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## Su Lian Tan: A Guardian of the Contemporary Music Scene

Calm, unassuming confidence was my initial impression of Su Lian Tan, even before my telephone conversation with her. One glance at her background and list of achievements is to render one's own life pretty shambolic. Can you be too well-rounded? Born in 1964 to a musical family, Su Lian Tan was a flute prodigy, a watched star on Malaysian radio and television, before moving abroad and becoming a fellow and licentiate of Trinity College, London, at the grand old age of 17. Despite already being an acclaimed soloist, she continued to play in orchestras and ensembles and with various instruments, including the gamelan. Her transition from flutist to composer was gradual but successful, with her numerous works including commissions for the Takács Quartet, Meridian Arts Ensemble, and the New Juilliard Ensemble. If it makes you feel more secure, she didn't complete high school in Malaysia ("I love telling everyone I'm a high school dropout!"), but only so she could study music at Bennington. With the help of full scholarships, Tan ended up with a Ph.D. and master's from both Princeton and the Juilliard School, demonstrating throughout an insatiable appetite for mastering every facet of composition, as well as retaining her enthusiasm for performance.

With such a blessed, continent-hopping upbringing, she seems to be returning the favor. Now a professor of music at Middlebury College in Vermont, she is equally respected as a composer and teacher. Like so many artists, her recognition has largely remained on one side of the pond, although this will probably change with the arrival of her latest CD on the ARSIS label. Certainly when my review copy arrived in London, she was a name new to me, yet this is a remarkable, beautifully performed album of three compositions: *Jamaica's Songs*, *River of the Trunk*, and *U don Rock*—two song cycles and a piano work, respectively—a neat and perfectly formed program that exposed me to Tan's unique and eclectic sound world. What blew me away on first listen was not just the quality and rawness of the texts she set, but also her ability (not always a given with contemporary composers) to write imaginatively and

sympathetically for the voice. Furthermore, this was not yet another awkward mish-mash of competing styles, but utterly free and confidently structured pieces that elegantly wore their various styles and influences. I was immediately curious to find out more about her background, so when *Fanfare* asked me to interview her I jumped at the chance of finding out what makes this performer/composer/teacher so apparently grounded. Taking time out of her busy schedule at Middlebury College, Tan discussed this album and tackled my questions of specialism, nature, and identity in music.

*Q: What was your musical background in your family?*

*A:* While my lessons were in the Western styles, I played in an orchestra attached to the Ministry of Culture in Kuala Lumpur. We would sometimes perform with gamelans. What a great sound! Also, the street culture there is such that you couldn't really go anywhere without encountering Chinese music, too, Chinese opera and classical instrumental music. Then you would suddenly hear Moslem chant coming from a nearby mosque, or Hindustani music. (Some of my music, like *Moo Shu Rap Wrap*, tries to capture this busyness and makes numerous stylistic leaps within a short space of time.) It would only be a matter of time, after studying modality with Vincent Persichetti, and then serialism with the master himself, Milton Babbitt, that I would venture back to include some of my Asian modality and philosophy. So much is embedded in those notes and rhythms, so many nuances and specific speech patterns. Dad loved music and opera and would be constantly humming and singing. Mum loves music, too, and played a little piano. Both sisters were studying piano, then one one took up the violin and clarinet as well. She was rather good at both instruments but finally gave it all up for vascular surgery!

*Q: So we have the classic choice of the arts or medicine. Were your parents supportive of you choosing music?*

*A:* My parents were very supportive. Music occupies a much deeper part of social consciousness for Asians and Asian families. Music, math, philosophy are all part of a general education, necessary to become a well-rounded individual, a socially conscious adult. That I excelled in music and also visual arts was an achievement of cultural depth for them. And in fact, it was teamwork all the way through, pooling resources when necessary, and then my education in the States was funded by scholarships.

*Q: Why did you leave Malaysia?*

*A:* I never completed O levels in Malaysia. Instead, I left early to go to college at Bennington, one of the few places that would accept me without the high school diploma. It was clear that I would go into music apparently, as I had achieved FTCL (Fellow of the Trinity College,

London) by age 16 and a half. So, it was to the U.S. or the U.K. for me, as I had, by that time, exhausted the opportunities in Malaysia. By then I had already recorded for both TV and radio several times.

