Interest in music with Asian influence has been increasing in the West. The music of Cambodian-born American composer Chinary Ung represents one of the more successful attempts to accomplish a musical integration of East and West. Having heard no Western classical music until his late teens, he was first attracted to nineteenth century romanticism and later developed this interest to embrace a wider spectrum of Western music. One of the first graduates from the École de Musique in Phnom Penh, he received a diploma in clarinet performance in 1963 before emigrating to the United States on an Asian Foundation scholarship where he subsequently completed his master's degree at the Manhattan School of Music in New York. There he met his future mentor, the Chinese-born Chou Wen-chung, and entered the doctoral program in composition at Columbia University where he graduated with distinction in 1974. Since then he has received numerous awards and grants, including the University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award for music composition. He continues to teach and to receive commissions for new compositions.

This study examines Ung's synthesis of Eastern and Western elements in his music. The introductory chapter sets forth the scope of the study, discusses the general characteristics of Ung's music, and reviews primary and secondary sources. Chapter one surveys Ung's life and gives an overview of his output. Chapter two is a study of two early works—Tall Wind and Khse Buon—that he wrote before he reached his mature compositional style. Chapter three treats the first of nine compositions that Ung composed using what he called a “spiral” concept. Chapter four discusses Rising Light, a work using multiple vocal and instrumental forces that embodies aspects of a major change of direction for the composer. The final chapter gives a summary of Ung’s musical style and career up to the present date.