

## **Margaret Leng Tan: Avant-garde artist and toy piano virtuoso**

By Stephanie Ho, written on 28 January 2014

*Singapore-born Margaret Leng Tan is an internationally acclaimed musician best known for her performance of avant-garde music and use of the toy piano. She delights in exploring and pushing the limits of the piano, and has made toy piano music a serious musical genre.*

Margaret Tan Hee Leng (now known as Margaret Leng Tan) was born in Singapore in 1945. Her father was prominent lawyer C. C. Tan and her mother, a piano teacher. Tan started lessons in classical piano from the age of 6 with Mrs Madeline Aitken and later, Mr Lee Kum Seng whom she found most inspiring.<sup>1</sup> A student of Raffles Girls' School, Tan's talent for music was evident from a young age. She won first prize in the junior, senior and open divisions of the Singapore annual music competition.<sup>2</sup>

At 16, Tan left Singapore for the Julliard School of Music in New York to do a bachelor's degree in music. Tan proved to be an outstanding student, constantly winning scholarships that enabled her to continue her studies.<sup>3</sup> After her bachelor's degree, Tan went on to pursue her masters, and eventually a doctorate, in musical arts. In 1971, Tan became the first Singaporean, and the first woman, to receive a doctorate from Julliard.<sup>4 5</sup>

After her studies, Tan embarked on a career as a concert pianist. She performed throughout the world, participated in musical festivals and recorded music for Radio France and Radio Television Belgium.<sup>6</sup> Despite her success, Tan felt limited by her classical musical repertoire. She said, "Playing the piano felt like being tucked away in an ivory tower...like I was not being of much use to the world".<sup>7</sup>

### **Avant-garde artist**

From the 1980s, Tan began to move away from her classical western repertoire to explore ethnic and contemporary music. She was interested in the influence of Asian music and philosophy on Western composers, in part because of the ethnic music she heard growing up in multiracial Singapore. She began exploring works by avant-garde composer John Cage and performed his prepared piano piece *Bacchanale* in 1981. She invited him to a performance and they began a friendship that lasted till the composer's death in 1992.<sup>8</sup>

Meeting Cage was a milestone for Tan. Tan described her life as consisting of two periods: B.C. and A.C. which refer to life "Before Cage" and "After Cage".<sup>9</sup> Tan said, "The man is really amazing. His writings have profoundly influenced my being, not only musically but as a way of life."<sup>10</sup> Cage was also enamored with Tan whom he

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<sup>1</sup> Prophet, but not in her own land. (1992, June 5). *Straits Times*.

<sup>2</sup> Singapore pianist Margaret gets doctorate in music. (1971, June 23). *Straits Times*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Back home and so busy planning for recital. (1966, June 28). *Straits Times*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Singapore pianist Margaret gets doctorate in music. (1971, June 23). *Straits Times*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret speaks of vicious circle in music. (1976, December 22). *Straits Times*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> A pianist who made history at Julliard. (1979, March 1). *Straits Times*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Chew, D. (2006, March 22). Serious toying around. *TODAY (Singapore)*.

<sup>8</sup> Kozinn, A. (2004, November 19). A performer drawn to the piano's wild side. *The New York Times*.

<sup>9</sup> Kozinn, A. (2004, November 19). A performer drawn to the piano's wild side. *The New York Times*.

<sup>10</sup> Kong, L. (1991, April 6). Re-inventing the piano. *Straits Times*.

called “an excellent musician, quite extraordinary, with an intensity of concentration and projection that reaches many people”.<sup>11</sup> He would later write work especially for her, and Tan became one of the leading interpreters of Cage’s work.

Performing Cage’s pieces opened Tan to a new sonic world and a different approach towards the piano. “The piano became my oyster once I opened up the lid!” she said.<sup>12</sup> Tan became known for her performances of Cage’s prepared piano pieces where the piano is modified with objects such as felt, nuts and bolts to change the quality of sound produced. Cage’s idea was to produce a percussion orchestra under the control of a single player.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the using the prepared piano, Tan is also a “string piano virtuoso” where the piano is used as a “horizontal harp” that can be plucked, picked, bowed and strummed while the keyboard is played.<sup>14</sup> She used this technique in performing George Crumb’s *Makrokosmos* which she also recorded on CD. With these pieces, Tan spent much time leaning into the piano to pluck and scrape the strings, sometimes with thimbles on her fingers, sometimes with a wire brush. In some of these pieces, Tan also had to sing and shout.<sup>15</sup>