*Q: As you were already very successful as a flutist, a prodigy in fact, what made you start composing?*

A: Well yes, I was a “watched” young performer, I think there’s even an article in the newspaper about me, a series devoted to young people toward celebrating independence day, I think. The O-levels were simultaneous with preparations for the fellowship exams, and I didn’t finish them because I left for Bennington College on a full scholarship, a year earlier than most of my classmates would have gone. I started composing at Bennington because all music majors do that there. It was a fascination, then more interesting, and challenging in a different way, and then I got to study with Vincent Persichetti at Juilliard, and so I had to go there.

*Q: Jamaica’s Songs is an extraordinary text, about the death of the author’s (Jamaica Kincaid) mother. It is very touching but also extremely raw and vivid with its imagery and journey of conflicting emotions of maternal love. What were your own feelings about the work?*

A: The text was everything it expresses. It is so very powerful, forbidding, marvelous, uncanny, fearful, loving, Biblical, looping, rather like when one is in the throes of a powerful emotion, very expressionist. The sound of a world churning until it breaks apart and reconstructs itself into something else, wondrously new and yet painful and bereft. Quite romantic in one moment, the next blunt in its description. I guess you’ve figured out that I am usually pretty happy, or at least as happy as I can be while being an artist! The text pulled me in uncomfortable directions. It was difficult to embrace these facets of the maternal relationship. Of course, no such relationship can exist without some amount of tension. It was a question of what degree. I thought of the instrumental parts as angelic Muses to the vocal part; sometimes joining the harangue, other times consoling, hovering in protection, but always close at hand. It’s quite veiled but the last song is a good doppelgänger to the first, so when we hear it at the end of the cycle it’s as if we’ve all gone through a catharsis and are transformed, from the first moment of shock, almost catatonic, to allowing the waves of emotions to course through our bodies.

*Q: It is also very musical in feel. Was this something you and Jamaica had discussed from the start, or did you have to deal with that style, as it came? Did it lend itself well to your style of composition or was it even a hindrance?*

A: The rhythms were always going to be in combination with mine, so I thought more of the music of Jamaica talking, that particular lilt and inflection. That we are both postcolonial island girls made for a great

sympathy. We had been discussing a very different theme for the song cycle. As the piece was commissioned for the bicentennial celebrations of Middlebury College, we had originally been planning a cycle about Siebold, who had gone to Japan, taught medicine, and who later became interested in botany. Then Jamaica's mother died, and everything changed, and so did the text. I abandoned the early sketches for something quite different and dramatic, and then brought those back for *River of the Trunk*.

*Q: Now, River of the Trunk is a similarly earthy, complex, and emotional text, even though it deals with the more comfortable theme of changing seasons. So many composers, old and contemporary, have this acute sensitivity to nature and its changes. Is this something you are aware of in yourself?*

*A: Have you been to Vermont? If you haven't, you must come and visit sometime. It can be arrestingly gorgeous here as days go. One literally stops in the middle of a walk to look around and gaze at the landscape here; the heart opens irrepressibly. I know this sounds very romantic, but it's true! While this beauty touches me and while music both occupies and gets the best of me, I can hardly leave nature unmentioned. While being concerned with our postmodern issues and matters of politics, when we see these pristine, colorful mountains and fields, we find the inspiration to hold on, to create sustainable energy, to combine ourselves and our work with nature in a holistic way. I am happy to rage forth and express the vigors of contemporary society and structures through music, but I also want to give back to the earth. Before moving to Boston, I had a garden of 29 rose bushes. I suppose I want to compose "rose bushes" as well as suicide dramas for a full spectrum of work. I need to hear the distant cataract, as well as talk about the car crash; is that very strange? I think it's essential, at least for me. Mostly, I'm interested in the human being who evolves through a readiness to cope, enjoy, marvel, and despair.*

*Q: So nature in River of the Trunk is beautiful but also unstoppable and unpredictable?*

*A: Nature is beautiful, yes, but also menacing and torturous. We subjectify it and it, in turn, defines us and shows us our place. Everything stops here, and frequently in the winters, when the heavy snow practically obliterates any function. That threat is ever-present in *River of the Trunk*. Sometimes we are hanging on by a thread, the last song, and yet the resonance is great and we will endure. When we began our collaboration, John Elder and I found that we had much in common, like Buddhism and literature. We thought that the process of living is making plans, going in a particular direction, finding it not what we thought it would be, learning, breaking our bones through the process, getting back up and evolving into a new self. The keening quality in the cycle comes from this original conversation, taking place shortly after I had actually broken my leg!*

*Q: Both vocal works are scored for trio and voice. What attracts you to this*

*underused combination?*

A: I really appreciate the kind of music sharing that goes into performing chamber music. So, I thought hard about what instrumentation might lend itself to the expression for *Jamaica's Songs*. Strings in particular seem to have such emotional range and, of course, piano is the usual instrument of choice for Lieder and *chanson*. I had also heard Dawn Upshaw perform the Shostakovich songs with piano trio and it had stuck in my mind as a particularly rich-sounding ensemble for so few instruments.

