



75TH SEASON OF CONCERTS

MAY 7, 2017 • NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Lento elegiaco [$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 70$] (uncanny, forbidding)
 (half-sung) — plaintively

mp cant,
(i.v. sempre) *(sim.)* *p cant, cav*

(15) *pp* strike crossbeam (yarn stick)

pp *(i.v.)* gliss. over str. (wire brush) *(sempre sim.)*

Ped. II sempre
Ped. I

20 I (on keys) (espressivo) *on keys*

r str. *pp sempre* *pizz. (f.t.) (sim.)* *ppp legatiss.*

scrape over winding of string with a guitar plectrum

(Ped. II sempre)

I
 I

PROGRAM

4:00 • East Building Auditorium

**The Three Cs: Cage, Cowell, Crumb
Pioneers of the Avant-Garde Piano**

Margaret Leng Tan, piano

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

Henry Cowell (1897–1965)
The Tides of Manaunaun (1917)
Aeolian Harp (1923)
The Banshee (1925)
Advertisement (1914/1959)

Intermission

George Crumb (b. 1929)
*Metamorphoses, Book I** (2015–2017)
Black Prince (1927) — Paul Klee
The Goldfish (1925) — Paul Klee
Wheatfield with Crows (1890) — Vincent van Gogh
The Fiddler (1912–1913) — Marc Chagall
Nocturne: Blue and Gold — Southampton Water (1871) — James McNeill Whistler
Perilous Night (1990) — Jasper Johns
Clowns at Night (1937) — Marc Chagall
Contes Barbares (1902) — Paul Gauguin
The Persistence of Memory (1931) — Salvador Dalí
The Blue Rider (1903) — Wassily Kandinsky

For amplified piano, toy piano, auxiliary percussion

*World premiere and written for Margaret Leng Tan

The Musicians

Singaporean pianist Margaret Leng Tan has established herself as a major force in the American avant-garde. Tan, whose work embraces theater, choreography, and performance, has been called “the diva of avant-garde pianism” by the *New Yorker*. She is renowned as a preeminent John Cage interpreter (her mentor of eleven years) and for her performances of American and Asian music that transcend the piano’s conventional boundaries. As one of George Crumb’s favorite performers, her DVD recording of his *Makrokosmos I and II* has come to be regarded as a performance manual for pianists.

The first woman to graduate with a doctorate from Juilliard, Margaret Leng Tan has since been hailed as “the queen of the toy piano” (*New York Times*) and “the toy piano’s Rubenstein” (*The Independent*, London). In her groundbreaking 1997 CD, *The Art of the Toy Piano* (Philips/Universal), she elevated a humble toy to the status of a real instrument. Critics acknowledge her as the world’s first toy piano virtuoso, who has inspired composers to create a distinctive repertoire for a new instrument. Her subsequent toy album, *SHE HERSELF ALONE: The Art of the Toy Piano 2*, was released as a Mode Records CD/DVD. Evans Chan’s 2004 documentary, *Sorceress of the New Piano: The Artistry of Margaret Leng Tan*, was nominated for “Best Music Documentary” at the American Film Institute/Discovery Channel’s *SilverDocs* (now a Mode DVD).

In 2011, Tan was awarded an honorary doctorate of fine arts by the State University of New York. She was inducted into the Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame in 2014. The 2015 Singapore International Festival of Arts commissioned *Curios* — a solo music-theater work by Phyllis Chen — for Tan, who was also awarded the 2015 Cultural Medallion, Singapore’s highest artistic accolade.

The Composers

John Cage — composer, philosopher, author, artist, and mycologist—is one of the twentieth century's most influential figures. He was not only a leader in the postwar, avant-garde movement and the most important innovator in experimental music, but also an influencer of cultural norms.

