few along the way, however, and her new album might be seen as a pinnacle thus far. Like the meal it's named for, Dim Sum serves up a variety of small pieces, which, taken together, make for a satisfying whole.

The album's 10 tracks draw heavily on her traditional musical upbringing while namechecking Miles Davis and John Cage and featuring a variety of voices - from a toy pipa and one run through amplification and distortion to the subtle underpinnings of the inventive percussionist Satoshi Takeishi. But never do her avant impulses get in the way of the purity of her music. Xiao-Fen is a virtuosic musician and a remarkable vocalist and any breaks with tradition here only serve her own artistic vision.

Xiao-Fen presented some of the pieces from the album, along with arrangements for her Blue Pipa Trio and some new material, in an afternoon concert at the Brooklyn Public Library last month. She played the dedications to Cage, "ABC (American Born Chinese)", making deft use of a guitar slide on her pipa, and Davis, the mood-swinging "Blue Pipa", as well as a wonderful arrangement of Monk's "Misterioso" during the unaccompanied first half. She also played what could be her keynote solo, "Tan Tan, Chang Chang" (also from the new record), where she found common ground between Chinese opera and folk and American bluegrass and blues.

The second half of the program featured Xiao-Fen's Blue Pipa Trio with guitarist Steve Salerno and bassist Dean Johnson. Xiao-Fen's full talents aren't as at the forefront as an ensemble player but the trio shows her in a jazzier mode and the three stringed instruments wove together wonderfully. Xiao-Fen's arrangements inventively interpolated Buck Clayton, Count Basie and George Gershwin with traditional Chinese songs and a lovely take on the Appalachian standard "Wildwood Flower". Salerno's big hollowbody had a lovely, rich tone and he's an exemplary accompanist while Johnson proved an unusually melodic bassist. The three gave full voice to what might be Xiao-Fen's mission - not to find a multilingual music but to craft a single cross-cultural language.

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