

The Flute and Compositional Artistry of Su Lian Tan

BY DAVID DEBOOR CANFIELD

Flutist Su Lian Tan has been in the recording studio since the tender age of 14, has performed widely, and has been recently featured in *Flute Talk*. Composer Su Lian Tan has received numerous commissions and performances of her music, and has written for such groups as the Takacs String Quartet, Da Capo Chamber Players, and the Vermont Symphony Orchestra. Teacher Su Lian Tan is Professor of Music at Middlebury College, and has received many awards and citations in that area. I was fortunate enough to interview all three of them together in an email exchange in early June of 2013. If that wasn't enough, I was also privileged to ask a few questions of Carol Wincenc, the renowned flutist heard in Tan's *Autumn Lute Song*.

Q. Su, how does it feel to juggle what would be three careers for most people?

A. My life's a constant shift between pressure and elation! It's not quite as compartmentalized as it might seem at first. The composer and flutist are one, as is the person who mentors younger musicians. I draw inspiration from experiences that seem trifling to those that rock my world, from my students to everything that feeds my creative "well," my internal dialogue.

Q. Do you sometimes feel that one of your focuses in music is taking too much from the other two?

A. In the past this was more of a concern than now. I remind myself that everyone on the receiving end of my work—my colleagues, my family, my audiences, my performers, and my students—all ultimately want me to feel fulfilled as a musician and a human being, and so are very understanding. Of course, everyone in each one of these groups might be looking for something different from me! For example, if I spent all of my time with no one but my students, would I bring any more to them? In theory that might seem plausible, but if you really understand what it means to be a practicing musician, and what this means in the classroom, you can see that this idea won't hold up! So the most intelligent plan for me would seem to be to attempt to continue to evolve in my various musical endeavors. After that, there is benefit to be found in good organizational skills and persistence in staying the course. I'm not saying that this is always easy—not at all.

Q. How would you describe your own music?

A. Because of my training and background, my inner ear, and memory are filled up with older European music. This makes me feel that my music must be really old-fashioned, turgid or boring, but most of my trusted advisors and friends think that I'm often radical and edgy in my composition. Go figure....

Q. Who do you view as your most influential teachers, either in flute or composition? What did you learn from them?

A. I know it's rather un-PC of me to say, but you did ask, so here goes. I *really* studied at the feet of the great *masters* of composition, although it hardly felt like it at the time. One of my most amazing teachers was Patricia Adams, an artist and painter, who I was very fortunate to have studio classes with at Bennington. She taught me, just by chatting about life, and the process of becoming, that one's art then "becomes" under your care. I still hear her voice frequently, especially when I need to take a piece to the next level; I hear her encouragement to

make that final push. (I bet you didn't know I have an art background!). Other influential teachers were Lou Calabro, Vincent Persichetti, and Milton Babbitt, all such great men and great human beings. They taught by example, and are responsible for my integrity and also my courage to feel comfortable in my distinctly different voice. Sue Ann Kahn, Patricia Spencer, and Tom Nyfenger all together contributed immensely to my abilities on the flute. Each of them contributed in different ways, molding me in different areas, which greatly helped me gain resilience as a performer and musician.

Those were the teachers I was lucky enough to have lessons with in person. My other teachers include J.S. Bach, Beethoven, Schoenberg, and Debussy. And if Bartók were alive, I'd probably have moved to Hungary to study with him!

Q. Well, if you had lived in the early 1940s, you could have theoretically studied with him right here in the US! Do you feel that being a performer gives you an advantage as a composer? Do you consult with the performers for whom you write to get their feedback?

A. If by advantage you mean that I know the difference between idiomatic and un-idiomatic composing, then you bet! I remember one of my favorite compliments from a musician was when Karoly Schranz (of the Takacs String Quartet) mentioned to me that he'd happily practiced his part to my quartet over the Christmas holidays, and that it was so fun to play. If I consult musicians, it's mostly to do with practical issues like how long the piece should be, the medium, etc. I figure the rest is my job, to tailor the piece and parts to their abilities, quirks, and charm. I do this even though most of the performers I'm so lucky to write for can probably play anything I would compose, if it were possible to execute on their instruments! I like to highlight particular stylistic traits of individual performers, too. This is especially true when I'm composing for the voice, because each voice is absolutely unique.

Q. Tell us a little about how you came to write your Autumn Lute-Song, which must be your major work to date for your own instrument.

