



# Vivacious Virtuoso

Celebrated New York-based pianist Margaret Leng Tan speaks to ZARA ZHUANG about reinventing herself, her artistic influences and how being back in Singapore puts her in touch with her roots

PIANIST MARGARET LENG Tan is one of a kind. Her enthusiasm for music, which manifests in her intent focus on the ivories, is uneroded by her 71 years. Her energy and her clipped, excited manner of speaking are infectious. "You should see me give a class — nobody is yawning, nobody is falling asleep," she says. And with childlike freshness, she readily offers an impromptu imitation of a crow's caw, featured

in a new composition by avant-garde composer George Crumb, in between giving a preview of *SATIEfaction*.

The Singaporean musician was in town recently to perform the showcase, dedicated to the corpus of French composer Erik Satie and works he inspired, as part of a series of shows organised in tandem with the Singapore Art Week. A fortnight later, she conducted at the National Museum of Singapore's *Beyond the Silence: The Legacy of John Cage*, a workshop devoted to the late American composer, writer

and philosopher, who was Tan's long-time mentor and collaborator.

A classically trained pianist arguably better known for her work on the toy piano — so much so that she's been dubbed the queen of the instrument by *The New York Times* — Tan now considers herself a multimedia theatre artist. Going beyond the toy piano, she has enlisted everyday objects, fashioned her own musical instruments and

MAIN PORTRAIT: ANTON CHIA

MARGARET LENG TAN BRINGS TO LIFE COMPOSITIONS BY ERIK SATIE, ALONG WITH WORKS BY JOHN CAGE, TOBY TWINING AND FEDERICO MOMPOU

incorporated her voice and elements of comedy in her performances. Tan's 2015 Singapore International Festival of Arts showcase, *Cabinet of Curiosities*, had her donning masks and even a clown's nose as she struck cowbells and metal bowls with mallets.

"I can say I'm multifaceted in my skills," she says, crediting it to Cage's addition of found objects for percussive effects in his compositions. "For me, it's still a constant process of discovery, I don't believe in the artist being in the ivory tower and only doing their eight hours of practice a day."

"Who practises eight hours a day anyway?" she adds with a laugh.

Tan concedes she might have when started playing the piano at just six. Her journey to become a professional musician began when she won a scholarship to The Juilliard School 10 years later and in 1971, she became the first woman to earn a Doctorate in Musical Arts from the conservatory. Though she has found immense success as an instrumentalist, she sees it has become tougher in the current climate to replicate her accomplishment. Over her decades in music, she has observed the scene evolve and considers herself fortunate to have forged a niche career by reinventing herself repeatedly, going from pianist to avant-garde pianist to toy pianist.

"For musicians, in a way, it's easier now [to build solo careers] because you can promote and launch yourself," Tan explains, referring to digital and social media platforms as avenues for self-promotion that didn't exist during her time. "On the other hand, I think it's increasingly harder for a young musician to make it today — I look at Juilliard now and there's so much talent there and I

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think: What are they going to do? There just isn't that kind of openings for that many gifted young people to have solo careers."

Tan's is one worth envying. The 2014 Singapore Women's Hall of Fame inductee and 2015 Cultural Medallion honouree has been invited to the Venice Biennale thrice and was the first Singaporean to perform on the main stage at Carnegie Hall in 2002. Having lived in New York City since she was 16, Tan is sometimes mistaken for a naturalised American, but she emphasises to music festival organisers that she must be billed as a Singaporean artist.

There is a strong Asian influence in her music, Tan explains, adding that Cage was one Western composer whom Asian philosophy and culture inspired — he studied Zen Buddhism and owned in his library diverse tomes such as *The I Ching* and *The Manual of Abhidharma* on Buddhist philosophy. "To me, this cross-fertilisation of cultures is a broader one than just a Singaporean identity," she says. "There's an aesthetic there

I'm very attuned to, that is different from a classically trained musician playing Beethoven and Mozart, and I've come to refine and experience that on a profound level."

Spending more than 50 years living outside Singapore hasn't diluted her appreciation or grasp of its lingua franca. "Hearing Singlish is so comfortable, it's like putting on the most comfortable pair of slippers," Tan says, adding that she code-switches with ease. "I'm not going to speak to the crew (setting up her stage at the National Museum of Singapore) the way I speak to you," she says with a laugh. "They'll think: 'You *sombong* (Malay for 'proud, arrogant') or what?'"

"What's that saying...you can take a girl out of Singapore, but you can't take Singapore out of a girl." ■