*Q: You write very well for the voice, not always a given with new compositions. Do you compose with a specific singer in mind, like playwrights casting the role in their heads as they write, and do you look at a singer's stamina and comfort, or is there more an intuitive sense of fitting the text comfortably?*

A: I sing myself, having fallen into it by taking voice lessons to enhance my coloristic range on the flute. My vocal coach and I found that I had a voice that is probably a slightly higher one than Mary Garden's. As her repertoire tends to fit rather nicely with my range, *Mélisande* was the last role I was studying. So I tend to favor composing music that preserves vocal health. That said, however, I did compose a blow-out for the second song of *Jamaica's Songs*. Brenda (Patterson, the mezzo for *Jamaica's Songs*) recovered brilliantly!

*Q: Presumably from being a performer yourself, you seem to be very open to allowing performers to bring their own ideas, like the improvisation in U-don-Rock. Have you always had this healthy level of collaboration with your performers?*

A: Whenever possible, I like to compose for musicians whose performance style I know quite well. To compose a piece that is specific to that particular ensemble or individual is a very special opportunity. I like to play up their attributes and often get a lot of musical ideas from hearing them perform. Don Berman and I talked quite a bit about the nature of that commission. He really likes *Moo Shu Rap Wrap*. Without going into detail, I thought perhaps he liked the freedom of that piece, and its fun and wit. That piece is also made so that the Meridian Arts Ensemble can bring their art to join mine, so the piece has either notated improvisation (mine) or spontaneous improvisation (theirs). It's so easy to forget that we are supposed to bring that freshness, that impulse, to our next performance of Beethoven or Mozart, so easy to get caught up in the notation.

*Q: Your next CD will be a return to performing. What else can you tell us about this project?*

A: This January, I will record new flute works, many of which were dedicated to me. John McDonald, himself a composer, will play the piano with me. We performed a recital of these works a couple of seasons ago.

John's work is a series of miniatures; he manages to say a lot with relatively little time. They are concise and comprehensive. Each piece is based on a set of materials; for example, *Flute on the Bottom* captures echoes of Renaissance textures and invertible counterpoint. *Brief Lyric* is marvelous, a little postmodern song. He is a remarkable pianist as well.

*Q: Aside from chamber works, you also wrote an opera, which will be premiered next year.*

*A: Lotus Lives* is somewhat autobiographical, based on the lives of my grandmother, mother, and myself, but mostly, it's about women assimilating, dreaming, and growing strong from the process. It runs for 50 minutes, and the Meridian Arts Ensemble is both the commissioning body as well as the "orchestra." They are a brass quintet and percussion ensemble. That's the person I am talking about, and often composing for. So the opera is lyrical, and still contemporary, harboring on tonality.

*Q: It is a chamber opera. Did you find it hard, taking in theatrical as well as vocal considerations?*

*A:* In fact when we were discussing the size, shape, and length of the opera, a lot of thought was given over to the style as well. The ensemble and I love all genres and styles of music, when it's done well! So, the Meridian Arts Ensemble would have been delighted to perform anything that I would compose, considering that our first commission together was *Moo Shu Rap Wrap*, in which the brass instruments play in "Chinese" as the main modality. They imitate the sound of spoken Mandarin and Cantonese almost throughout the piece. I am interested in vocal expressions of all sorts, from quacking to the loveliest bel canto. While thinking about the theme of the opera and how I like to write for the voice, however, I wanted to compose in such a way to attract many different singers and types of voices to it, to represent a diversity of women, and to get a variety of interpretations, not just to have a specialist in new music perform it.

