

ISAIAH Liner Notes by Meg Okura

Isaiah marks the twentieth anniversary of the Pan Asian Chamber Jazz Ensemble, my home for musical exploration — the one place I can be free. Free to express myself at a time when it can feel dangerous to be openly Jewish. This album is a musical memoir of my shifting identities. As an immigrant, a Jew by choice, in an interracial marriage, and as a musician moving from classical to jazz, I have often felt like an outsider. In composing, I found solace — a realm where I am not an outsider. Through PACJE, I have shaped a sound distinctly my own, not bound to a single style but defined by the freedom to move among them. Each piece reflects a facet of that journey.

The opening work, **Sushi Gadol** (סושי גדול, Big Sushi), is a tribute to my brother Yasushi (寧), once an amateur heavy-metal drummer and now a Protestant pastor in my hometown. His name means “peaceful,” yet the music bursts with explosive gestures and restless energy, establishing a spirit of defiance.

Blessing draws on the Before Haftarah Blessing. Having chanted it at my own adult bat mitzvah — and more recently hearing my daughter chant it at hers — I reimagine it here in multiple guises: first through orchestral textures, then as a jazz waltz.

The title track, **Isaiah**, follows — the actual Haftarah portion for Re’eh (Isaiah 54:11–17) from my bat mitzvah. Months of grueling study, learning Hebrew as an adult, and preparing the chant became more bearable when I accompanied myself at the piano. And voilà.

Rice Country, composed during a Copland House residency, reflects on the Japanese term for America, *Beikoku* (米国, “rice country”). A fragment of a 1970s Japanese pop song is reframed through the lens of Copland’s American idiom, embodying the complexities of immigrant identity and belonging.

African Morning Vignette leads seamlessly into **African Skies**, Michael Brecker’s iconic tune that defined so much of the 1990s for me. Performing in Brecker’s Quindectet with Gil Goldstein as MD was a dream realized, and one of my deepest inspirations as I grew into a jazz composer. This rendition is unmistakably my own, using my earlier work *Afrasia* (from *Naima*, 2010) as a springboard to fuse the two pieces. Featuring his brother, Randy Brecker, as guest soloist continues that lineage.

Sunset Bells offers a meditation on closure and transformation, ringing with both solitude and celebration, and fulfills a long-held wish of mine: to hear Randy Brecker’s solo on a sunset theme.

Jubberish, a commission from Chamber Music America’s New Jazz Works, takes its title from my daughter’s childhood invention — “Gibberish, but Jewish.” The melody imitates the style of Eastern European folk music, but it is entirely made up, with no ties to any real language or country — and thus, *Jubberish*.

The album concludes with **Will You Hear My Voice** (*Hatishma Koli* / *התשמע קולי*), a setting of a gentle, yearning poem by Rachel Bluwstein (1890, Saratov, Russia – 1931, Tel Aviv, Mandatory Palestine). The text has inspired many musical settings, but here I offer my own. I have sung this before, but here I chose to sing it through my violin. The poet writes of waiting “as Rachel waited for her beloved,” invoking the biblical matriarch — a resonance made more personal since my own Hebrew name is also Rachel. This album is both a reaching out and an affirmation. Will you hear my voice?

— Meg Okura