

Bernard Tan (陈忠义): The Science of Musicby **Perera, Audrey**, written in August 2010

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Poetry, ethnic music, science – all have inspired and infused the classical works of composer Bernard Tan.

He is a professor of physics, a man of science. No conflict at all with being, at the same time, a classical composer of local and international repute. As he explains, “music is the only art that requires you to master theoretical frameworks akin to those in science.”

Born in 1943, Bernard Tan had a very English-educated upbringing. “It was very conventional, very colonial. I studied at Anglo-Chinese School. I learnt the classical piano and got a teaching certificate,” he explains. His father worked for the British, in the City Council. “War prevented him going to the university, and he eventually became CEO of Overseas Assurance Corporation. Mum was a teacher, and my only brother, younger than me, became a pathologist.”

Maintaining that he was a “lousy” pianist, Tan's involvement with the Straits Chinese Methodist Church (now called the Kampong Kapur Methodist Church) steered him towards early efforts in composition in his 20s.

“I started late, with no formal training as a composer. I began by writing for my church choir, and didn't tell anyone that it was my work because I feared they'd scoff at it. Those were my first compositions.”

Unlike novels, plays and fine art, which are created by contemporary artists, he explains, most of the music that was traditionally played by orchestras were composed by musical greats who died centuries ago. “So the attitude to new work was always sceptical, as in, 'Who are you to presume to have the talent to compose classical music?' In that way, music composition has never been seen in the same way as other art forms.”

“My early work was entirely choral, which involves writing for voices, not instruments. It's a good starting point for a composer, and I was a member of three choirs.”

From choral, Tan moved onto instrumental music, beginning with small pieces, such as *Sinfonietta No.1*. “I wrote this to be performed the first time the Asian Composers League (ACL) meeting was held in Singapore, I think in 1982. We couldn't be members because we didn't yet have a composers' association or society, but the ACL permitted our work to be performed. This work was significant because of the occasion, and also because it was the most ambitious piece I'd done so far. I cut my teeth on that work, taking whatever I knew about writing for choirs and using it for this piece. It worked out reasonably well.”

In 1989, he wrote his first and only full symphony, *Symphony No.1*. “It was for the Singapore Youth Orchestra (SYO). We had made a commitment to support local composers, but since I was Chairman of the SYO, I waited for the other composers' works to be performed first.”

And then came a piano concerto, followed by a violin concerto.

“I never had formal training in classical composition, and I am still learning the process. Music involves a whole new language. I learnt through trial and error, from books and other composers, the rules for harmony, counterpoint, and so on. You can’t really write for an orchestra based only on feeling – orchestral compositions are very technical and complex.”

Many factors have influenced the style of Tan’s composition. Growing up in a Lavender Street shophouse near Jalan Besar and the red light district, he remembers the constant presence of music from Singapore’s main cultures.

“In those days, the '50s and '60s, you could not escape ethnic music; it was all around you. During seventh moon and throughout the year, there was opera in Chinese dialects at the field near our home. Then there were the travelling Chinese musicians. The itinerant *kana* seller played the *erhu*, while I could always hear snatches of Malay and Tamil music coming from radios in shops and homes. Movies also played a role. And of course, those were the early days of rock and roll, so I was also listening to Bill Haley and the Comets, Elvis Presley and the Beatles.

“Music was to be heard everywhere, and I absorbed all the different languages and styles of music that I heard, all of which were such a part of Singapore in those days.”

Another factor was the fact that in those days, says Tan, Chinese in Singapore grew up either in English-speaking or Mandarin/dialect-speaking homes. The community was deeply bifurcated, and the two worlds never overlapped. “I was aware of this, but I was fortunate in that ACS was a very mixed school, and the races mixed easily and naturally. I would like to think that some of it comes out in my compositions.”

Tan describes the work which, for him, is his most significant and meaningful as a composer. “Most composers look to poetry, with its innate rhythms and cadences; once you understand the poem, the music almost writes itself. I myself have always been committed to using Singapore poetry, and have used the works of poet Lee Tzu Pheng most often, because her work is very musical.

“Her poem, *My Country and My People* is about a generation of people who came through colonial rule, self-rule, independence and post-independence. It speaks of an uneasy mix between a strong British influence and the yearning to be independent. The poem spoke to me – it is one of my early works, and one of my most important works.

