

Cultural Dream Weaver

Composer, Tan Dun, on love, life and the heart of his music

BY TODD COCHRAN

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流水何處去

"I'M TRYING TO BREAK UP THE BOUNDARIES OF THE MODERN AND THE ANCIENT, THE WEST AND THE EAST, THE FUTURE AND THE PAST." TAN DUN

Tan Dun





To consider musical expression,

and what it means to those who create it and how it then translates to the audience, is to be transported into a dimension of limitless memories, impressions and emotions. With art, society expresses and re-experiences itself, and also imagines the world of tomorrow. Chinese-American composer, Tan Dun's metier is to communicate with the open-minded. For those who are drawn to the theatre of his sensory stimulating explorations, he brings a rich depth and complexity. While his themes weave varying cultural histories, root concepts, and mother tongues, his ideas often appear to be informed by deep intelligence. As a 'citizen philosopher' there's connectivity in Tan's work, and in a proactive style, he continues to do his part to help audiences go beyond the limiting viewpoint of 'our best work is behind us'.

The range of Tan Dun's musical career is diverse, and from his home base in Manhattan, New York City, he travels frequently and far. You might say his approach is to not stand still; he's a composer, symphonic conductor, percussionist, and conceptual artist who freely accesses his range of personal experiences to shape his sonic reverie. Following the sequence of his compositions—which includes his *Grammy* and *Oscar*-winning film score for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*—can be likened to observing a private past becoming a public present.

In his work *The Gate: Orchestral Theatre IV*: to be presented by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra at the *Singapore Arts Festival 2002*, Tan has encircled the concept of love in the context of a desire for resurrection. We shared thoughts on music, his philosophies on music making, and art in the 21st century.

Todd Cochran: In the traditions of concert music and performance art, two areas—the

literary and musical—can be combined to create what we know as 'the great statement' or 'the big gesture. *The Gate* suggests an extension of this tradition. How would you describe this experience to listeners?

Tan Dun: *The Gate: Orchestral Theatre IV* was written in celebration of the arrival of the new millennium. I was trying to write a piece to express what we need for the new era, which of course is 'love'. Through this love I thought it might be interesting to combine the high technology and very earthy and rooted ethnic culture together. In that sense multicultural and multimedia have joined together in discovering deep love. So this is why I have the four media—video, Peking opera, Western opera, and puppet theatre of the Japanese tradition. I'm trying to break up the boundaries of the modern and the ancient, the West and the East, the future and the past.

TC: What you're offering with *The Gate* is actually a step removed from 'performance art', whereby the audience—upon seeing themselves on video monitors—'participates' in the outcome of the piece.

TD: The piece is performance art, opera art, inspiration art, orchestral art. In *The Gate* you also see a water installation that makes water sounds on stage. It's a very stunning visual metaphor and provides sounds of both 'what is death' and 'what is love', and also sounds of resurrection. Also there are 20 violinists playing from different locations in the audience which gives the performance a strong installation experience.

The three women [in the piece] all died by their own hands. The Peking opera story is from *Farewell My Concubine*. The soprano is from *Romeo and Juliet*. The Japanese puppet theatre, *The Love Suicides at Amijima*, is from the film *Double Suicide* [circa 1972].

The gate is a metaphor, it's an invisible gate actually. So what I did was to write a

calligraphy gate for the production, with these three women going through this gate.

TC: Incorporating a calligraphy gate is interesting. It reminds of the art of calligraphy, where great emphasis is placed on where the artist puts their signature. In a way this signature reinforces the watermark of the artist, which leads me to ask: what is the watermark of this work?

TD: I feel that for the 21st century it's important we have the metaphor of love resurrected.

TC: As we embrace the times we're living in, it's difficult not to hear the cry of humanity. The beliefs that you are putting forth, and your storytelling, provides an almost allegorical context.

TD: *With Farewell My Concubine*, Yu Ji's suicide is based upon her love of the earth. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's love and then suicide is constructed upon the family's hate. With *The Love Suicides*, Koharu's suicide is based on the belief (in the Japanese tradition) that as a prostitute she can never love, nor be loved.

TC: You've lived in both Asia and America and your music embraces the clarity and textures of both. In which ways do the memories of your early musical encounters inform your musical process and ongoing creative quest?

TD: Actually for me, the high tech always meets my early shamanistic cultural experiences. This is pretty much what I'm doing in New York. New York is a multicultural capital, like Los Angeles, and it's also a capital of experimental art. Sometimes I find this is a kind of 'modern society'-'Buddhist society' circling idea. The circling idea that's always coming back is: what is the modern, what is the ancient, what is the future, what is the past? This is why my modern pieces will always continue to reflect my early childhood memories. For example, the ghost opera, and



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the inclusion of rituals stems from Hunan culture which is very shamanistic.

