

*Luminous Spirals for Guitar, Cello, and Flute (1997) by Chinary Ung (1942- )*

**CHINARY UNG (1942- )**

“*Life is so delicate,*” says Ung, when describing the casual twists of fate that kept him in the United States in the late 1960’s and prevented him from returning to Cambodia and being caught in the crosshairs of the murderous Khmer Rouge. In A May 2011 interview with James Chute of the San Diego Union-Tribune, Ung details his education at the Manhattan School of Music through a grant program that obligated his return to his native country upon the completion of his degree. Close to his departure date, a change meeting in an elevator led to a scholarship at Columbia University, thus keeping him in the West. “*If I did not go (to that office), and I did not take that elevator at exactly the perfect time, I would have been sent back to Cambodia (permanently).*” With Pol Pot’s disdain for intellectuals, “*... I would be gone in no time at all,*” says Ung. His three brothers and one sister perished in the genocide.

His music is highly spiritual, otherworldly, drawing on a range of Eastern traditions and techniques. Of his pupils at the University of California at San Diego, he asks, “*Where is your heart? What are you doing? What is your message? Does it boost your ego only, or does your music communicate to people? Does it empower humanity? Or is it just a form of self-indulgence?*”

Ung studied composition with the Chinese-American composer Chou Wen-Chung at Columbia, where he earned a doctorate. In response to the horrors in Cambodia, he took a decade-long hiatus from almost all composing in 1974 and immersed himself in the fate of his homeland: artistically through work with native musicians, dancers and scholars in performance and recording projects, and humanely by aiding relatives and artists escaping the Khmer Rouge. He kept his two musical worlds separate, with his “serious” music rich in the post-serialist, experimental aesthetic learned at Columbia completely unmixed with his Cambodian folk heritage. Yet, *Khse Buon* for solo cello, written in 1980 in response to the genocidal killings, finally broke through that artificial boundary.

*Luminous Spirals* was written in 1997 during a period of prolific writing, and it draws upon the idea of a spiral – something that circles back but continues going – which inspires a number of his works: *Spiral II*, *Grand Spiral*, and *Antiphonal Spirals*.

**Program Notes by Kris Palmer, DMA**