

Clarice Presents

MARGARET LENG TAN: PERILOUS NIGHT

CAGE – COWELL – CRUMB: Pioneers of the Avant-Garde Piano

Sunday, March 9, 2025 • 3PM

GILDENHORN RECITAL HALL

AT THE CLARICE SMITH PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF
MARYLAND

Clarice Presents

**MARGARET LENG TAN, PIANO • PERILOUS NIGHT
CAGE – COWELL – CRUMB: Pioneers of the Avant-Garde Piano**

John Cage *The Perilous Night* (1944)
(1912–1992) for prepared piano

Henry Cowell *The Tides of Manaunaun* (1912)
(1897–1965) *Aeolian Harp* (1923)
 The Banshee (1925)
 Advertisement (1914/1959)

INTERMISSION

George Crumb *Metamorphoses* (Book I) (2015-2017)
(1929–2022) (Ten Fantasy-Pieces (after celebrated paintings) for Amplified Piano)
 Black Prince (1927) - Paul Klee
 The Goldfish (1925) - Paul Klee
 Wheatfield with Crows (1890) - Vincent van Gogh
 The Fiddler (1912-13) - Marc Chagall
 Nocturne: Blue and Gold (Southampton Water) (1871) - James McNeill Whistler
 Perilous Night (1990) - Jasper Johns
 Clowns at Night (1957) - Marc Chagall
 Contes Barbares (1902) - Paul Gauguin
 The Persistence of Memory (1931) - Salvador Dali
 The Blue Rider (1903) - Vasily Kandinsky
 Written for Margaret Leng Tan

This performance is supported in part by the Maryland State Arts Council and The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation.



THE MORRIS AND GWENDOLYN
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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Written by Margaret Leng Tan

The three Cs—John Cage, Henry Cowell and George Crumb—laid the foundation for the extended language of the piano, conjuring forth tantalizing new sound possibilities from the piano’s interior. While their pioneering, now “classic avant- garde” accomplishments constitute the bedrock for forays by future experimentalists, the alternative pianistic worlds of Cage, Cowell and Crumb remain sui generis, each an inimitably distinct, unmistakable sonic realm.

I have chosen to represent John Cage’s prepared piano with ***The Perilous Night***, a work that had profound implications for Cage on his path towards Zen. Four decades later this work became the inspiration for Jasper Johns’ series of *Perilous Night* artworks, all of which contain a page from John Cage’s score.

The prepared piano is John Cage’s now classic invention from the 1940s: mutes of various materials are inserted between the grand piano’s strings completely transforming its sound characteristics. Prepared with bolts, screws, pieces of felt, rubber and bamboo, *The Perilous Night* fulfills Cage’s intention of creating “a percussion orchestra under the control of a single player.” Written towards the end of his marriage to Zenia Cage, it is one of Cage’s most personal, expressive statements, a study in inquietude on “the loneliness and terror that comes to one when love becomes unhappy.” Cage said that the title, *The Perilous Night*, came from Joseph Campbell’s recounting of an Irish myth about a perilous bed that rested on a floor of polished jasper.

Cage’s teacher, Henry Cowell, is recognized for his two pianistic innovations—the tone cluster and the string piano, Cowell’s term for playing directly on the piano strings. ***Aeolian Harp*** and ***The Banshee*** are string piano pieces while ***The Tides of Manaunaun*** and ***Advertisement*** employ all manner of clusters—aggregates of consecutive notes played by fingers, fists, palms and forearms. *Advertisement* is a sonic depiction of the blinking neon lights of New York’s Times Square while Irish mythology lies at the root of *Banshee* and *Tides*. 2025 is the centenary of *The Banshee*, a work that sounds as refreshingly avant-garde and inventive as when it was first composed.



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Metamorphoses (Book I)

In 2015 I was visiting George Crumb when he casually dropped his bombshell: “Margaret, 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 had been 40 years since the *Makrokosmos* series, Crumb’s groundbreaking, pianistic achievement of the 1970s. Since then Crumb had 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 way-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 *Perilous Night* music from 1944. Crumb’s spontaneous response to *the Perilous Night* artwork was immediate and visceral; his ensuing *Perilous Night* composition could not be more different from Cage’s.

George Crumb went on to compose *Metamorphoses* (Book II) for Marcantonio Barone, a work which I have also performed extensively. At the time of his death in 2022, Crumb had begun work on *Metamorphoses* (Book III) for two pianos.

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

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): Dramaticamente; 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 (especially harmonics of the 5th partial); 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 sometimes 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 always been most fortunate to have had outstanding pianists who were 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
Media, Pennsylvania
March, 2017

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

Margaret Leng Tan would like to thank Art Resource and the Artist Rights Society for their permission to project the paintings featured in George Crumb's Metamorphoses (Book I).

