

Cinema Asian America:

Director Evans Chan Discusses ‘Sorceress of the New Piano’

by [Chi-hui Yang](#) | May 26, 2012 at 11:26 AM | [Cinema Asian America](#), [Movies](#), [Xfinity On Demand](#)



"Sorceress of the New Piano."

To see **Margaret Leng Tan** perform is an experience both captivating and mind-expanding. The Singaporean-born, New York-based avant-garde musician is most well known for her performances on the toy piano, that scaled-down instrument originally built with children in mind (and most memorably played by Peanuts character Schroeder), but which has also become adopted by contemporary music composers and performers.

In **Evans Chan**'s entertaining and eye-opening profile of Tan, we have a front seat to her charismatic personality, personal history and role in the creation of some of the 20th Century's most ground-breaking and enduring musical compositions, written by such musical titans as **John Cage**, **George Crumb** and **Henry Cowell**.

[Use xfinityTV.com](#) to order "Sorceress of the New Piano" on your DVR

Tracing her childhood in Singapore to her present day in Brooklyn, "Sorceress" is an enchanting portrait of a singular artist who is the fascinating sum of her many parts; a bi-cultural, artistically adventurous provocateur, who accentuates the threads connecting the musical and social histories of Asia and the western avant-garde. Made by Chan, an equally trail-blazing artist with a parallel diasporic life and history of experimentation, Sorceress is a rare find and true delight.

"[Sorceress of the New Piano](#)" is available this month through Cinema Asian American on [XFINITY ON DEMAND](#).

Your body of work, which was recently featured in a mid-career retrospective at the Hong Kong Arts Centre includes both documentary and fictional films and "conjures up the vision of a diasporic intellectual, who traverses nations, cultures, languages... pointing to a new type of cultural sphere that moves through and beyond Greater China." What drew you to a Singaporean avant garde musician as a subject for a film?

EC: One advantage of leading a diasporic life is having a more panoramic view to the mutation of one's own ethnic identity, which in this case, concerns the so-called Chinese-ness of myself or that of Margaret Leng Tan's. I've always been passionate about music. **Ge Gan-ru** — one of the composers featured in Sorceress — and I both agreed that being Chinese make us listen to Margaret differently, meaning that we seem to be privy to certain resonances in her playing

that fuse the Asian/Chinese sound-world with the American avant-garde, or privy to her ability to penetrate the Asian underpinning of American revolutionary composers like John Cage and Henry Cowell.

Margaret and Gan-ru are both great producers/music-makers, and I'm a mere consumer/listener. But it is a privilege to be around them and follow their sonic odyssey. I met both of them in the mid-80's not long after I arrived in New York. I was then working for the Chinese press, and I interviewed both of them after a Ge Gan-ru concert at The Asia Society, where Margaret performed Gan-ru's Gu Yue (Ancient Music). Something clicked. By the time I decided to go into filmmaking, Margaret's performance of Cage's "In the Name of the Holocaust" had become the subject of my first filmmaking exercise. And the footage from that session found its way, 15 years later, into *Sorceress*, which also featured Gan-ru and his "Gu Yue." It's amazing to see how my encounter with both of them came to such an artistic fruition.

Sorceress of the New Piano reveals the rich artistic circles and lineages which Margaret is part of, from John Cage to George Crumb to Philip Glass – a list of many great 20th Century avant garde musicians. Do you also take inspiration from musicians? Who are some of the foundational artists who have influenced your work, and how much does New York City play a role in your creative process?

EC: Margaret's community of composers has been important to me as a filmmaker from the very beginning. My first film, "To Liv(e)" (1991), which was recently named one of the 100 Greatest Hong Kong films by Time Out, used Margaret's recording of Somei Satoh's music. Another composer friend and Brooklyn neighbor of Margaret's, **Milos Raickovich**, composed an original score for another narrative feature of mine, "The Map of Sex and Love" (2001). When in Hong Kong I worked with Margaret's remarkable colleague from Juilliard, **Nancy Loo**, who provided the piano playing for my films.

Even though most of my work may be more associated with Hong Kong than America, New York/America haunts my corpus both in its narrative and sonic content. After all, I've made two narrative films about New York — "Crossings" (1994) was inspired by a real-life interracial murder in the New York subway during the 1980's, while "Bauhinia" is my post-9/11 story about a pair of Chinese lovers.

Another interesting twist involves the atmospheric original score of "Crossings," which was composed by **Kung Chi Shing**, a student of **George Crumb**'s.

Apparently, "Sorceress" is thus far my only full-fledged Asian American New York film. However, Margaret and I may consider ourselves more bi-cultural than "Asian American" in its legal sense. To begin with, Margaret has spent many years exploring the Asian roots of a certain type/category/segment of American avant-garde music. She owes this affinity to the pan-Asian musical surroundings of her childhood, where Chinese, Malay and Indian music pervades the everyday sound world of her native Singapore. Margaret considers Henry Cowell, one of the important originators of that Asian-inflected sound found in certain American avant-garde music, the first of her great 3 Cs — the other two being Cage and Crumb.

I'd like to highlight the fact that Cowell, just like **Bertolt Brecht**, saw the great Peking Opera performer **Mei Lanfang** during his world tour in the 1930's. Brecht saw Mei in Moscow, and the creative result was the famous "alienation effects" (Verfremdungseffekt) for his epic theatre.

