

Leonard Tan: Pushing musical boundaries

By Stephanie Ho, written on 22 April 2014

From his beginnings as a tuba player in the school band, Leonard Tan's passion for music has driven him to become a leading conductor and music educator in Singapore. He is currently an assistant professor at the National Institute of Education, Principal Conductor of the Singapore National Youth Orchestra and music director of the Philharmonic Winds.

Tan Yuh Chaur Leonard was born in 1978 into a working-class family. He was first introduced to music in primary 3 when he joined the school band and was assigned to play the tuba. But it was only in primary 6 that he fell in love with classical music. He was attending a birthday party at a friend's house when he came across a cassette recording of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*. His friend lent him the tape, and listening to the piece "completely transformed his life". He became a life-long fan of classical music, especially of symphonic works.^{1 2}

Musical education

While in secondary school, Tan set his heart on getting into the Music Elective Programme at Raffles Junior College (RJC). This desire was the motivation that led him to pick up the violin and pass the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) grade 6 examination within two years.

When Tan was in Secondary 3, he approached Singapore composer and Cultural Medallion recipient Leong Yoon Pin to study harmony. Tan asked Leong if he would take him as a student even though he could not afford Leong's fees. At that time, Leong's fees were around \$50 an hour. After looking through a sample of Tan's work, Leong offered to teach Tan for an hour a week, and Tan would pay \$10 a month for these lessons. Leong's generosity is still deeply embedded in Tan's memory. Tan remembered Leong as a very strict teacher but a good and kind man.

With his good academic grades, Tan eventually won a place to study at Raffles Junior College. Tan said that RJC provided him with an academic foundation in music and made him think of music as a scholarly discipline. Under the tutelage of Dr Eddy Chong and Mrs Constance Loke, it was here that the seed of Tan's interest in music theory and analysis was planted. At the same time, it was in RJC that Tan became aware of how much he lagged behind his classmates because of his late start in music. Tan was grateful that his teachers did not ask him to drop music. Tan's teachers did, however, advise him to switch his principal instrument from the violin to the tuba, and rendered him the necessary financial assistance to complete his 'A' level practical examination requirements.

After National Service, Tan received scholarship offers from major American, British, and Australian universities, but could not proceed due to financial reasons. Unlike many of Tan's peers who headed off to Ivy League universities, Tan decided to take the road less trodden and began teaching school bands instead.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, information for this article is taken from an interview with Leonard Tan conducted on 4 March 2014 at the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

² The Jacobs School of Music. (2012, April 1). *A conversation with Leonard Tan*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AoPAu96CFc&list=PL09CFF80A98415CAD&index=15>

Despite his best intentions, Tan had difficulty raising sufficient funds. During one of his performance gigs, Tan met Eric Watson, then head of the school of music in LASALLE College of the Arts who suggested he study at LASALLE. This would enable Tan to study music and work at the same time. Tan spent three years in LASALLE where he studied conducting with Robert Casteels and graduated with Distinction. Tan then proceeded to do an additional year at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) to complete a Bachelor of Arts jointly awarded by the University of Wales, where he graduated at the top of his class as the sole First Class Honours.

After earning his degree, Tan pursued a Masters in music theory and analysis at the National Institute of Education (NIE). After completing his Masters, Tan's dream of going abroad to study was finally realised. In 2009, Tan was awarded the Overseas Graduate Scholarship by the National Institute of Education-Nanyang Technological University to complete a doctorate in music education at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Tan chose the Jacobs School of Music because he felt the school synthesised a strong conservatory environment with the scholarly resources of a major research university.

While studying in the USA, Tan successfully auditioned to study orchestral conducting together with the orchestral conducting majors for two years. His teachers included David Effron and Arthur Fagen, and he regularly worked with the orchestras. He also studied doctoral advanced wind conducting with Stephen Pratt, and conducted the Indiana University Summer Concert Band.

Tan completed his PhD in 2012 with numerous accolades, including perfect GPA, the Dissertation Year Fellowship, and special letter of commendation for completing his doctoral qualifying examinations with distinction. His PhD dissertation, 'Towards a Transcultural Philosophy of Instrumental Music Education,' was awarded the Dean's Dissertation Prize.