A. *Autumn Lute-Song* was commissioned by the Vermont Symphony for their fall tour and composed quite a while ago. It's lovely to hear Carol performing it so marvelously on the disc! I thought of giving it to her when it was first written but I was too bashful, so it's a particular pleasure to hear her now. It's also wonderful that when we first met, it was as though we'd been friends forever. Adding to my joy in this was the recording session, conducted by my husband Evan Bennett, and engineered by the terrific Antonio Oliart—all of this was a little piece of Paradise for me. What a team we made—there was so much happiness in the room!! Almost as if the Muses have carried the idea of Tan concerti on the wind, this year I will be embarking on two new projects. One is the orchestration of *Ming*, composed for virtuoso trumpeter Joe Burgstaller, which I'm arranging for solo trumpet and wind band; there will also be a brand new piece which will be inspired by the profound artistry of cellist Darrett Adkins. These may in fact be commissions, but they feel much more like gifts to me! I'm currently composing a quintet for cellist Sophie Shao, and that is giving me great ideas for the upcoming concerto.

Q. Let me ask you, Carol, a few questions! How does it feel to learn a work by a composer who happens to play the same instrument that you do? Did you worry that your interpretation of any places in the piece would diverge from what composer-flutist Su Lian Tan had in mind?

A. *This* is not the first work that I have performed by a flutist/composer! And in each case, there was an open enough relationship that I could ask candidly what the composer wanted. In the

case of Su Lian Tan, it was ideal that she could impart to me the way she wanted the "ethnic flute" effects done, and in some instances, she loved how these came out of my embouchure, rather than hers—there is certainly the human factor here. But, I definitely had to consult with her, and try repeatedly to obtain what she was driving at, and it took several attempts in some spots. It has helped that I have heard so many examples of sounds from various Asian style flutes and flute players, that I came close enough to what she desired.

Concerning matters of standard flute playing, and passages that were overtly *espressivo*, I did ask her about such things as whether to use vibrato or not, what she wanted for the color of specific notes, how much thrust to use, or what kind of articulation was needed, whether very *secco* or more legato. In each such instance it was *highly* advantageous that she was a flute player herself! Thank heaven—this is the best part about having flute colleague, and a trusted one, as a composer!

Q. How did you happen to become friends with her?

A. I happened to be walking through the Juilliard hallway when she was visiting and getting a tour from our president Polisi, with her husband Evan Bennett. We exchanged hello's and she took no time at all to ask me if I would be interested in a recording project. Thank God for that serendipitous encounter. Su was actually quite surprised that I was interested, but I have very good intuition, and had a good feeling about her proposal. As it turned out, I adore the piece—it is simply gorgeous!

Q. I would imagine that a flute work composed by a flutist would be rewarding to perform, but did Su also put some particularly demanding technical or musical challenges for the soloist into this piece?

A. Yes, there are a few tricky spots, but with practice, I could conquer them. My main concern was that I wanted to satisfy what she wanted. This has been my desire for every living composer I've worked with, and I ask a lot of questions about interpretation from them. I will remember very vividly playing the Copland *Duo* with Mr. Copland in 1972, just after it was written, and wanting every possible answer to illuminate my interpretation and my inquiries. After all, being so young and just out of Juilliard, I revered the man and was awe struck! Instead, he would say to me, "Honey, you sound great, just do what you are doing!" *#%#@%*&!! You can imagine how that impacted me! I was a mix of frustration and elation. But he certainly made up for his brevity in our private rehearsals, when it came to a rehearsal with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra of *Appalachian Spring*. I was the new solo flutist of the orchestra, again right out of Juilliard, and Copland as conductor of his work was exceedingly demanding with what he wanted. But working with Rouse, Foss, Tower, Gorecki, Schoenfield, Sierra, Schickele, Heggie, and Rochberg, to name a few, many were very fussy with what they wanted, but many were not demanding at all. It is quite a process, and I am glad you are asking me this in conjunction with Su's work.

Working with her was a wonderful mix of her being demanding, but also open to suggestions. She was a total pleasure to work with, and I am delighted to know her and be acquainted with her work, as she is quite the creative spirit, and *so* original.!

Q. *Coming back to you, Su, what are some of the most important things in music that you feel you should convey to your students?*

A. That music is a whole language, philosophy, and expression, and that it is always deeper than one might initially think. Music is such that it will give back rewards to you exponentially if you are willing to bring to it your best self. This musical loop, at the same time completed and ongoing, is what brings spirituality to the process and product, while personalizing

its every parameter.

