

CULTURAL  
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## MARGARET LENG TAN



**M**argaret Leng Tan (b. 1945) was awarded a scholarship to study at New York's Juilliard School at the age of sixteen. She became the first woman to earn a Doctorate in Musical Arts from Juilliard in 1971. Tan has since established a prolific career as a virtuoso pianist and an innovative multi-toy instrumentalist. Her musical oeuvre has expanded the sonic possibilities of the piano, and explored the musical potential of unconventional instruments, particularly the toy piano. Her performances challenge the conventions of the concert experience, incorporating elements of performance art, theatre, and choreography.

Tan's mentor, the American avant-garde composer John Cage, was a formative influence on her artistic sensibilities. After Cage's death, Tan performed his *Suite for Toy Piano* on a toy piano purchased at a thrift shop in New York during her memorial tribute to Cage at New York's Lincoln Center in 1993. Captivated by the subversiveness of music composed for so unlikely an instrument, Tan commissioned new works to be played on toy pianos and toy instruments including bicycle bells and hand-cranked music boxes, while creating arrangements of "grown-up" piano pieces. Her groundbreaking album, *The Art of the Toy Piano* (1997), earned her the accolade "The Queen of the Toy Piano" from *The New York Times*, and her subsequent album, *She Herself Alone: The Art of the Toy Piano 2* (2010), received the Diapason d'Or (France).

Tan made history in 2002 as the first Singaporean musician to perform on Carnegie Hall's main stage. She tours extensively, performing in settings such as the Venice Biennale and Beethoven's house in Bonn. Alongside her achievements on the international stage, she remains closely connected with Singapore's artistic scene, performing with Singapore Symphony Orchestra (1981) and Singapore Chinese Orchestra (2002). She was featured in Tan Pin Pin's documentary *Singapore Gaga* (2002), and was the subject of *Sorceress of the New Piano* which premiered at the Singapore International Film Festival in 2004. Tan also participated in the *Homecoming* series at the Singapore Arts Festival (named as Singapore Festival of Arts before 1999) in 1992, 1999, and 2002. She returned to perform music-theatre works at the Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA) in 2014 and 2015 including *Curios*, a new SIFA-commissioned work.

For setting an inspiring example for women in Singapore through her pioneering work in the arts, Tan was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame by Singapore Council of Women's Organisations in 2014.



## The Singular Genius of Margaret Leng Tan

By Dr Tan Shzr Ee

**The toy piano is parallel to Singapore – small but potent. I like the paradox that comes from the phrase diva of the avant-garde from Singapore.**

*“A singular artist in a sea of classically trained musicians.” – Ong Keng Sen*

*“Queen of the Toy Piano.” – The New York Times*

Margaret Leng Tan celebrates her seventieth birthday on 12 December 2015, the year in which she also receives her Cultural Medallion from the National Arts Council. Tan’s trans-national career arcs through the temporal and geographical, staking claims across three and a half decades of work in transatlantic and Asian circles. Known first in her early years as a prodigal student and collaborator of the late music theorist and composer John Cage, Tan has since gone on to become the world’s foremost piano interpreter of Cage’s music. Since Cage’s death Tan has forged a second successful artistic career, specialising in the toy piano. She is widely thought of as the first international artist to work with a professional focus on the instrument. Today, the legacy of Tan’s early experiments in the avant-garde world has come full circle again, with her rising in stature as an authority on Cage following recent commissions to serve as an editor for posthumous publications of Cage’s works. Yet beyond her various and discrete contributions to the world of new music, Tan’s larger impact in the international cultural milieu lies in

her pushing of boundaries at the philosophical and transnational levels: she articulates a *naïf* curiosity from an idealistic, if also privileged post-cultural position as a daughter of Singapore residing in New York, taking on the avant-garde world, asserting her natural birthright as a cosmopolitan citizen-child of the world; working in the realm of ideas and concepts beyond old discourses that pigeonhole notions of ethnicity, identity and class.

The daughter of a prominent lawyer and former chairman of *The Straits Times*, Tan began piano lessons at the age of six. Precocious from a young age, she was a high-flying student at the Raffles Girls’ School while maintaining a growing and serious interest in music.