“I set it to music and it was performed by the Singapore University Madrigal Singers. At that time, I was composing mainly choral music. It has only been performed once because the idiom was very angular, dissonant and mirrored the mood of the poem. It is not a comfortable piece to perform.”

The Process

“I think for several weeks, even months, about a work. I jot down ideas on my computer, or on my mobile phone. I work on the piano for the preliminary work, using it as a thinking tool. I start on a movement, do the thematic parts, and not in a particular order. You never know where the starting comes from. I gather parts and then start to formalise the beginning, middle and end. A classical piece has to develop from start to end. It’s only at the end of this process that I begin to think of the technical aspects – are the cadences right, and so on. It’s a hard slog before it makes it onto my computer.”

“I am very conservative as a composer; some call my style neo-classical. I use the traditional Western classical forms such as the concerto and symphony, and Asian musical elements are embedded in the music, elements not picked up in specific melodies but in influences. It is a natural consequence of growing up in the '60s with all those musical influences which permeated my soul and came naturally.

“My style has become more economical over the years. It used to be more complex and more convoluted. I try to write what resonates and communicates with people, and prefer to write for someone specific, because the work becomes more personal – that’s why composers like writing for friends. It is a form of self-expression, to say in music something that can’t be said in any other form.”

“I strike a balance between being a scientist and composing music. There are 101 different ways to write music, and I belong to the category of people who have to work hard at it. I have to think and ask myself questions like ‘What do I want this to be about?’, ‘Why do I want to do this?’ and ‘Who is the audience?’ before I think of a single note. I have to think of the formal structure, much like writing a novel. I have a ‘severe’ view of art in that I believe that one must master the technical aspects before one can create. You cannot create without understanding the fundamentals first.

“The construction of a piece of art or music is as complex as that of making an engineering or scientific tool. I speak as a scientist. Because, at the end of the day, I want to write music that people can connect to, and I want to write music in which a distinctive voice comes through – this is what every musician wants. I’d like my music to be recognisably Singaporean and recognisably my own.”

At the NUS since 2002, Bernard Tan is a Professor at the Department of Physics and Director of the Centre for Maritime Studies. He was formerly Acting Head of Music, Associate Director of the Centre for Musical Activities, Dean of Science, Head of Physics and Dean of Students. Having been instrumental in the formation of the SSO, he is its longest serving board member. His works have received critical acclaim locally and internationally, and his *A Classical Overture*, *Piano Concerto* and *First Symphony* have been recorded by the SSO and released on CD.

His works include a symphony, three overtures, a piano concerto, a violin concerto, four sinfoniettas and several choral works. US music publisher Neil Kjos has published a number of

Tan's choral works. His piano concerto premiered in January 2002 and his violin concerto in January 2006, both by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO).

“A professional composer would have a list of works three times as long as mine. I haven’t written a major piece since 2006, although I am working on two at the moment,” he explains.

“Where does music come from? All creative work is divinely inspired, as in, the ability to put it down in a way that makes sense. And there is a view that things exist in a heavenly zone, and that God allows us to release it.

Quote

“Every work builds on something already created. I must be very honest and say what I want to say. Integrity is very important for the creative artist. If you are not honest, the work will not speak of who you are. Being true to yourself means doing things which are not always understood at first.”

Awards

1982: *Public Service Medal (PBM)*

1988: *Chevalier dans l'ordre des Palmes Academique*

1990: *Public Service Star (BBM)*

1993: *Public Administration Medal (Silver) (PPA)*

2001: *Public Service Star (Bar) BBM(L)*

2005: *Institute of Physics, Singapore (IPS) President's Medal*

2010: *15th Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, Meritorious Award*

Works

Orchestral

1983: *A Little Overture for Strings*, commissioned and premiered by the Goh Soon Tioe String Orchestra conducted by Vivien Goh

1983: *Sinfonietta for Strings No.1*, premiered at Asian Composers' League Conference Singapore conducted by Lim Yau

1985: *Sinfonietta for Strings No.1*, performed by SSO conducted by Choo Hoey and performed on SSO's Scandinavian tour