Brecht's epic theatre was a source of inspiration for the so-called Third Cinema, the kind of cinema that disrupts illusion and jettisons opulence — that obsession with so-called "production value" — for creative assertion and creative democracy. That vision has been echoed by the maverick tradition of the American avant-garde. Cage invented the prepared piano because, the stage was too small to accommodate his percussion instruments. Necessity is the mother of invention, given that one is creative enough to prevail over the limitation of resources. As an independent filmmaker, I see myself in a parallel situation. Many critics, as well as PRC and Taiwan filmmakers, expressed amazement at my most recent film "Datong: The Great Society," because they — notably, **Hung Hung**, director of the Taiwan's Xinbei Film Festival and himself a notable filmmaker — never thought an "epic historical drama," about China's first constitutional reformer at the turn of the 20th century, could become filmable through my approach, i.e. without tons of money to recreate luxurious period details. Film audiences have become so used to historical dramas being expensive, "naturalistic" productions that they don't see the possibility of going into the heart of the story by using suggestive "abstraction" the way Peking Opera once attempted. Among contemporary filmmakers, Kiarostami and some of his colleagues in Iranian cinema have made the creative attempt to go back to the basics — in that vein of Brechtian epic theater and American musical avant-garde.

Concerning early influence on my work: Bergman's "Wild Strawberries" and Antonioni's "Eclipse" were the two films I viewed repeatedly in my youth. They woke me up to the sensuous beauty and the intellectual power of cinema.

Looking back, I was struck by how “silent” each of these two films is. Remember the stunning ending of “Eclipse”? Doesn’t its sound design constitute a performance of Cage’s silent piece?

Sorceress can perhaps be considered one of your more formally conventional films; others works explore the fertile terrain in between genres. Your most recent, “Datong: The Great Society” is more of a hybrid essay-documentary-performance work. What draws you to creating films that work outside of established narrative conventions?

EC: Yes, it’s been pointed out that “Sorceress” is actually a “conventional” film within my corpus. I’ve been asked why I didn’t make the film more “avant-garde.” However, my primary consideration had been how to make Margaret’s career and the American maverick music-making tradition behind it comprehensible and comprehensive for “a general audience,” if indeed “the general audience” is willing to take the opportunity to see this film. I hope the film’s availability through Comcast will allow many to expand their sonic vistas.

One barrier this film, and Margaret’s career, is up against is the simplistic notion that post-classical music is unlistenable, irritating, and dauntingly uncompromising. Margaret told me that once she became known to an interlocutor that she is “the leading Cage pianist,” she was told right away that she “didn’t need to do anything” for her playing. Alas, Cage himself, and Margaret, have at times fallen victim to ignorance and misunderstanding regarding Cage’s all too famous silent piece, “4’33.”

Calling “the three Cs” the oxymoronic “classical avant-garde,” makes one wonder how useful such labels actually are. We understand that Bach took more than a century to become a classic. Sorceress was released in 2004, which was not an inopportune moment to take stock of that maverick keyboard lineage and to sift through its countless valiant attempts to extend the sonic horizon for what would, or have, become “classics” via a [SURVEY](#) of Margaret’s own career.

In that sense, “Sorceress” is a deeply conservative work, if by “conservative” I mean the effort to “conserve” what Margaret and I believe is a repertoire which deserves to survive, to emerge triumphant through the filter of time and in the tradition of post-classical music-making.

I don’t feel my film needs to compete against the works featured, to emulate their avant-garde-ness. The occasionally rough, less than polished footage seen in the film was retained in keeping with the idea of “found” art (& music). The footage about Margaret, accumulated over 15 years, that I drew upon were not always filmed by me. But I included such rougher footage because of their human and musical interest. I felt that my mission was to make sense of, and unveil a powerful, eminently legitimate and fruitful, but still under-known musical tradition. This film wasn’t pre-scripted. As intellectually self-aware as Margaret is, she had no idea how I was going to structure the film and to present the material. She was in fact very apprehensive about the final product. Thus, I was most flattered when, after seeing its rough cut, she told me that she really appreciated the film’s “architecture.” I guess she meant that her work and her life-long endeavors had somehow found a discursive/narrative “home” in this film. As a filmmaker often considered belonging to the avant-garde camp, I actually believe, when dealing with “conventional” material, I could and should “de-familiarize” it for fresh insights. However, concerning this exciting but far from familiar material, my approach should be to help the audience acquaint themselves with such “new, exotic material.” The musical works featured in the film are individualistic and noteworthy in themselves, not merely a fetishization of the novel or, as Susan Sontag used to say, being merely “interesting.”

Sorceress was included in my retrospective program in Hong Kong. Many music students came to see it, and they felt energized and stimulated by it. During the Q&A, one piano student said to me: Oftentimes in the past, when called upon to play a contemporary piece, he considered it a pointless exercise to be summoned “to dismantle a bomb.” In Sorceress, he saw for the first time that here is someone who can bring “white hot intensity” to make new music convincing and intriguing. I feel very honored to be a facilitator between Margaret and the upcoming generation of music-makers who, Asian or not, are drawn to the challenges of this corpus.

What are you working on now?

EC: A filmmaker always has various projects in different stages of development. One project that Margaret and I are talking about is to make a film out of her, and to some extent our, reconstruction of this **Jean Cocteau** play, “The Eiffel Tower Wedding Party” (Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel, 1921), which John Cage re-scored in the 1930’s. But before we can even think about filming, Margaret has to complete her research and coordinate her resources since this Cage score actually involves a toy orchestra. I do hope this will come to fruition since this will be Cage’s last major work that remains unrecorded. This is going to be a highlight of Margaret’s career as a prominent new music pianist/Cage

interpreter, and hopefully, my tribute to Cocteau and Cage, two leading icons in my personal pantheon of exemplary (post)modern artists.

<http://xfinity.comcast.net/blogs/tv/2012/05/26/cinema-asian-america-director-evans-chan-discusses-sorceress-of-the-new-piano/>