Tan’s introduction to Bach, Beethoven and Chopin soon overtook her first teachers as she found her talents catching the attention of an overseas scout from the United States, who presented her with a scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music at the age of 16. The pianist’s move to New York grew into a lifelong adventure that saw her eventually graduate with a Doctorate in Musical Arts from Juilliard in 1971. The title was the first performance-based degree of its kind to be conferred at the institution, and – during its time – a pioneering move in global education trends for performance research. As such Tan’s earning of the degree made history for both the school, as well as for Singapore.

Tan’s curiosity for eastern influences in western art music was borne of a reflexive journey towards understanding her Chinese roots as a result of a heightened experience as an Asian diasporic woman living New York. Eventually, this brought her to Cage. In what would be the turning point of her life – Tan speaks of it as “B.C and A.C: before Cage and after Cage” – the pianist simply looked up the phonebook. In 1981, she called up and invited the composer to a concert she was putting on with Malaysian dancer Marion D’Cruz. Intrigued, Cage turned up. He was impressed enough to write a mesostic poem in inspiration of their joint performance, and invited the duo to play his compendium of twenty pieces for prepared piano, *Sonatas and Interludes*. This performance marked the beginning of a collaboration, mentorship and friendship that would last more than a decade and outlive Cage’s death. Barely a year after meeting Cage, Tan opened his seventieth birthday concert. She says,

*“That was an inviolable landmark, a divide in my career, in my life, in my thinking. It’s not just about music – with Cage it’s an all-encompassing experience that goes beyond just music.”*

In 1984, Tan was awarded a US National Endowment for the Arts grant to specialise in the works of Cage. From 1990 to 1991 she began a major project showcasing a series of retrospective concerts of Cage’s music, in cooperation with the visual artist Jasper Johns. She continued to work with Cage till his last days in 1992.



Performing John Cage’s *Suite for Toy Piano* with John Cage at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (2012). Photo credit: Ken Weiss



Preparing the piano, Philadelphia Museum of Art (2012). Photo credit: Ken Weiss



Performing George Crumb's *Makrokosmos* at Carnegie's Zankel Hall for the composer's 75th birthday (2004). Photo credit: Susan Siegrist

Since the 1980s, Tan has grown from protégé to trusty custodian and foremost authority on the late thinker's piano oeuvre, taking his compositions to festivals around the world. These have ranged from Spoleto in Charleston to the Singapore International Festival of the Arts, Womadelaide and the Venice Biennale. In 2001 and 2008, Tan was featured on the PBS *American Masters* films, playing in segments detailing the lives and works of Cage and Jasper Johns. She is hailed as "the leading exponent of Cage's music today" by *The New Republic* and "the most convincing interpreter of John Cage's keyboard music" by the *New York Times*. Tan has recorded Cage, among other contemporary composers including Ge Ganru and George Crumb, extensively for the New Albion and Mode labels. In 2002, she made history again as the first Singaporean soloist to play in Carnegie Hall's main Isaac Stern Auditorium, performing Cage's *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* with the American Composers Orchestra. More recently, Tan's expertise on Cage has extended to include a scholarly role. C.F. Peters recently invited her to edit the fourth volume of Cage's piano music, and in 2007 she premiered, and also edited, his newly discovered composition *Chess Pieces*. A forthcoming publication of a new edition – under her watchful eye – of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* is in the books.

To measure Tan's career according to her mentor's posthumous shine, however, would be an underestimation. Indeed, Cage himself had pursued her acquaintance not only for her interest in his ideas, but with a fellow geek's appreciation for the marginal, quirky, the silly and the provocative. Most of all, he was attracted to her sense of idiosyncratic drama. In a recent interview with *The A List*, Tan herself pleads a positioned humility in triumphing her daring to be "an entertainer...I don't see that as denigrating. I want to be a sit-down comic – that's my other ambition in life."

Her ageless China-doll coiffure; a clipped would-be British accent (still unlost) honed through an early English education in Singapore; her cheerful imperiousness on matters of ethics and all small print relating to scores or indeed life-at-large; her assured sense of self – collectively give Tan the gravitas and cheek to claim divahood by the piano. Whether gleefully decanting music from a gently brewing teapot (Alvin Lucier's *Nothing is Real: Strawberry Fields Forever*), or throwing a mock tantrum at screws lining the innards of a piano, or drawing out artificially long and unsmiling vowels from a Tang dynasty poem, Tan has been, from the start, a show(wo)man and theatrical exponent extraordinaire.