- 1986:** *Sinfonietta for Strings No.1*, used as music for ballet, Environmental Phases by Ballet Group of Ministry of Culture, choreographed by Goh Soo Khim; broadcast on Hawaii Public Radio
- 1986:** *Hors d'Oeuvres for Strings*, commissioned and premiered by the SSO conducted by Lim Yau
- 1986:** *Suite from the ballet, Conflict* premiered by the NUS Concert Orchestra conducted by Paul Abisheganaden
- 1987:** *Sinfonietta No.2*, premiered at New Music Forum conducted by Lim Yau; recorded on New Music Forum cassette
- 1989:** *Symphony No.1*, commissioned and premiered by the Singapore Youth Orchestra conducted by Vivien Goh for its 10th anniversary
- 1990:** *Concertino for Piano and Strings*, premiered at New Music Forum conducted by Lim Yau; recorded on New Music Forum CD
- 1991:** *Symphony No.1*, performed by SSO conducted by Choo Hoey; recorded by SSO conducted by Choo Hoey for NTU Inaugural Commemoration CD
- 1991:** *Sinfonietta No.3*, premiered by SSO conducted by Shalom Ronly-Riklis
- [199x]:** *Classical Overture*, premiered by Singapore Symphony Orchestra conducted by Lan Shui on August 30, 2003
- 1995:** *Fantasia on Chan Mali Chan*, premiered by Singapore Youth Orchestra
- 1999:** *Sinfonietta No.4*, commissioned and premiered by SSO conducted by Lan Shui for its 20th anniversary concerts
- 2001:** *Overture to Youth*, commissioned and premiered by the Singapore Youth Orchestra conducted by Lim Yau for its 21st anniversary concert
- 2002:** *Piano Concerto*, commissioned by and dedicated to Toh Chee Hung and premiered by the SSO conducted by Lan Shui with Toh Chee Hung, soloist, at SSO's 23rd anniversary concert
- 2006:** *Violin Concerto*, commissioned by and dedicated to Lynnette Seah and premiered by the SSO conducted by Lan Shui with Lynnette Seah, soloist at SSO 27th anniversary concert

Orchestral Arrangements

1991: *Fried Rice Paradise*, commissioned by KPMG and premiered by the SSO conducted by Lim Yau

1991: *KPMG Song*, commissioned by KPMG and premiered by the SSO by Lim Yau

1991: *One Moment in Time*, commissioned by the Economic Development Board and premiered by the SSO conducted by Lim Yau for EDB 30th anniversary concert

1998: *San Nien*, commissioned and premiered by SSO conducted by Lim Yau for SSO President's Charity Concert

1998: *Song for the President*, premiered at SSO President's Young Performers' Concert by the SSO conducted by Lim Yau

Instrumental/Chamber

1976: *Etude for Percussion Ensemble*

1984: *Sonatina for Violin & Piano*, commissioned and premiered by Chan Tze Law

1985: *Movement for Viola & Piano*, commissioned and premiered by Jiri Heger

1986: *Conflict, Suite for Piano*

1987: *Reverie for Violin & Piano*

1988: *Sonatina for Trombone & Piano*, premiered at New Music Forum by Chong Shoo Mei (1989); recorded on New Music Forum cassette (1989)

1988: *Dialogue for Oboe & Clarinet*

1989: *Improvisation for Piano*

1994: *Sonatina for Two Pianos & Percussion*, commissioned and premiered by EMIS IV chamber ensemble

1998: *Improvisation No.2 for Viola & Piano*, commissioned and premiered by Jensen Lam at Singapore Arts Festival

2006: *Movement for String Quartet*, commissioned by Japan Composers Association and premiered in Tokyo

Choral

1975: *Psalm 23*

1975: *Father Give Thy Benediction*

1975: *The Peace of God*, performed by NUS Choir on their UK tour (1979), performed by Church of Risen Christ Choir at Llangollen Eisteddfod (1980)

1977: *Psalm 100*, premiered by the Singapore University Madrigal Singers

1977: *My Country and My People*, premiered by the Singapore University Madrigal Singers, words by Lee Tzu Pheng

1980: *Sanctus*, commissioned and performed by Church of Risen Christ Choir at Llangollen Eisteddfod

1983: *Moon and Stars on Christmas Eve*

1984: *Sing unto the Lord*, premiered by the Cherubim Choir of Kampong Kapur Methodist Church

