

WALL STREET JOURNAL, 2011 (WSJ site [HERE](#))

A Singer's Arrival, in Her Own Words by LARRY BLUMENFELD, photo by ED KECK

"Lettered tiles crisscrossed the coffee table in singer Jen Shyu's Bronx apartment, remnants of an unfinished game of Bananagrams—a sped-up, free-form variant of Scrabble. How fitting. A playful yet rigorous approach to language animates her stirring music. Sounding fierce at times, ruminative at others, displaying tonal precision and an intuitive rhythmic sense, Ms. Shyu is among New York's most invigorating vocal presences. And perhaps the most enigmatic.

Part of the intrigue, especially through her highest-profile role, in alto saxophonist Steve Coleman's Five Elements band, is the question of language. "People always ask what I'm singing," she said. "The answer is a variety of languages, including ones from China, Taiwan and East Timor, which are points in my ancestry. When I'm improvising, I'm singing in all of them. Or none of them. I'm taking bits and pieces, making it sound like it could be a language."

Ms. Shyu's fluency in seven languages and several traditional musical styles is based on far-flung and deeply immersed study. (She leaves later this month for a year in Indonesia, her great-great-grandmother's birthplace, on a Fulbright Scholarship to study *sindhenan*, the traditional singing of Javanese gamelan music.) Her grasp of a language closer to home—modern jazz improvisation—has attracted attention within jazz's freest-thinking ranks. Her Jade Tongue ensemble features notable contemporaries such as bassist Thomas Morgan and trumpeter Shane Endsley. She is a featured vocalist on a recording of Anthony Braxton's opera "Trillium E," to be released next month. Her performance on Friday with bassist Mark Dresser at the Jazz Gallery in SoHo will mark the release of the duo's "Synastry" (Pi Recordings), a recording of wildly varied and distinctively moving duets.

For Mr. Dresser, who has pushed the expressive range of his instrument to extremes throughout his 30-year career, "what impressed me was the depth of her musicianship. Plus, she's fearless. She studies traditions and then does what she wants."

At the Stone in late August, performing solo, Ms. Shyu sang new compositions based on a three-month trip to East Timor, her mother's birthplace, and played a two-stringed instrument—a "moon lute," she called it—indigenous to her father's homeland, Taiwan. She sang lyrics, sometimes in English, on topics ranging from her nightly dreams to atrocities reported during East Timor's struggle for independence. Two nights earlier, at the University of the Streets, she performed "Raging Waters, Red Sands," a mostly through-composed suite that blended *shuo-chang*, an ancient Chinese narrative form, with a resolutely downtown Manhattan musical vernacular.

Long before Ms. Shyu, 33, absorbed those influences, her story began in Peoria, Ill. Her father, a mechanical engineer, and her mother, a librarian, met at graduate school in the U.S. Classical music, her father's passion, was Ms. Shyu's musical entry point, on piano and violin. She began singing Broadway showtunes, and ended up a classical-voice major at Stanford University. "I had no concept yet of improvisation," she said. Nor had she interest in the Xeroxed stack of Taiwanese folk songs passed on by an elder relative.

That changed after she encountered Francis Wong, a saxophonist influential in San

Francisco's "Asian Improv" scene. He persuaded her to embrace jazz and to pick up that stack of songs. "Francis showed me that there was something, musically, that could be related to jazz but also to my heritage," she said. "I didn't know what yet, but the door was open."

If Mr. Wong opened a door, Mr. Coleman pushed her through. At his insistence, she listened to Charlie Parker solos, sang Art Tatum's piano lines, sought out jazz elders such as Von Freeman. She also immersed herself in Mr. Coleman's music, a complex mixture of "drum chants" and harmonic patterns often based on esoteric influences.

"Steve challenged me to follow my heart," she said. By 2003, she'd quit her job and set off for Taiwan. After her return, she sang on Mr. Coleman's 2004 album, "Lucidarium." She's been a member of his group ever since. By 2005, she'd settled in New York.

Mr. Coleman recalled, "People used to ask why a singer was in the band. Nobody asks anymore. She's carved out her own space."

Surrounded by Western and Eastern instruments at her apartment, Ms. Shyu reflected on jazz scat-singing ("something I moved away from a long time ago," she said) and the idea of *xū zǐ*, a concept among indigenous Taiwanese musicians that translates roughly to "empty words"—words that no longer have literal meaning but are believed to hold the most potent feeling. As she finds a place of prominence within the landscape of cutting-edge jazz, hers is a personal search worth following. The libretto to one of her recent pieces quotes a Han Dynasty princess: "Where at the sky's edge is my native land?" -- **By LARRY BLUMENFELD, photo by ED KECK**

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