



Live at The Stone
NPO Trio (Chant)
Ima Ima (featuring Tom Harrell)
Meg Okura & The Pan Asian Chamber
Jazz Ensemble (New Music)
by Elliott Simon

On these two releases, violinist Meg Okura's classical virtuosity combines jazz, Jewish, and Japanese cultures into a distinctive transcendental musical identity. Similar to John Coltrane, her music is a theosophical tool to approach divinity. *Live at The Stone* is an improvisatory session with soprano saxophonist Sam Newsome and pianist Jean-Michel Pilc while *Ima Ima* is an insightful sketch of Okura's life as a mother within the context of her Pan Asian Chamber Jazz Ensemble featuring trumpeter Tom Harrell.

Live at The Stone contains a six-part reinterpretation of the Yiddish song "Oyfn Pripetchik". Okura and Newsome use their instruments' close timbre to discover the spiritual nature of the melody. On the surface, the tune describes teaching children the Hebrew alphabet but this is an allegory for creation and the subsequent struggles of the Jewish people. It is believed that Hebrew letters were the creator's building blocks, akin to elements on the periodic table. Okura and Newsome create their own world as they return to the original melody using notes as their bricks and Pilc's superb improvisations and supportive structures as their mortar. "Unkind Gestures" follows as a derivative of "Giant Steps", using Trane's notes as building blocks amid new changes, while session closer "Yiddish Mama No Tsuki" intertwines "My



Yiddische Momme" and "Kojo No Tsuke", an apt introduction to *Ima Ima*.

Released on Mother's Day, *Ima Ima* is Okura's personal journey as a Japanese woman into motherhood and Judaism. The music blends both cultures' musical forms into classically informed jazz compositions scored into magnificent concert-level pieces. *Ima* means "mother" in Hebrew and "now" in Japanese with the Hebrew letters (aleph/mem) representing strong water, referring to the glue that holds a family together. Okura is both the literal "Ima", self-reflecting through these sweeping compositions, and the figurative "Ima" holding them together.

The title track opens with wondrous naïveté as flutist Anne Drummond, harpist Riza Printup, Okura and Newsome combine for gorgeous voicings that evolve into a glorious celebration underscored by Newsome's touching solo. Other cuts present Okura's take on her life pre- and post-partum. "A Summer in Jerusalem" depicts a fictitious relationship between Jew and Arab with Middle-Eastern tinge from Okura and Sam Sadigursky's bass clarinet, Harrell's horn echoing the lovers' warm moments, while instrumental interchange and changing rhythms portray one aspect of the newborn experience, "A Night Insomnia". "Black Rain", "Birth of Shakyamuni" and "Tomiya" elegantly intertwine disparate Japanese themes such as Buddha's birth, the WWII Atomic horror and Taiko drumming into the group dynamic (the band is completed by bassist Pablo Aslan, drummer Jared Schonig and guitarist Rez Abbasi) while "Blues in Jade" presents as Okura's "Rhapsody in Blue".

For more information, visit chantrecords.com and newmusicusa.org. Okura's *Ima Ima* project is at Dizzy's Club Aug. 20th. See Calendar.