

Extended Play: Margaret Leng Tan

CITY
RECITAL
HALL

ARTIST

Margaret Leng Tan **Piano, toy piano, toys, sound objects**

PROGRAM

Henry Cowell **Tides of Manaunanun**

Henry Cowell **Advertisement**

Toby Twining **An American in Buenos Aires**

Phyllis Chen **Carousel**

Phyllis Chen **Cobwebbed Carousel*** (video by Rob Dietz)

James Joslin **Für Enla**

Erik Griswold **from Old MacDonald's Yellow Submarine**

Raphaël Mostel **Star-Spangled Etude ("Furling Banner")***

(Interval, 15 minutes)

George Crumb **Metamorphoses (Book 1)*** Ten Fantasy-Pieces (after celebrated paintings) for amplified piano, toy piano, auxiliary percussion, voice

Black Prince - Paul Klee

The Goldfish - Paul Klee

Wheatfield with Crows - Vincent van Gogh

The Fiddler - Marc Chagall

Nocturne: Blue and Gold Southampton Water - James McNeill Whistler

Perilous Night - Jasper Johns

Clowns at Night - Marc Chagall

Contes Barbares - Paul Gauguin

The Persistence of Memory - Salvador Dali

The Blue Rider - Vasily Kandinsky

*Written for Margaret Leng Tan

ABOUT THE ARTIST MARGARET LENG TAN

Singaporean pianist Margaret Leng Tan is one of the most highly regarded performers in American experimental music. Tan, whose work embraces theater, choreography, performance, has been hailed as the "diva of avant-garde pianism" by *The New Yorker*. She is renowned as a pre-eminent John Cage interpreter (her mentor of eleven years) and for her performances of American and Asian music that transcend the piano's conventional boundaries. She is also one of George Crumb's favorite performers for whom he composed *Metamorphoses (Book I)*, a major piano cycle which Ms. Tan has performed to critical acclaim throughout Europe and USA since 2017. It will receive its Australian premiere at the Extended Play Festival presented by Sydney's City Recital Hall on August 31.

The first woman to earn a doctorate from Juilliard, Margaret Leng Tan is recognized as the world's first toy piano virtuoso. Her groundbreaking 1997 recording, *The Art of the Toy Piano* (Point/Universal), transformed a humble toy into a real instrument. She has been called "the queen of the toy piano" (*The New York Times*) and "the toy piano's Rubenstein" (*The Independent*, UK). The BBC, CNN, National Public Radio (USA) have all profiled her career as a concert toy pianist. Her curiosity has extended to other toy instruments as well, substantiating her credo: "Poor tools require better skills" (Marcel Duchamp).

In 2015 Ms. Tan was awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's highest artistic accolade. Recent major works written for her include *Curios* by Phyllis Chen, a solo music-theater piece for toy instruments. *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep*, a theatrical sonic portrait of Margaret Leng Tan, is currently in the works in collaboration with the Australian music theatre company, Chamber Made. *Dragon Ladies* will premiere in February 2020 at AsiaTOPA in Melbourne.

To find out more about Margaret Leng Tan visit margaretlengtan.com

PROGRAM NOTES

MINIATURE meets MONUMENTAL is an exercise in maximal contrasts: Tiny vs. gargantuan, fun vs. serious, vernacular vs. ivory tower. Yet, through it all, the toy piano manages to hold its own against its behemoth counterpart. And on occasion, miniature can even be monumental!

***The Tides of Manaunaun, Advertisement* by Henry Cowell**

These seminal works are now historic avant-garde. Cowell was the first composer to explore the expanded possibilities of the piano whether through an unconventional approach to the keyboard as in the arm and palm tone clusters of *The Tides of Manaunaun*, or through direct contact with the strings themselves as in his *Aeolian Harp* and *The Banshee*. The brash and witty *Advertisement* is a virtuoso study in clusters for fingers, fists and palms inspired by the equally virtuosic neon lights of New York's Times Square.