Q. What about to your audiences?

A. I want to impart its nobility, justness, and its sometime aching beauty, to produce the kind of event that lifts you out of the mundane into some special place or state. Music should be fun for everyone, too! Even if the subject matter is dark and depressing, an audience must at the end feel that it has had a good and important use of its time,

Q. Do you teach composition or theory, as well as flute?

A. At Middlebury College, I teach composition primarily and of course theory pops up in conjunction with that. At Bennington when I was there as a student, there was no separation or demarcation between those two disciplines, so I now teach both of them concurrently, just as I was taught. I also enjoy coaching chamber music and conducting ensembles as I am needed. My students are my family; for them, I am ready with discipline and support. Last term, the Jupiter String Quartet (which will record my next composition album with Bruce Brubaker) came to read their string quartets. It was a mighty proud day for me, to conduct them and hear this wonderful quartet bring to life that term's work. Also amazing to me was hearing my student ensemble perform the Schnittke *String Trio* with surprising understanding and control.

Q. How did you meet the other artists on this album—Carol Wincenc, Peter Hamlin, Mary Montgomery Koppel, Matt LaRocca, Evan Bennett, and John McDonald?

A. Mary and Matt are two terrific former students of mine and became the impetus for this recital program which brought about this disc. I remember they had completed their works for me at roughly the same time. I'd also asked Peter for an exciting piece with electronics when he came onto the faculty of Middlebury as chairman of the Music Department. I'm very happy to have been invited to perform *Grand Theft Flauto* at the National Flute Convention in New Orleans this summer. John's witty piece *Flute at the Bottom* was a natural, and he had agreed to perform with me. I liked it so much I asked for more! He describes himself as a pianist who composes and a composer who plays the piano, a kindred spirit!

Carol occupies a separate part of my brain and heart. Imagine: in the ever-unfolding saga of my eventful life there is a recurring heroine—Carol! From the time that I became a serious flutist, she was my *idée fixe*, the unattainably gifted, wish-I-could-be-her role model. I will be brief about my husband Evan to prevent devolving into maudlin effusiveness! Love, Music.....and Milton Babbitt!

Q. Now, I'll really put you on the spot: What do you think is the greatest flute work of all time?

A. The concerti Ligeti, Lutosławski, Shostakovich, Bartók, Schoenberg and Debussy never wrote!

Q. I guess that leaves you to fill the void! Thanks for sharing your thoughts with us!

GRAND THEFT AND OTHER FELONIES □ Su Lian Tan (fl); John McDonald (pn); Carol Wincenc (fl); Evan Bennett (cond); Peter Hamlin (elec); Juventas Ens □ ARSIS CD 178 (53:20)

HAMLIN *Grand Theft Flauto* **KOPPEL** *Horizons* **La Rocca** *Down At The Crossroads* **McDONALD** *Brief Lyric. Flute at the Bottom. Nine-Color Night* **Tan** *Autumn Lute-Song*

Flutist-composer-teacher Su Lian Tan is one busy woman, but all of her activity is goal-oriented, and has produced some valuable tangible results. One of these I'm currently holding in my hands: her latest compact disc, "Grand Theft and Other Felonies," a recital of new music for the flute. Each of the works herein contributes something new to the large, but none-too-large body of flute repertory, and each offers the discerning listener musical rewards.

The title of the disc comes from the first work on the CD, a work for solo flute and video game controller, *Grand Theft Flauto*, by Peter Hamlin. The notes helpfully explain that there is nothing pre-recorded in this work; rather, the work is created from a live performance by solo flutist, whose sounds are processed by a computer in real time to create the electronic score. The auralson (my coinage for an illusion created through aural means) suggests that a multiplicity of flutists are involved, but no, there is really just one, Ms. Tan herself. Composer Peter Hamlin has utilized a computer program called Max to create this collage, which is filled with plenty of swirls, overlaying and figuration thrown wildly about. It's a very effective and imaginative use of contemporary electronic manipulation. The opening "big bang" (as the composer terms it), produces an outburst that generates the material for the remainder of the piece. Hamlin, a new name to me, completed his doctoral studies at Eastman School of Music, working with Samuel Adler and Joseph Schwantner, and taught for some time at St. Olaf College. He is currently on the faculty of Middlebury College