MARGARET LENG TAN

MARGARET LENG TAN, Singaporean avant-garde pianist and toy pianist, is one of the most iconic performers of new American music. Her practice goes beyond traditional boundaries of discipline and genre, embracing aspects of theater, choreography and performance. Her daring and disciplinary rigor is inherited from her mentor of 11 years, John Cage. The New Yorker calls her the “diva of avant-garde pianism.”

Renowned as a pre-eminent John Cage interpreter and for her performances that transcend the piano’s conventional boundaries, Tan was the featured performer in a tribute to Cage’s memory at the 45th Venice Biennale. Her Cage recordings are critically regarded as definitive performances and she performs his music in the PBS American Masters films on John Cage and Jasper Johns. Tan is also one of George Crumb’s favorite performers for whom he composed *Metamorphoses* (Book I), a major piano cycle that Tan has performed to critical acclaim throughout the world since 2017.

The first woman to earn a doctorate from Juilliard, Margaret Leng Tan is recognised as the world’s first toy piano virtuoso. Her groundbreaking 1997 recording, *The Art of the Toy Piano*, transformed a humble toy into a real instrument. Tan 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, ABC (Australia) and National Public Radio (USA) have all profiled her career as a concert toy pianist. Tan’s curiosity has led her to other toy instruments and sounding objects substantiating her credo: “poor tools require better skills” (Marcel Duchamp).

Major works written for her include *Curios* by Phyllis Chen, a solo music-theater piece for toy instruments commissioned by the 2015 Singapore International Festival of Arts. *Dragon Ladies Don’t Weep*, a dramatic sonic portrait of the artist with music by Erik Griswold, is Tan’s fully-fledged foray into theater in collaboration with Chamber Made, Melbourne. In 2020 *Dragon Ladies* premiered in Arts Centre Melbourne at Asia TOPA, the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Performing Arts that co-commissioned the work with Esplanade-Theaters on the Bay, Singapore where it received its Asian premiere in 2021. *Dragon Ladies Don’t Weep* won Work of the Year (Dramatic Category) in the 2021 Australian Art Music Awards.

Tan’s iconoclastic practice has led to two feature documentaries: Evans Chan’s *Sorceress of the New Piano* and Chuang Xu’s *Twinkle Dammit!*, the latter winning Director for Best Feature Documentary at NÔT Film Festival and Best Foreign Language Documentary at Kadoma International Film Festival.

Margaret Leng Tan is a recipient of The National Endowment for the Arts’ Solo Recitalist Award. She was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts by the State University of New York in 2011. In 2015 she received the Cultural Medallion, Singapore’s highest artistic accolade. The Phillips Collection honored her in 2020 as a creator of innovative concert experiences.

Becoming Margaret Leng Tan (Marshall Cavendish International (Asia)), a 2023 children’s storybook by Lai Low and illustrated by Dan Kuah, has been acquired by Kokila Imprint (Penguin Random House). In 2025, in celebration of the 60th anniversary of Singapore’s independence, Margaret Leng Tan will be featured in SG60 exhibitions at Esplanade-Theaters on the Bay and the National Museum Singapore.

Learn more at margaretlengtan.com

ENGAGEMENT ON CAMPUS AND IN THE COMMUNITY

Margaret Leng Tan will be spending time with students in the UMD School of Music (SOM) tomorrow. In the morning, she will be part of a colloquium for SOM composers, and in the afternoon she will give a masterclass for students in the SOM’s Piano Division.

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Gabriela Montero, piano

Ortiz: *Antrópolis*
Montero: Piano Concerto No. 1, "Latin"
Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade*



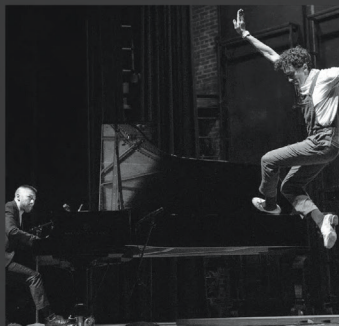
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Sun, Mar 30 • 3PM

Conrad Tao & Caleb Teicher
Counterpoint ft. Gershwin's
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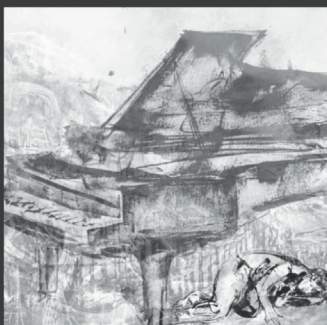
Sun, Apr 13 • 3PM

American Brass Quintet



Sat, May 3 • 7:30PM

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