Henry Cowell, like Cage, was the quintessential American original. He caused an international furor with his remarkable string piano and tone cluster techniques. Among his many students were George Gershwin and Lou Harrison, who described Cowell as "the mentor of mentors." henrycowell.org

***An American in Buenos Aires* by Toby Twining**

Toby Twining's *An American in Buenos Aires* manages to weave seamlessly together three diverse genres - tango, blues and the symphonic. In 1995 Twining wrote *Satie Blues* and *Nightmare Rag* for me. These were the first compositions to tap the potential of the toy piano and piano played together. This blues tango continues to explore the novel combination. The resplendent "symphonic finale" elicits echoes of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Toby Twining has expanded the musical palette with a new choral sound, micro-consonant harmony, and innovative instrumental techniques. Twining was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2011. tobytwiningmusic.com

***Carousel/Cobwebbed Carousel* by Phyllis Chen**

Both *Carousel* and *Cobwebbed Carousel* are composed on the same punch tape strip but for *Cobwebbed Carousel*, the reverse surface of the punch tape passes through the music box mechanism. In this "counter-piece", Margaret suggested that I attempt to capture the mysterious, darker aspect of childhood. *Cobwebbed Carousel* is dedicated to and written for Margaret Leng Tan with great admiration.

- Phyllis Chen

Phyllis Chen is a pianist/toy pianist/composer who created the annual UnCaged Toy Piano Competition in 2007 and since 2011 has hosted the bi-annual UnCaged Toy Piano Festival in New York. phyllischen.net

Rob Dietz, video and sound artist collaborates frequently with Phyllis Chen. cerumenspoon.com

***Für Enola* by James Joslin**

Für Enola attempts to bridge the gap between the inherent childlike nature of the toy piano and its more recent status as a 'serious' instrument. Chance operations were used to construct the piece in a manner mimicking that of a child playing the toy piano - seemingly random strikes just happening spontaneously. *Für Enola* is also visual theatre, intended as a nod to the man who first saw the potential of the toy piano as a concert instrument: John Cage

- James Joslin

James Joslin is an English composer whose oeuvre includes toy piano pieces, instrumental works with electronics and sound installations. His *Für Enola* (for toy piano and jack-in-the-box), won the 2011 UnCaged Toy Piano Competition's "Most Ingenious Combo" award. jamesjoslin.weebly.com

Chooks!/Bicycle Lee Hooker by Erik Griswold

Chooks! is a sonic depiction of chickens. *Bicycle Lee Hooker* is a mini-tribute to the great blues musician, John Lee Hooker. Erik Griswold explains: "Knowing the skill and dedication of Margaret Leng Tan, I pushed the limits of toy instrument virtuosity by asking her to coordinate bicycle bells, train whistles and toy piano in *Bicycle Lee Hooker*, a right brain/left brain extravaganza." *Chooks!* and *Bicycle Lee Hooker* are part of *Old MacDonald's Yellow Submarine* created with funding from the Australia Council for the Arts. *Old Mac* was the ABC's official entry at the 2010 International Rostrum of Composers.

Composer-pianist, Erik Griswold performs in *Clocked Out Duo* with percussionist Vanessa Tomlinson. He is the composer for Margaret Leng Tan's portrait-piece, *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep*.
erikgriswold.org

Star Spangled Etude #3 ("Furling Banner") by Raphael Mostel

The toy piano inspired this flag-waver in celebration of the great American tradition of freedom, a freedom that has become increasingly under threat since the ascent of the Trump presidency.

Raphael Mostel is renowned for his Tibetan Singing Bowl Ensemble and his chamber narrative, *The Travels of Babar*.
www.mostel.com

Metamorphoses (Book I)

In 2015 I was visiting George Crumb when he casually dropped his bombshell: "Margaret, I think I'm about ready to write a new piano cycle which I am calling *Metamorphoses* and the first volume will be for you." Crumb then proceeded to pull out several art books containing the various paintings that he had chosen to interpret in *Metamorphoses*.

It has been forty years since the *Makrokosmos* series, Crumb's groundbreaking, pianistic achievement of the 1970s. Since then Crumb has written several piano compositions, but nothing on the scale of *Makrokosmos*. This was a historic occasion indeed!

And so began the step-by-step creation of a composition that would unfold over the next eighteen months. These were memorable, intoxicating work sessions: I loved seeing the excitement that hearing his music for the first time elicited in George. I was extremely gratified that he was tailoring the work to my particular idiosyncrasies: the inclusion of the toy piano, using my voice in unusual ways - most strikingly, learning to caw from the many crows frequenting Crumb's backyard apropos of Van Gogh's *Wheatfield With Crows!* He also enlisted a battery of small percussion, mostly toy.

