

George Crumb

on *Metamorphoses, Book I*

The great Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky invented the idea of transforming 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 (later orchestrated by Maurice Ravel and several others).

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 for the instrument. Included are a special range of timbral techniques such as pizzicato, muted effects, production of 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 such as 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). In addition to the amplified piano the pianist is also required to play 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
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Margaret Leng Tan

on *Metamorphoses, Book I*

In 2015 I was visiting George Crumb when he casually dropped his bombshell: “Margaret, I think 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 has been forty years since the *Makrokosmos* series, Crumb’s groundbreaking, pianistic achievement of the 1970s. Since then Crumb has 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 ways - 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 and his ensuing *Perilous Night* composition could not be more different from Cage’s.

George Crumb is planning a second volume of *Metamorphoses*, this time for the pianist Marcantonio Barone. I can’t wait to see what surprises are in store!

Margaret Leng Tan



Margaret Leng Tan preparing the piano
Photo: Michael Dames

About Margaret Leng Tan

MARGARET LENG TAN has established herself as a major force within the American avant-garde; a highly visible, talented and visionary pianist whose work sidesteps perceived artificial boundaries within the usual concert experience and creates a new level of communication with listeners. Embracing aspects of theater, choreography, performance and even “props” such as the teapot she “plays” in Alvin Lucier’s *Nothing is Real*, Tan has brought to the avant-garde, a measure of good old-fashioned showmanship tempered with a disciplinary rigor inherited from her mentor John Cage. This has won Tan acceptance far beyond the norm for performers of avant-garde music, as she is regularly featured at international festivals, records often for adventurous labels such as Mode and New Albion and has appeared on American Public Television, at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall.

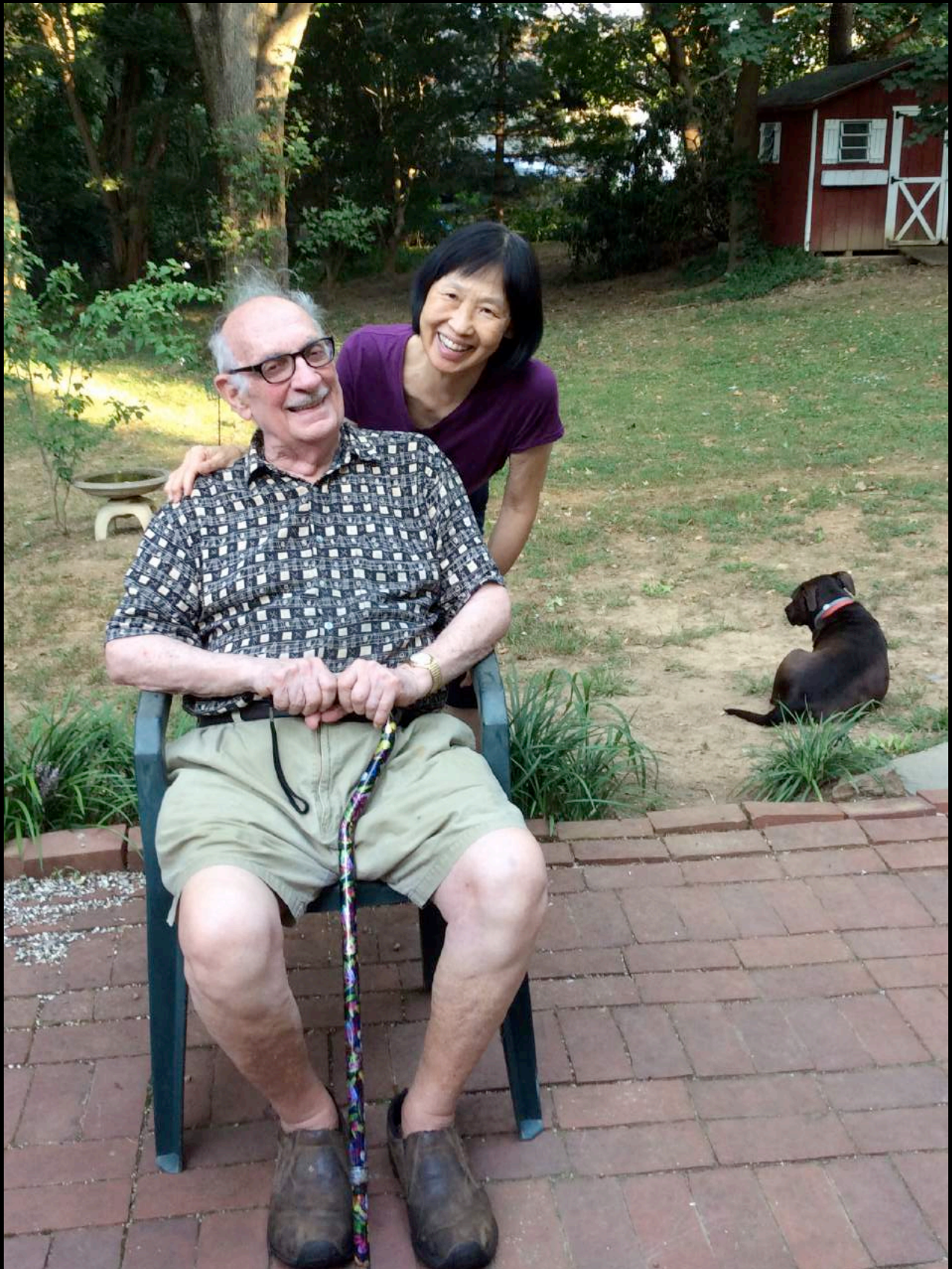
Born in Singapore, Tan was the first woman to earn a doctorate from Juilliard, but youthful restlessness and a desire to explore the crosscurrents between Asian music and that of the West led her to John Cage. This sparked an active collaboration between Cage and Tan that lasted from 1981 to his death, during which Tan gained recognition as one of the pre-eminent interpreters of Cage’s music, partly through her New Albion recordings, *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* and *The Perilous Night/Four Walls*. She has subsequently recorded *Works for Piano 4* and *Works for Piano 7* for Mode Records’ *Complete John Cage Edition*. After Cage’s death in 1992, she was chosen as the featured performer in a tribute to his memory at the 45th Venice Biennale.

Tan takes a lively interest in the musical potential of unconventional and unlikely instruments, and in 1997 her groundbreaking CD, *The Art of the Toy Piano* on Point Music/Universal Classics elevated the lowly toy piano to the status of a “real” instrument. Tan is certainly the world’s first professional toy piano virtuoso. Since then her curiosity has extended to other toy instruments as well, substantiating her credo “Poor tools require better skills” (Marcel Duchamp). *She Herself Alone: The Art of the Toy Piano 2*, Ms. Tan’s latest toy instrumental album (mode 221 CD/DVD), has been called “one of this year’s finest treasures of new music” (Downtown Music Gallery).

Tan favors music that confronts and defies the established boundaries of the piano and has collaborated with like-minded composers to create works for her, such as Somei Satoh, Tan Dun, Michael Nyman, Julia Wolfe, Toby Twining and Ge Gan-ru; she is also a favorite of composer George Crumb. Photogenic and comfortable with the camera, Tan is the subject of a feature documentary by filmmaker Evans Chan, *Sorceress of the New Piano: The Artistry of Margaret Leng Tan*, which has been screened at numerous international film festivals.

The 2015 Singapore International Festival of Arts commissioned *Curios*, a multimedia theater work from Phyllis Chen for Tan who has also been awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore’s highest artistic accolade.

www.margaretlengtan.com



Margaret Leng Tan and George Crumb
Photo: Anne de Fornel