1984: *Bless the Lord O My Soul*, premiered by the Cherubim Choir of Kampong Kapur Methodist Church

1984: *Rejoice in the Lord*, premiered by the Cherubim Choir of Kampong Kapur Methodist Church

1985: *For Laura*, words by Chandran Nair

1985: *O for a Thousand Tongues*, commissioned and premiered by United Methodist Choir for the Centenary of the Methodist Church in Singapore, words by Charles Wesley

1985: *Little Thing*, commissioned and premiered by Methodist Boys' Choir and performed on their Californian tour; published by Neil Kjos (USA); recorded on Anglo-Chinese Junior College CD (words by Geraldine Heng)

1991: *Nightpiece*, recorded on Anglo-Chinese Junior College CD, words by Lee Tzu Pheng

1993: *Another Place*, words by Boey Kim Cheng

1995: *Blue*, commissioned by Ministry of Education as set piece for their Choral Competition, words by Angeline Yap

1997: *To Your Mountains*, commissioned and premiered by Anglo-Chinese Junior College Choir for World Choral Symposium in Sydney, words by Lee Tzu Pheng

2002: *Dreamscape II*, commissioned and premiered by Anglo-Chinese Junior College Choir, words by Lee Tzu Pheng

2004: *Missa Brevis*, commissioned and premiered by Anglo-Chinese School Orchestra and Choir in Perth

Choral Arrangements

1972: *Sarinande*

1976: *Ondeh Ondeh*

1976: *Three Malay folk songs, Chan Mali Chan, Suriram and Lenggang Kangkong*, commissioned and premiered by Singapore University Madrigal Singers and published by Neil Kjos (USA)

1976: *Flower Drum Song*, recorded on Singapore Youth Choir CD

1985: *Di-Tanjong Katong*, commissioned by Methodist Boys' Choir

Band/Wind

1976: *Flower Drum Song for Symphonic Band and Choir*, premiered by University of Singapore Concert Band and University of Singapore Choir

1976: *Ondeh Ondeh*, premiered by University of Singapore Concert Band ensemble

1979: *Fantasia on Dayong Sampan*, premiered by NUS Concert Band, performed by NUS Symphonic Band (1984)

1985: *A Methodist Fanfare*, commissioned by the Methodist Church of Singapore

Ballet

1985: *Music for the ballet, Environmental Phases (Sinfonietta No.1)*, choreographed by Goh Soo Khim and premiered by the Ballet Group, Ministry of Community Development Cultural Affairs Division, the ASEAN Dance Festival (1985); performed by the Singapore Dance Theatre at the Singapore Festival of Arts (1996)

1986: *Music for the ballet, Conflict*, commissioned by Antony Then and performed to choreography by Antony Then by the Ballet Group, Ministry of Community Development Cultural Affairs Division

Organ

1980: *Short Suite for Organ*, commissioned by Kampong Kapur Methodist Church and premiered by Keith Piggott on the dedication of the rebuilt Kampong Kapur Methodist Church pipe organ

Songs

1980: *Bigger and Smaller*, commissioned and published by the Science Council of Singapore, words by Lee Tzu Pheng

1980: *Light*, commissioned and published by the Science Council of Singapore, words by Lee Tzu Pheng

1980: *Water*, commissioned and published by the Science Council of Singapore, words by Lee Tzu Pheng

1980: *My Shadow*, commissioned and published by the Science Council of Singapore, words by Lee Tzu Pheng

1988: *Queenstown Rotarians' Song*, commissioned by Queenstown Rotary Club

1988: *Northland School Song*, commissioned by Northland School

1991: *Nightpiece*, words by Lee Tzu Pheng

1991: *KPMG Song*, commissioned by KPMG Singapore and premiered by SSO and SSC, words by Edwin Thumboo

1995: *Mei Ling*, commissioned for NUS 90th anniversary, words by Edwin Thumboo

Play

1980: *Incidental Music for Clarinet and Piano*, for Robert Yeo's play, *One Year Back Home*

References

Abisheganaden, P. (2005). *Notes across the years anecdotes from a musical life*. Singapore: Unipress, Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore.

Koh, T., ed. (2006). *Singapore: the encyclopedia*, Editions Didier Millet, National Heritage Board.

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