The shamanistic culture in Asia always symbolises—everything has a spirit: the trees, the water, the clouds, human beings have a spirit. This means that as we can talk to a human being, the human being can talk to past lives and future lives. Vast parts of the culture are being bared and explored in *The Gate*. The three women have already died—how could they speak? How can they say they want to try love again? Obviously I’m very much influenced by my childhood.

TC: You’ve spoken warmly of your relationship with visionary composer/conductor, Toru Takemitsu. Your composition, *Concerto For Water Percussion (In Memory of Toru Takemitsu)*, is a colorful homage to his empathy for, and representations of, the textures of nature. Talk a bit about the influence he’s had on your sensibilities.

TD: The piece is actually using water sounds. With the sounds of water, there are many, many choices of sound. Actually with my colleague, a percussionist, we invented a number of water percussion instruments. Everything is transparent—you can see the water inside. We had many water instruments made in New York, and there were other

instruments we researched on the Internet. We used the *waterfon*, and had more than 20 water instruments to play. Again, it was very much like performance art, installation art. All the water instruments also have lighting.

TC: The approach you’ve taken to music as social commentary is fascinating. The fact that you mention shamanistic ritual as a source of insight, and that your ‘themes’ address both physical and spiritual realities, suggests a personal tone of great concern. What is this concern?

TD: Water is a perfect subject for

multicultural, multimedia art. In every culture water is central. From the Western world we have baptising and resurrection. In the East there are water festivals; there’s the Tibetan pouring festival where water is poured onto participants which is believed to bring good luck. The American Indians have a water gong, where they put the water into ceramics.

TC: You’ve experienced a tremendous amount of validation and success with the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. You’ve said that your shared concern with filmmaker Ang Lee, and cellist Yo-Yo Ma, was to provide an important counterpoint to the paradigmatic “fatal, bloody, violent” martial arts image as commonly portrayed in Hong Kong films. What has been the most far reaching impact of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*? Can you also talk about the film you’re currently scoring?

TD: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was written after *The Gate* as a continuing spiritual journey. For example, having Chinese pipas, cellos, one orchestra Western, the other Chinese, electronic music and also Turkish clocking instruments, continues a theme. (*laughing*) The new film I’m working on has just started, it’s early and I don’t want to talk too much about it!

TC: For many, the complexity of the social dynamics in China during the late 20th century—the period of the Cultural Revolution, your formative years—is not easily grasped. How did your orientation to Western music occur?

TD: My musical experience had two big steps. Before I was 18, before the Cultural

Revolution, it was more pure Chinese folk music and drama. Hunan is very, very far from the big city and during the Cultural Revolution we were not allowed to play Western music. After 18 I started to study at the conservatory in Beijing, studying all of the Western music, pop music, symphonic music, modern music, all philosophies. At this point I decided to totally jump into the expression of Western music. I came to the United States, and got a doctorate degree... (*laughing*) all kinds of stuff. Afterwards I found it was much more efficient to express myself in both, because that is what I’m made of. I’m not trying to purposely do something [different]... I cannot escape from my own experience.

TC: How were you drawn to conducting?

TD: I always wanted to be a conductor, because when I was a child I had a ritual band, not just for Buddhist weddings, but also funerals and shamanistic ceremonies. Now that I have the opportunities to conduct some of the greatest orchestras in the world I still use the same kind of spirit! (*laughing*). I mean a musician’s work is to have dialog with the soul.

TC: Conducting your own compositions provides the opportunity to conform your work to the moment.

TD: I love to perform. Composing and performing cannot be separate.

It’s been said that “Where our heart is, there also is our art”. Tan Dun’s composition, *The Gate*, puts forth some intriguing ideas, particularly in the way it draws from three aesthetics—Peking opera, Western opera, and Japanese theatre—and connects them with a common concern for renewed life. There is a sense of fraternity shared amongst the three characters, conveyed with words, musical melody, and visual movement.

The combination of poignant setting and leitmotif creates a powerful dialog about multiculturalism. It’s a beautiful representation of how creativity occurs between the material world and the inner world of the mind ☐

Tan Dun will conduct The Singapore Symphony Orchestra in *Concerto for Water Percussion and The Gate: Orchestral Theatre IV* on 31 May and 1 Jun at NUS—University Cultural Centre.

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