Following John Cage, Tan believes that music is more than sound; it is living theatre.<sup>16</sup> Tan’s performances are a fusion of sound, dance, choreographed movement, gesture and theatre. When she is performing she is engaged in “pianistic choreography” which she described as follows. “My movements are highly choreographed. They are stylised to an extent, because that’s the only way I can coordinate all the various activities I do that combine working inside the piano with the keyboard. I have to sit down, I have to stand up. My gestures are much bolder and larger than if I were just sitting at the piano like a regular pianist.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to Cage, Tan also performs and promotes works by Asian composers such as Somei Satoh and Ge Gan-ru. She likes composers who push the boundaries and “who do not sound like anybody else”.<sup>18</sup>

### **Toy piano**

In 1993, Tan acquired her first toy piano for US\$45 in a thrift store in New York’s East Village. She was working on John Cage’s Toy Piano Suite for a memorial concert and needed one to use.<sup>19</sup> Since then, Tan fell in love with the sound of the instrument and took on the challenge of perfecting her technique on it. Tan said, “In the course of exploring the extended possibilities of the piano, I got more and more

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<sup>11</sup> Xu, W. (1989, February 26). ‘Dancing’ on air for art. *Straits Times*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Prophet, but not in her own land. (1992, June 5). *Straits Times*.

<sup>13</sup> John Cage Unbound. *Preparing the Piano for Bacchanale, with Margaret Leng Tan*. Retrieved from <http://vimeo.com/34911783>.

<sup>14</sup> Sasitharan, T. (1992, June 5). Breaking the barriers of music. *Straits Times*.

<sup>15</sup> Tommasini, A. (2004, November 24). When the keyboard is merely an option. *The New York Times*.

<sup>16</sup> Kong, L. (1991, April 6). Re-inventing the piano. *Straits Times*.

<sup>17</sup> Sasitharan, T. (1992, June 5). Breaking the barriers of music. *Straits Times*.

<sup>18</sup> Kong, L. (1991, April 6). Re-inventing the piano. *Straits Times*. *USA Today*.

<sup>19</sup> Tan S. E. (1998, July 29). In the brew is music from a teapot. *Straits Times*.

intrigued by taking the piano to its ultimate frontiers; into a whole other sonic universe – fell off the edge and landed on the toy piano”.<sup>20</sup>

In the following years, Tan devoted much time and effort in mastering the instrument. “I’m fascinated by the challenge of turning a plaything into an art instrument,” she said. “It challenges me to defy the boundaries and capabilities of a conventional instrument”.<sup>21</sup> In 1997, she released her first album of toy piano music and the toy piano music became part of her touring repertoire.

Although Tan thought that the popularity of the toy piano programmes would die out, she was surprised that composers kept writing to her about new pieces for the instrument. She said, “...there’s been tremendous demand. I think composers feel that with the toy piano, there are no rules to be broken, so the sky is the limit.”<sup>22</sup>

Tan has won many accolades throughout her career. She has been called the “diva of avant-garde pianism” and “sorceress of the new piano”. Her artistry and approach to music has been even been featured in a documentary by Hong Kong filmmaker Evans Chan. Beyond these, Tan finds satisfaction in providing entertainment for her audience. She said, “After performances, I look at the audience and they almost always have smiles on their faces. For me, it’s important that the audience has fun. For far too long, the classical music scene has been way too serious”.<sup>23</sup>

### Quote

*“I am fascinated by music that breaks new ground, that pushes the piano to the ultimate limits. When I play, I want it to be so immediate that nothing else exists for an audience. I want them to live this particular piece of music while it is happening as if it is the only piece of music in the entire universe.”*<sup>24</sup>

### Albums

- 1988 Litanian – Margaret Leng Tan plays Somei Satoh
- 1988 Sonic encounters – The new piano
- 1990 Cage The Perilous night, Four walls
- 1994 Cage Daughters of the Lonesome Isle
- 1995 Milos Raickovich New Classicism
- 1997 The art of the toy piano
- 2000 Cage The seasons
- 2002 Cage The works for Piano 4
- 2004 Crumb Makrokosmos I and II
- 2005 Ge Gan-ru Chinese Rhapsody
- 2006 Cage The works for Piano 7
- 2007 Ge Gan-ru Lost style
- 2010 She herself alone: The art of the toy piano 2

### Film

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<sup>20</sup> Singaporean carves niche as the world’s only professional player of toy piano. (2003, October 2). *Channel NewsAsia*.

<sup>21</sup> Hainer, C. (1997, May 28). Tan turns the toy piano into avant-garde art. *USA Today*.

<sup>22</sup> Kozinn, A. (2004, November 19). A performer drawn to the piano’s wild side. *The New York Times*.

<sup>23</sup> Chew, D. (2006, March 22). Serious toying around. *TODAY (Singapore)*.

<sup>24</sup> Sasitharan, T. (1992, June 5). Breaking the barriers of music. *Straits Times*.

- 2005 Singapore Gaga (Documentary by Tan Pin Pin)  
 2008 Sorceress of the new piano: The artistry of Margaret Leng Tan plus The Maverick Piano (Documentary by Evans Chan)

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