A highlight of my role as composer's muse was introducing Crumb to Jasper Johns' 1990 *Perilous Night*, one of four works with that title made by the artist in response to John Cage's 1944 composition, *The Perilous Night*. Crumb's spontaneous response to *The Perilous Night* artwork was immediate and visceral and his ensuing *The Perilous Night* composition could not be more different from Cage's.

George Crumb is working on a second volume of *Metamorphoses*, this time for the pianist Marcantonio Barone. I can't wait to see what surprises are in store!

- Margaret Leng Tan

Notes from George Crumb on Metamorphoses (Book I)

The great Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky transformed visual art into sound in his *Pictures at an Exhibition*. My *Metamorphoses, Book I* is therefore a direct descendent of Mussorgsky's hauntingly beautiful piano composition.

Black Prince (Paul Klee, 1927): boldly, with smoldering intensity

The Goldfish (Paul Klee, 1925): *Vivace, quasi presto*; playfully, whimsically

Wheatfield with Crows (Vincent Van Gogh, 1890): *Lento elegiaco*; uncanny, forbidding

The Fiddler (Marc Chagall, 1912 -13: Poco animato; joyous, exuberant (in a Jewish-Russian folk style)

Nocturne: Blue and Gold (Southampton Water) (James McNeill Whistler, 1871): *Lento sospeso*; ethereal, dreamlike

The Perilous Night (Jasper Johns, 1990): *Molto vivace*; fearfully, with dark energy

Clowns at Night (Marc Chagall, 1957): A ballet grotesque for circus folk and poltergeist (in a lazy blues tempo, languid, seductive, ghostly)

Contes barbares (Paul Gauguin, 1902): *Drammaticamente*; The storyteller invokes a vision - Tahitian death chant: spirit of the dead watching (*Manao Tupapau*) - The storyteller invokes a vision - Tahitian dance: myth of the moon (*Hina*) and the earth (*Fatou*)

The Persistence of Memory (Salvador Dalí, 1931): *Lentamente*; shadowy, dreamlike

The Blue Rider (Vasily Kandinsky, 1903): *Molto agitato*; with a relentless driving rhythm throughout.

Like all of my piano works since *Five Pieces for Piano* (1962) through *Makrokosmos I and II* and other works, *Metamorphoses* is concerned with new modes of expression: timbral techniques such as pizzicato, muted effects, harmonics; various glissando techniques including bending of pitches and also special pedal effects. Occasionally objects are applied to the piano strings - a glass tumbler, a percussionist's wire brush, a metallic jewelry chain, a yarn mallet. I also require certain vocal sounds (speaking, whispering, shouting, singing, humming). Besides the amplified piano the pianist plays toy piano, woodblocks, a metal wind chime, pod rattle and wire coil drum.

I have been most fortunate to have had outstanding pianists willing to tackle the formidable technical and musical innovations in my scores. And among the very finest of these is Margaret Leng Tan for whom I wrote *Metamorphoses Book I*. Margaret's technical prowess and superb artistic sensitivity is a combination that must warm the heart of any composer!

- George Crumb

Metamorphoses (Book I) was first performed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. on May 7, 2017 followed by the European premiere at the Holland Festival on June 9, 2017.

Credits for Metamorphoses (Book I)

Black Prince: bpk Bildagentur/Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany/Art Resource, NY

The Goldfish: bpk Bildagentur/Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany/Elke Walford/Art Resource, NY

Wheatfield with Crows: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands/ Art Resource, NY

The Fiddler: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands/Art Resource, NY

Nocturne: Blue and Gold: Tate Gallery, London, UK/Art Resource, NY

Perilous Night: ©Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/Private collection/Jamie Stukenberg/The Menil Collection

Clowns at Night: Musee d'Art Moderne, Saint-Etienne, France/Art Resource, NY

Contes barbares: Folkwang Museum, Essen, Germany/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

The Persistence of Memory: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA/Art Resource, NY

The Blue Rider: Foundation E.G. Buehrle/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

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