



Secret Treetop
Annie Chen Octet (Shanghai Audio & Video Ltd.Co.)
by Alex Henderson

Traditional Asian music has influenced a variety of jazz improvisers over the years and the folk traditions of China and neighboring countries are a prominent influence on Annie Chen's *Secret Treetop*, which underscores her talents as a vocalist, composer and bandleader. Chen was born in Beijing but has lived in New York City since 2013, where she leads the working group heard on this album—a cohesive ensemble of David Smith (trumpet and flugelhorn), Alex LoRe (alto saxophone and flute), Rafal Sarnecki (guitar and arrangements), Tomoko Omura (violin), Glenn Zaleski (piano), Matthew Muntz (bass) and Jerad Lippi (drums). Although Chen interprets a few traditional folk songs, her own compositions dominate. And she is as adept at writing lyrics as she is composing melodies.

Chen draws on traditional Chinese or Mongolian music with “Ao Bao Xiang Hui” (a well-known Mongolian standard) and “Majo Kiki in 12 Days” as well as “Gan Lan Shu” (a Taiwanese favorite), “Leaving Sonnet” and the title track. The modal improvisations on the hypnotic opener “Ozledim Seni” have a strong Middle Eastern/Arabic flavor, yet on “Mr. Wind-Up Bird, Strange Yearning”, she gets into some wordless scat vocals that bring to mind Brazilian jazz singers like Flora Purim and Ithamara Koorax.

Adding to the album's lack of predictability is Chen's ability to perform in different languages. Depending on the mood she is in, Chen can scat, sing in English or sing in Mandarin. Chen's use of the latter serves her well on “Gan Lan Shu”, but she is equally expressive performing original English lyrics on “My Ocean Is Blue in White”, “Orange Tears Lullaby”, the title track and “Majo Kiki in 12 Days”.

Chen has been an active performer in New York City for half a decade now. And as the memorable *Secret Treetop* demonstrates, she is a welcome addition to the city's jazz scene.

For more information, visit anniechenjazz.com. Chen is at Cornelia Street Underground Oct. 19th and Tomi Jazz Oct. 27th. See Calendar.