Like Hamlin, Mary Montgomery Koppel is likely not a familiar name to the majority of *Fanfare* readers. She also has a connection with Middlebury College, having obtained her B.A. degree there. She went on to Boston University to obtain her D.M.A., and also has taught at Bennington College. Her *Horizons* is a work for flute and piano in six sections. It is, I would say, modestly atonal, and contains numerous interesting effects, especially pitch bends and flutter-tonguing. The six sections seem to cover the span of an entire day, being titled "Nocturne," "Dawn," "Siesta," "Afternoon," "Sundowners," and (once again) "Nocturne." All to the good, except that the countries that I've visited where siestas are routinely practiced, they occur *in* the afternoon, the hottest part of the day. There is plenty of tension in this work, and I wouldn't say that I particularly hear anything that reminds me of a siesta, which I envision as a pretty peaceful thing. I think the piece would work better just as absolute music. Because of the pitch bends, very common in the music of the Native American flute, I hear something of the American West in this work, which fades out on a tri-tone at its conclusion.

Matt LaRocca's *Down At The Crossroads* (sic), begins with an ebullient outburst of activity in the solo flute which quickly settles down into placid lyrical phrases that distinctly resemble a spiritual. What I hear as a spiritual, though, the composer apparently intends to be more akin to the blues, as it is based on Robert Johnson's *Crossroad Blues*, a story about a guitarist who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for complete mastery over his instrument. The work alternates between nearly-atonal "strummings" in the lower register of the piano, and bluesy inflections. There is also a fair amount of lively figuration, and the soloist (I presume it is she) is even required to sing at several points in the score. Although this flutist sings better than some professional singers I've heard, I nevertheless prefer her flute playing. Pitch bends are also a part of this work. The end of the piece suggests that the devil has shown up to claim his victim. LaRocca also attended Middlebury College, and lest the reader wonder about some sort of big coincidence going on here, he should know that Tan herself teaches at the college, and doubtless

became familiar with the music of these composers by her association with them there, as I subsequently confirmed in my interview with her. LaRocca and I share a background in chemistry, followed by a “conversion” to music, so I relate to him on that basis, although I liked his piece even before I read the notes about the chemistry.

Composer John McDonald, on the other hand, has no mentioned connection to Middlebury College, or chemistry, for that matter. His opus numbers suggest—no, they scream—that he is a prolific composer. *Brief Lyric* is his opus 247, no. 1, while the other two works are both drawn from opus 440. Depending on how many pieces are in each of his opus numbers, he might even rival *Fanfare's* own Carson Cooman in prolificity. I like his self-description as “a composer who tries to play the piano and a pianist who tries to compose.” How’s that for humility? His three pieces heard here examine different aspects of the flutes range or sound. The *Brief Lyric* explores the flute in its upper range, with attention given to its lyrical capabilities. *Flute on the Bottom* displays the flute at, well, do I really need to say which part of the flute range is featured here? I think not. The piano gets the high notes in this piece. *Nine-Color Night* covers a wider range of notes, but with muted expressivity, intended to evoke the night. The composer accompanies all three of his pieces, which, from the sound of them, don’t make too great a demand upon his technique, which seems perfectly adequate to do them justice. He need not have denigrated his compositional ability, either.

In the last work, Su Lian Tan turns over the solo flute role to her colleague, Carol Wincenc, so that she could (I am guessing) listen to the work as its composer in the recording studio. Of course, Wincenc has also long been one of Tan’s heroes, so her inclusion in this recital is not surprising. *Autumn Lute-Song* was commissioned by the Vermont Symphony for their 1995 tour. The string orchestra that accompanies the solo flute functions as a sort of grand lute, sometimes jangling or pointed, and at other times gently strummed. The flute spins out a captivating melodic line, sometimes accompanied by a solo string that is reminiscent of the Chinese violin, the erhu. The composer states that she has sought to evoke a timeless tranquility through the sounds of this work, and in this she has succeeded brilliantly. I like all of the pieces in this recital, but this work is far and away my favorite. It has a distinct Chinese sound, but with Western elements worked into the mix. It is gorgeously and brilliantly rendered by flute superstar Carol Wincenc, formerly Professor of Flute right here in Bloomington at Indiana University.

The well-recorded and produced disc is doubtless a must-own for flutists and flute enthusiasts, but others who would like to explore new colors and sounds on this instrument would do very well to check out this CD as well. **David DeBoor Canfield**