In the 1930s, he studied composition with Adolph Weiss and Arnold Schönberg. Cage became involved with modern dance in Los Angeles and Seattle, where he met his future artistic and life partner, Merce Cunningham. In his compositions, rhythm and timbre became increasingly important, and in 1940 he invented the prepared piano. In 1951, he was introduced to the *I-Ching* or *Book of Changes*. This led him to chance operations and indeterminacy, which became his lifelong approach to composing music, writing, and making art. The year 1952 saw the launch of his silent piece, *4'33"*. He also wrote a number of the earliest electro-acoustic compositions. Through his collaborations with Cunningham and artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, he established the concept of interdisciplinary collaboration. Cage's fame started to grow from the 1960s onward. In the 1980s, he started focusing on opera, resulting in his five *Europeras*. In his final years, he composed his series of number-titled pieces — sparse, time-structured, elegiac statements.

Henry Cowell's father introduced him to the Irish music that would remain a touchstone for the composer, while the Irish poet John Varian fueled his interest in Irish folk culture and mythology. While growing up in San Francisco, Cowell experienced Chinese opera, leading to a lifelong interest in world music. It was in Cowell's classes at the New School in the 1930s that John Cage first heard Indonesian gamelan music.

Although lacking a formal musical education, the teenaged Cowell wrote many piano pieces. He began to explore the idea of tone clusters and also experimented with polyrhythm and polytonality. In 1914, on the strength of his compositions, he entered the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied with Charles Seeger and also became interested in mysticism and theosophy. In New York, he met the radical composer-pianist, Leo Ornstein, who encouraged Cowell's pianistic experimentations. He soon caused an international furor with his remarkable new string piano and tone cluster techniques.

Cowell was central to the group known as "ultra-modernist" composers: Carl Ruggles, Leo Ornstein, John Becker, Colin McPhee, Ruth Crawford, and Edgard Varèse. In 1927, Cowell started the periodical, *New Music*, publishing significant new scores including those of Copland and Ives. Cowell's influential book, *New Musical Resources*, appeared in 1930, and in 1934 he created the record label, New Music Recordings. Among his many students were George Gershwin and Lou Harrison, who described Cowell as "the mentor of mentors."

George Crumb received his bachelor's degree in 1950 from Mason College of Music in his home city of Charleston, West Virginia. In 1959, he completed his doctorate under Ross Lee Finney at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. From 1965 to 1999, Crumb taught at the University of Pennsylvania. He has been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship (1956), the Pulitzer Prize (1968), a Grammy Award (2001), and the Gold Medal for Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2015).

While teaching at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in 1962, Crumb wrote his *Five Pieces for Piano*, the first work in his characteristic style. In the 1960s and 1970s, he gained recognition with his vocal compositions based on the poetry of Federico García Lorca — *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970), the *Madrigals* (1965–1969), and *Night of the Four Moons* (1969). Crumb's important instrumental compositions include *Echoes of Time and the River* (1967), *Black Angels* (1970), *Vox Balaenae* (1971), *Makrokosmos* (1972–1973), and *Star-Child* (1977)). His seven-volume *American Songbook* (2001–2010) constitutes the longest song cycle in Western classical music history.

Crumb's stylistic language has its roots in Mahler, Debussy, and Bartók. His iconic, indisputably recognizable voice draws inspiration from sources ranging from Western art music to hymns and folk tunes. The distilled timbral universe and sense of suspended time in a Crumb score invite comparison with certain Asian musical traditions, which Crumb attributes to "certain vibes being in the air at the time." Many of his compositions integrate theatrical, mystical, and symbolic elements that are reflected in the unorthodox notation of his exquisite, calligraphic scores.

Program Notes

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 of 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 toward Zen. Four decades later this work became the inspiration for Jasper Johns's 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 quietude concerning "the loneliness and terror that comes to one when love becomes unhappy." Cage said that his title, *The Perilous Night*, came from Joseph Campbell's recounting of an Irish myth concerning 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 palms, forearms, and fists. *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*.

Metamorphoses, Book I

In July 2015, I was visiting George Crumb in Media, near Philadelphia, when he casually dropped his bombshell: "Margaret, I think I'm about ready to write a new piano cycle that 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 he had chosen to interpret in *Metamorphoses*. He also showed me his preliminary notated sketches for Paul Klee's *Black Prince*, the opening piece in the cycle.