*Q: Do you see specializing as dangerous?*

*A:* Although I know what you mean by "specializing," if what it means to be a musician is to give to others by way of sound composition, then I am all for it! This of course means that a specialist musician is able to perform many genres of music and knows no boundaries. This would extend to composing and, because composing must retain a sense of improvisation, then our specialist aims to have knowledge of a lot of different forms and styles of music to enrich their vocabulary, to be able to "speak" in a variety of languages and dialects. Furthermore, our specialist would be able to verbally transmit this mode of thinking and could teach all of the above fluently. I think this is a very outdated idea of specialization, maybe dating back to the Renaissance, but one model of progress and still quite relevant.

*Q: You notice a difference between generations of students, such as the opportunities now?*

A: I think I would have had the same opportunities now. There is still the support necessary for really talented and grounded people. Even as we don't like to think of anything as a meritocracy any more, it still is, especially when the competition is so great for such a small amount of funding. In my case, getting the full scholarships everywhere was because the admissions and other committees at each institution thought that I would be able to continue in that field, and therefore worthy of support. Much more important than having talent or being a virtuoso.

*Q: Presumably it helped that you played in an orchestra as well. In fact your background as soloist, orchestral member, composer, and teacher is incredibly varied. Was this intentional or just the result of being curious?*

A: Once I thought of myself as more composer than flutist, I suppose, things slowly evolved into a different state. The focus shifted from physical virtuosity to mental focus and lots of learning. (Also staying up much later than before, trying to get those ideas down on stave paper before they escaped!) Teaching has a way of helping everything codify, too.

*Q: As in Europe, the U.S. economy looks uncertain. As a composer is it getting harder to get grants and other funding for projects?*


A: Well, it's always difficult to get funding for projects, as most of it usually goes to symphony orchestras and other large institutions. I haven't yet let monetary concerns impede the artistic process, but instead have always erred on the side of hurtling headlong, kamikaze-like into the next project, hoping that it will work out in the end. My family is quite arts-oriented and those who have left the arts remain interested and are supportive. Middlebury College is well established and pays its full professors adequately! ASCAP has recently awarded me two ASCAP Plus prizes, and those went toward the budget for this CD. Bob Schuneman (of Arsis) is also extremely supportive and is so in love with music that he and I have agreed that he should publish my music (with ECS) as well as record and produce it.

*Q: What is your next big composition, and will that be recorded?*

A: The next composition disc will be based on two rather large works. It will feature *Orfeo in Asia*, a three-movement piece for piano that was premiered a couple of seasons ago by Diane Anderson at the Albert Roussel Festival in France. On the disc, it will be performed by Bruce Brubaker, a much recorded pianist, quite amazing in many ways and an old school chum. The other large piece will be *Life in Wayang*, the composition for the wonderful Takács String Quartet. They won't be

recording it, but the Jupiter String Quartet, one of our top young quartets, will. Then Bruce and the Jupiter will join forces in a quintet I am composing right now. My other projects include a new orchestral song cycle for the two gals who are featured in my opera; I can't wait to get to those!

Nor can we, I feel. Her analogy of rose bushes and suicide dramas haunts me; it seems extraordinary that someone apparently so contented and open in interview could be capable of the raw edginess displayed in her latest disc, yet I can see that it is her matter-of-fact acceptance of all of life's trials and joys that makes her music so unified. The obvious comparison, I suppose, is Darius Milhaud, that other expat composer/teacher with a healthy, unsnobbish interest in writing for multiple styles and genres. Both have that open-eared curiosity for the new, as well as a pretty selfless attitude to teaching, as can be gleaned from Milhaud's influence on many of America's current composers. Fascinating as it will be to see which direction Tan's next composition will take us, I am equally intrigued to see who her "Philip Glass" will be, emerging out of Middlebury. With Su Lian Tan taking an active role on various committees like the Lotte Lehmann Foundation and Vox Nova Media, America's contemporary music scene, it seems, has one very committed guardian and contributor. Not bad for a high school dropout.

**Su Lian TAN** *Jamaica's Songs*.<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup> *U-Don Rock*.<sup>4</sup> *River of the Trunk*<sup>2, 3, 5, 6</sup> • <sup>1</sup>Brenda Patterson (mez); <sup>2</sup>David Bowlin (vn); <sup>3</sup>Darrett Atkins (vc); <sup>4</sup>Donald Berman (pn); <sup>5</sup>Szilvia Schranz (sop); <sup>6</sup>Margo Garrett (pn); • ARSIS 9317 (63:12 )

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