In 1993, the second turning point in Tan's life arrived via her discovery of Cage's *Suite For Toy Piano* (1943). The microscopic recalibration of tone now required of the miniature instrument through the performer's depression of tiny keys required the artist to refine her touch – as Tan points describes – "to the *n*th degree.". That year, Tan made her first appearance on the instrument at New York's Lincoln Centre, playing Cage's abovementioned composition. Tan has made an entire second career out of the toy machine, alongside expanding her repertoire to include empty coffee cans and bicycle honks in their off-key glory.

Tan's hypnotic talents on the instrument led her to champion a whole new parade of composers from Toby Twining to Somei Satoh, Jed Distler, Tan Dun, Michael Nyman, Julia Wolfe and others. Many of these have specially written pieces for her, adding

to the small but growing repertoire of works for toys. If anything, the pianist counts this as one of her most important contributions to the arts:

*"That will be one of my legacies, the fact that I've made the toy piano into a real instrument, it's got its own repertoire."*

In 1997 Tan released her debut CD on the instrument with *The Art of the Toy Piano* with Point Music; this was followed by *She Herself Alone: The Art of the Toy Piano 2* with Mode in 2010 and a third album to be released in 2015. In 2004, Tan was the subject of a 92-minute documentary by Evans Chan, *Sorceress of the New Piano*, and in 2005 played her favourite instrument in a void deck in Ang Mo Kio for Tan Pin Pin's award-winning documentary, *Singapore GaGa*. But at the height of her career as a toy pianist today, Tan is still looking forward:

*"I'm no longer just a pianist, or a toy pianist, or a multi toy instrumentalist. I'm a performance artist. I've learnt to use my voice, I can sing in Chinese opera style. And I like that I do better than anyone else has done," she says.*

Over the past three decades, Tan has made regular appearances at the Singapore International Festival of the Arts. She has also collaborated with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and Singapore Chinese Orchestra. She says, "I like the idea that when I go to international festivals I see the word Singapore next to my name," she says. "The toy piano is parallel to Singapore – small but potent. I like the paradox that comes from the phrase diva of the avant-garde from Singapore."

Tan's example in the field has become an inspiration to a small but growing number of young female Asian toy pianists and composers. Despite her fiercely critical eye she already takes on herself and the absolute control she has over standards and approaches, she has, in particular, inspired composers. A recent example is the composer Phyllis Chen, who wrote *Cabinet of Curiosities* for Tan, which premiered at the 2015 Singapore International Festival of Arts. Tan herself muses: "I think it's made them want to be more adventurous."

Tan's indelible and inimitable presentations of self and of her milieu's performance philosophies are, to be sure, problematic on some levels. Should one, for example, read her conscious self-exoticisation with irony or as parody? What does newness or novelty – via Cage or toys – mean in the age of hyper-media and post-humanity in the twenty-first century? While Tan has valiantly pushed boundaries within western art music, time-warped on account of its rigidly classical status, she has also encouraged cross-cultural discussions through bringing Asian voices (including her own) to the fore. The question of where the cultural framing ultimately lies, however, remains to be answered.

#### About the writer

Dr Tan Shyr Ee is an ethnomusicologist, musician, music researcher and writer. She is currently a Senior Lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London.

#### WORDS OF APPRECIATION

*Where does one begin when acknowledging those who have contributed to one's creative evolution over a span of almost seven decades? Alas, at the inevitable risk of offending a host of generous individuals and institutions, I will mention those most immediate:*

*My parents for their courage/foolhardiness/no-holds-barred ambition in allowing me to rough it alone in 1960's New York while attending The Juilliard School at age sixteen.*

*My friend and mentor, the great avant-garde composer John Cage, who taught me how to listen, how to live in the now, and who gave me the confidence to be myself.*

*CultureLink's Goh Ching Lee who brought me to the attention of the Cultural Medallion Specialist Panel, and the Panel for choosing me.*

*And my many, many dogs who, over the years, have been the perfect companions through my long hours of practice.*