You could have bowled me over with a feather! It has been forty years since the *Makrokosmos* series, Crumb's groundbreaking, pianistic achievement of the 1970s. Since then he 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. George would call to say that he had finished a piece. I would learn it and travel to Media to play it for him on his Steinway M, whereupon he would hand me the next completed movement. These were memorable, intoxicating work sessions: I loved seeing the excitement that hearing his music for the first time elicited in George. I was impressed by his extreme open-mindedness, especially when I had suggestions for practical alternatives that would render the piece playable on a full-scale concert grand, and even the occasional aesthetic reservation on my part that he would then address and render more convincing.

I was extremely gratified that he was tailoring the work to my own particular idiosyncrasies: the inclusion of the toy piano, using my voice in unusual ways — most strikingly, learning to caw from the many crows in Crumb's backyard, apropos of Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows*. He also enlisted a battery of small percussion objects to satisfy my secret desire to be taken for a real percussionist beyond a mere toy embodiment of one.

A highlight of my role as composer's muse was introducing Crumb to Jasper Johns's 1990 *Perilous Night*, one of four works with that title made by the artist in response to John Cage's *The 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. Crumb was not familiar with the original Cage piece, and it was only after Crumb had completed his *Perilous Night* that I played him Cage's work.

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. *Program notes* by Margaret Leng Tan

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). I sometimes wonder if this sort of artistic reincarnation would even be possible without the application of a kind of musical "black magic" (perhaps this "demonic" element is already implied in the term "metamorphoses").

The opening piece of my composition illustrates the painting *Black Prince* (Paul Klee, 1927), over which I have inscribed: "Boldly, with smoldering intensity." I was thinking of Africa as the probable place of origin of the entire human race; my thoughts drifted to that modern "black prince," Nelson Mandela, who won the admiration of the entire world for his humanity and courage despite unimaginable hardship.

Goldfish (Paul Klee, 1925); *Vivace*, quasi presto; "playfully, whimsically." My piece attempts to replicate the bizarre swimming acrobatics of this remarkable creature and owes much to Debussy's *Poissons d'or* from his *Images*. I also quote tiny thematic cells from two of my earlier compositions.

Wheatfield with Crows (Vincent Van Gogh, 1890); Lento elegiaco; “uncanny, forbidding.” This painting is one of the very last works of Van Gogh and seems to me to be suffused with a sense of death.

The Fiddler (Marc Chagall, 1912–2013); Poco animato; “joyous, exuberant (in a Jewish-Russian folk style).” As depicted in the painting, this work might be more accurately titled *Fiddler on the Roof*, since it portrays that familiar figure of Jewish-Russian village life who musically commemorates all the important events of the villagers’ lives — births, weddings, funerals, and so forth. I have locked in the tuning of the violin (G-D-A-E) by means of the piano’s *sostenuto* pedal so that these pitches resonate throughout the entire piece.

Nocturne: Blue and Gold — Southampton Water was painted by the American artist James McNeill Whistler, 1871. My musical setting attempts to replicate the eerie insubstantiality of this impressionistic painting. I have inscribed: Lento sospeso; “ethereal, dreamlike.”

Perilous Night (Jasper Johns, 1990); Molto vivace; “fearfully, with dark energy.” This painting was inspired by a piano piece of the same title by John Cage (the composition of which was prompted by an emotional upheaval in Cage’s life). So with the advent of my own *Perilous Night*, we see an example of a “double reincarnation” — music into painting, and then again into music.

Clowns at Night (Marc Chagall, 1937) is one of my favorite of all paintings. I have provided my own subtitles: “A ballet grotesque for circus folk and poltergeist (in a lazy blues tempo, languid, seductive, ghostly).” The blues melody is played on a toy piano and the poltergeist is represented by two wood blocks with different pitches.

