

Chan-Boon Tan

Tan (b. 1965, postgraduate studies, Paris)¹ is a free lance composer, teacher, and conductor. He studied with Yoon-Pin Leong, Jacques Casterede, and Michel Merlet. Tan was awarded the Top Local Serious Music Award in 1998, the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (JCCI) Singapore Foundation Culture Award in 2004. He was made a *Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Knight of the Order of the Arts and Literature) by the French Government in 2008. Tan is president of the Gustav Mahler and Anton Bruckner societies in Singapore.

I met Tan at his home in a housing estate where he lives with Mrs Tan. There was a grand piano in the living room, an addition to the flat made possible by the JCCI prize. However, Tan is actually a violinist, and his entire body of chamber and solo music is for strings. This body of music enjoys significant support from prominent players with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, who have performed in several recitals in the 'My Music, My Art' series, which is dedicated to Tan's music. Tan has also written three symphonies. (The third symphony has not been performed.)

I first encountered Tan's music at the now defunct New Music Forum concert in 2003, when a revised, shortened version of the first movement from *Symphony No. 2* was performed. (The last three forums were held in 2001, 2003 and 2004, after a hiatus of nine years.) The forum in 2003 featured five compositions, of which four were composed from one to two decades ago. I attended the concert with a friend who became quite upset about the poor performance of Tan's symphony, and also aspects of the orchestration. One's memory of a performance so long ago cannot be entirely accurate, but I do have a preference for the concert version over the original version recorded in 2000 with the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra. The gargantuan proportions of the full symphony (lasting over an hour) harks back to both Mahler and Bruckner. In stylistic terms alone, however, Tan is the progeny of the former. Interestingly, the composer was not quick to admit to this. He turned the interview tables on me and queried me instead about the evolution of Mahler's symphonic technique. Our conversation took an elliptical route via Strauss, Bach, Ravel, and Brahms, before finally arriving at the obvious reference point - Mahler. Tan is clearly reticent about flippant references with regards to his musical influences. (Being the president of both the Mahler and Bruckner societies, Tan is perhaps especially susceptible to these easy but

¹ As the French system of higher education is unique and most readers may not be familiar with it, those who wish to understand more about Tan's musical education may contact him directly.

incomplete conclusions.) The composer eventually explained to me that he sees his music not as an imitation of Mahler, but a development from late nineteenth century music, with a focus on Mahler.

Tan's string quartets bear the same Mahlerian imprint as the symphonies. It could be said that Tan extends the legacy of Mahler, who had never written any string quartets, although he did complete one movement of a piano quartet in his student years. Tan has also written several extraordinary monodies for strings. Some of these sound like solo concerto parts, such as *Après un verre*, Op. 10 (1990, for violin). Stylistically they range from the early to late Romantic, from *Grand Caprice on a Theme from 'The Merry Widow'*, Op. 35 (2000, for violin), to *Awakening: Grand Caprice from the Opening Theme of Mahler's 10th Symphony*, Op. 12 (1990, for viola). *Awakening* contains only a few cadences, which are stretched out over long chromatic progressions. Mahlerian proportions can be observed in *Après un verre*, in which sections extend one after another, indefinitely postponing the end while the momentum of the music slowly ebbs away. The Romantic ideal of an infinite yearning, articulated by the nineteenth century music critic E. T. A. Hoffmann in his famous review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony,² finds its truest musical manifestation perhaps in long concluding passages like those in *Après un verre*.

Before I left Tan's home, he passed to me several of the programme booklets from his previous concerts. These contain detailed descriptions of his music, especially the programme from 2007, in which Tan provides painstaking analyses of all his string quartets, with liberal quotation of themes. It seems odd to find someone like Tan who continues in the same vein as the isolated Romantics of the twentieth century - Richard Strauss, Rachmaninov, Ernest Bloch, and others. Tan's alienation from the contemporary classical world began right from the start when he was a student in France. Yet his music speaks to more listeners, who are generally more attuned to Romanticism than to modernism. The disjuncture within the company of composers, and between composers and audiences, is likely to continue to be a fixture of classical music, which has become so saturated that new compositions are seldom performed after premieres, while the existing repertoire propagates itself across the world. Tan's popularity outside the modernist establishment suggests that 'new music' has indeed lived up to its name - so successfully that it has left a world still enamoured of the Romantic greats behind.

RESOURCES

1. Tan is mentioned briefly in *MA. Tan Chan-Boon: Ephemera* is folder collection of programme notes and other materials which can be located in NLB. Programme notes for the concerts 'Harvest of a Decade' (1997), 'Millenium Memory: My Music, My Art III' (2001) and 'Retrouvailles II: My Music, My Art VI' (2007) are available from NUS.

² Hoffman, E. T. A., *E. T. A. Hoffman's Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*, ed. David Charlton, trans. Martyn Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 234-251.

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2. Email: mmmatchb2005@yahoo.com. Tan has indicated that he welcomes enquiries by phone as well. Tel: 98430975.

3. Website: <http://inkpot.com/classical/tanchanboon.html>. Tan's profile includes a biography and list of works. There is an essay by Derek Lim containing insights into the composer and his music, based on an interview.

4. Scores and recordings:

Year of composition	Available from	Title	Publ.	Available from	Title	Prod.
Score:				Recording:		
Orches.						
1989-1995	NUS	Symphony No. 2 in F# Minor (Genese).	-	NLB or NUS	Symphony No. 2 in F# Minor (Genese).	-
1992				NLB	Autumn. In: 'New Music Forum'.	NAC
Chamber						
1990-1997	NUS	String Quartet No. 1 (Retrouvailles), Op. 14.	-	FB or NUS	String Quartet No. 1 (Retrouvailles), Op. 14. In: 'The Art of String Quartet'.	-
1998	NUS	Ostinatissimo in C Major, Op. 31 (vn., pf.).				
2000-2001	NUS	String Quartet No. 2 (Millenium Memory), Op. 38.	-	FB or NUS	String Quartet No. 2 (Millenium Memory), Op. 38. In: 'The Art of String Quartet'.	-
2002-2004				FB or NUS	String Quartet No. 3, Op. 45. In: 'The Art of String Quartet'.	-
Solo						
1990	NUS	Après un verre, Op. 10 (vn.).	-	NAFA	In: 'My Music, My Art IV: Absolute Solo'.	-
1990	NUS	Awakening: Grand Caprice, from the opening theme of Mahler's 10th symphony, Op. 12 (va.).	-	NAFA	In: 'My Music, My Art IV: Absolute Solo'.	-
1995	NUS	Polyphonic Study in F Minor, Op. 22 (vn.).	-			
2000	NUS	Grand Caprice on a Theme from 'The Merry Widow', Op. 35 (vn.).	-	NAFA	In: 'My Music, My Art IV: Absolute Solo'.	-
2000	NUS	Three Concert Etudes, Op. 36 (vn.).	-	NAFA	In: 'My Music, My Art IV: Absolute Solo'.	-
2000	NUS	Three Moods, Op. 37 (vn.).	-	NAFA	In: 'My Music, My Art IV: Absolute Solo'.	-
2000	NUS	Adagio in memory of my father, Op. 39 (va.).	-	NAFA	In: 'My Music, My Art IV: Absolute Solo'.	-
2002				NAFA	The Ernie Etude, Op. 46 (va.). In: 'My Music, My Art IV: Absolute Solo'.	-
2002				NAFA	Natural, Op. 47 (double bass). In: 'My Music, My Art IV: Absolute Solo'.	-