

# GRAMOPHONE

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## LIANG *A Thousand Mountains, a Million Streams*

Author: Guy Rickards



Lei Liang (*b*1972) was born in China then in the grip of the Cultural Revolution, but left to study in the US and has remained there ever since, taking citizenship in 2006. The alto saxophone concerto *Xiaoxiang* was composed shortly afterwards (2009, though based on an earlier piece for saxophone and electronics); it is given here in its 2014 revision. A concentrated (ten-and-a-half minute) concerto-cum-tone poem, its single span was derived from an incident in Xiaoxiang province during the Cultural Revolution when a widow haunted the official who murdered her husband by wailing in despair from the forest. Her cries suffuse the solo part but find echoes in the orchestral texture as well.

Liang thinks of himself as a painter in sound and refers to his use of a 'sonic brush'. His idiom is a fusion of Chinese and Western – if not exactly tonally based, still rooted in appealing euphony. This is most evident in the two companion (and longer) works. *Five Seasons* originated in 2010 as a quintet for pipa – the Chinese lute – and string quartet but the composer arranged its five movements ('Dew-Drop'; 'Water Play'; 'Cicada Chorus'; 'Leaves-Fall'; 'Drumming') for string orchestra in 2014. The concerto also nods in expression to the five elements – wood, fire, metal, water and earth – colouring the textures in each movement.

In *A Thousand Mountains, a Million Streams* (written in 2017 specifically for BMOP) Liang's tonal and textural palettes become ever more exquisite, ranging from sonorities at the edge of silence in 'Healing Rain Drops' to full-orchestral might describing the shredding of landscapes. Liang's Chinese-inflected sound world is never less than fascinating and always deeply involving. The BMOP navigate their way through his precisely calculated sonorities with aplomb and accuracy. The engineering copes with the extremes of the dynamic range superbly.