Conducting

At 21 years, Tan started conducting school bands out of sheer economic necessity. When he started, he felt his skills were poor so he attended lessons to improve his conducting skills. At some point, Tan also began to feel that conducting would widen his career options, as there were limited jobs for a professional tuba player. Then in LASALLE, Tan switched his specialisation from the tuba to conducting.

As music director of the Philharmonic Winds, one of Singapore's most accomplished wind orchestras, Tan provides musical leadership of the orchestra. His decisions seek to balance cutting-edge works such as John Corgliano's *Circus Maximus* with music that resonates with the public. Tan believes that challenging pieces are needed to stretch the musicians and the music scene in Singapore. On the 2013 *Circus Maximus* concert, Tan said, "It's experimental, yes, but we've done experimental works before. After all we started out with a desire to do something different, and not repeating and replaying all the tired old band stuff".³ At the same time, the more popular fare helps the orchestra connect with the masses. Both types of performances are important in their own ways.

³ Loi, R. (2013, November 29). Local wind orchestra's 'surround' show. *Business Times Singapore*.

With the Philharmonic Winds, Tan hopes to dispel the notion that wind orchestras and bands are less sophisticated than symphony orchestras. As such he seeks to inspire and teach wind musicians to play with the same level of nuance as their string counterparts.

Teaching and research

Tan is now an assistant professor at NIE-NTU where he teaches courses in music education, music theory and conducting. His research interests extend his PhD thesis that draws on the philosophical traditions of ancient China and American pragmatism to construct a transcultural philosophy of music education relevant to the modern interconnected world.⁴ Tan is currently collaborating on a book that will bring together articles from Asian scholars on their philosophies and their application to music education.

Quote

“I constantly hope to make music education relevant to the present generation, of course without erasing the past. Because if there was no music of the past, there will be no music of the present.”⁵

Selected creative works

Tan, L. (2013). *Singapore National Youth Orchestra Concert - Sibelius, Brahms, Dvorak. Leonard Tan, conductor* [Joint Concert (appr. 30 - 40mins)]. Singapore.

Tan, L (2013). *The Philharmonic Winds Concert - Circus Maximus! Leonard Tan, conductor* [Full Concert (appr. 90mins)]. Singapore.

Tan, L (2013). *Singapore National Youth Orchestra - Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music Camp. Singapore National Youth Sinfonia Woodwind and Brass Ensemble. Leonard Tan, conductor.* [Feature of Concert (up to 20mins)]. Singapore.

Tan, L. (2013). *Asian Composers League Concert - New Voices of Asia, The Philharmonic Winds. Leonard Tan, conductor* [Full Concert (appr. 90mins)]. Singapore.

Selected publications

Tan, L. (2013). The Value of Music: An Ancient Chinese Philosophical Debate (anthology entry - wrote framing introduction). In Mark, M. (Ed.), *Music Education - Source Readings from Ancient Greece to Today* (pp. xii-xiv). New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Tan, L. (2012). A Comparison of the Sonata forms in Hindemith's and Persichetti's Band Symphonies. *Journal of Band Research*, 48,(1), 11-29.

⁴ The Jacobs School of Music. (2012, April 1). *A conversation with Leonard Tan*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AoPAu96CFc&list=PL09CFF80A98415CAD&index=15>

⁵ The Jacobs School of Music. (2012, April 1). *A conversation with Leonard Tan*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AoPAu96CFc&list=PL09CFF80A98415CAD&index=15>

Tan, L. (2012). Wagner's Huldigungsmarsch. In Miles, R. (Ed.), *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band* (pp. 536-548). Chicago, IL: GIA Publications.

References

Interview with Leonard Tan conducted on 4 March 2014 at the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

Loi, R. (2013, November 29). Local wind orchestra's 'surround' show. *Business Times Singapore*.

The Jacobs School of Music. (2012, April 1). *A conversation with Leonard Tan*.

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