Contes Barbares (Paul Gauguin, 1902); Drammaticamente. This provocative painting suggested to me a theater piece for three characters: a storyteller (the strange male figure with deformed features and clawed feet), a reciter of ancient lore (the girl in an idol-like position), and a dancer (the girl to her right). I gave the music a four-fold structure: “The storyteller invokes a vision. . .,” “Tahitian death chant: spirit of the dead watching (*Manao Tupapau*),” “The storyteller invokes a vision. . .,” and “Tahitian dance: myth of the moon (*Hina*) and the earth (*Fatou*).”

The Persistence of Memory (Salvador Dali, 1931); Lentamente; “shadowy, dreamlike.” I cite three of my own “persistent memories” as revealed by three musical quotations: 1) A quote from Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto (my father, an accomplished clarinetist, would often practice at home and Mozart was his favorite composer); 2) A quote from Beethoven’s Piano Sonata, op. 110 (this was the first of Beethoven’s late works I learned as a teenage piano student); and 3) “Amazing Grace” — a favorite hymn tune in the heart of Appalachia (my Appalachia).

The Blue Rider (Wassily Kandinsky, 1903). Molto agitato; “with a relentless driving rhythm throughout.” A commentator wondered if Kandinsky had in mind Goethe’s poem, *The Erl-King*, in which Death is pursuing a young child. (An indistinct childlike contour is discernible in the rider’s arms.) I embraced this interpretation and my musical setting portrays a father galloping on horseback with his son in a frantic, futile attempt to outrun Death.

Like all of my piano works since *Five Pieces for Piano* (1962) and 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), but also various glissando techniques, bending of pitch, special pedal effects, and so forth). 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!

Credits

- Black Prince*: bpk Bildagentur/Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany/Art Resource, NY
- The Goldfish*: bpk Bildagentur/Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany/Elke Walford/Art Resource, NY
- Wheatfield with Crows*: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands/Art Resource, NY
- The Fiddler*: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands/Art Resource, NY
- Nocturne: Blue and Gold*: Tate Gallery, London, UK/Art Resource, NY
- Perilous Night*: ©Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/Private collection/Jamie Stukenberg/The Menil Collection
- Clowns at Night*: Musée d'Art Moderne, Saint-Etienne, France/Art Resource, NY
- Contes Barbares*: Folkwang Museum, Essen, Germany/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY
- The Persistence of Memory*: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA/Art Resource, NY
- The Blue Rider*: Foundation E. G. Buehrle/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Upcoming Events of the Seventy-Fifth Season of The William Nelson Cromwell and F. Lammot Belin Concerts

Laura Falzon, flute, and Rupert Boyd, guitar
Toward the Sea
Presented as part of the
European Month of Culture
May 10, 12:10
West Building, East Garden Court

Winners of the 2016 Joseph and Goldie Feder Memorial String Competition
Presented in cooperation with
Washington Performing Arts
May 13, 12:00
West Building, East Garden Court

Winners of the 2016 Misbin Family Memorial Chamber Music Competition
Presented in cooperation with Washington Performing Arts
May 13, 2:00
West Building, East Garden Court

Boreal Trio
Music by Max Bruch, Jean Françaix, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Uriel Vanchestein
May 14, 3:30
West Building, East Garden Court

Tomas Kaco, piano
Music by Bach, Chopin, and Paganini
Presented as part of the
European Month of Culture
May 17, 12:10
West Building, East Garden Court

General Information

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

The use of cameras or recording equipment during the performance is not allowed. Please be sure that all portable electronic devices are turned off.

Concerts are made possible in part through the generosity of donors to the National Gallery of Art through The Circle. Reserved seating is available in recognition of their support. Please contact the development office at (202) 842-6450 or circle@nga.gov for more information.

www.nga.gov
www.instagram.com/ngadc
www.twitter.com/ngadc
www.facebook.com/nationalgalleryofart

The department of music produced these program notes. Copyright © 2017 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Cover Score excerpt from *Wheatfield with Crows* (detail) by George Crumb, courtesy of C. F. Peters Corporation, NY

Back cover *West Building, Constitution Avenue entrance, viewed from Sixth Street NW, 1941, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gallery Archives*