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Guest Artist Recital

Margaret Leng Tan, piano

7:30 p.m., Thursday, Sept. 29, 2022

Grusin Music Hall

Brief introduction to the program by Steven Bruns

Arched Interiors II

For bowed piano and processed bowed piano (1991/revised 2022)

Written for Margaret Leng Tan

Christopher Hopkins (b. 1957)

Metamorphoses, Book II

Ten Fantasy-Pieces (after celebrated paintings)

For amplified piano (2020)

George Crumb (1929-2022)

- I. Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black (1925) – Paul Klee
- II. Landscape with Yellow Birds (1923) – Paul Klee
- III. Christina's World (1948) – Andrew Wyeth
- IV. Purple Haze (1991) – Simon Dinnerstein
- V. Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold) (1907) – Gustav Klimt
- VI. Spirit of the Dead Watching (1892) – Paul Gauguin
- VII. Guernica (1937) – Pablo Picasso
- VIII. From the Faraway, Nearby (1937) – Georgia O'Keeffe
- IX. Easter (1968) – Marc Chagall
- X. Starry Night (1889) – Vincent van Gogh

Margaret Leng Tan's residency in the College of Music is made possible by generous support from the Roser Visiting Artists Program and the CU Roser Piano + Keyboard Program. Technical assistance from Kevin Harbison, Recording Engineer, and Ted Mulcahey, Head Piano Technician, is also gratefully acknowledged.

Program notes

CHRISTOPHER HOPKINS's collaboration with Margaret Leng Tan began in 1990, leading to two compositions, *Arched Interiors* (1991) for bowed, plucked, and strummed piano strings with prerecorded digital sound transformations, and *Rings of Interiors Rung* (1995) for prepared toy piano. *Arched Interiors II* is a consolidated version of the 1991 composition, focusing mainly on the bowed piano technique.

Christopher Hopkins's electroacoustic compositions combine innovative performance techniques, computer-based transformations of instrumental sounds, and unique approaches to music notation. In *Arched Interiors II*, the technique of bowing the piano strings (with bows made from fishing line) reveals the "interiors" of each string's complex of harmonics, as well as a variety of timbres and articulations not normally heard from the instrument.

The composition begins with a series of long, arching bow strokes that evoke a floating, timeless and revelatory sound world. This gives way to a single continuous tone that forms a smooth surface upon which are cast plucked melodic tones. This is interrupted by aggressive and "raging" music that eventually transforms into a sea of high-pitched ringing harmonics that become increasingly gentle and soft. At the close, images from the opening movement return for a distant and reflective conclusion.

The computer-processed bowed piano sounds were produced for the original 1991 composition, *Arched Interiors*, as part of the artist-in-residence program at Harvestworks, Inc. in New York City and at the computer music studios at the State University of New York at Buffalo. (Excerpted from notes by the composer.)

George Crumb - *Metamorphoses, Book II*, for amplified piano

When, in 1980, George Crumb composed *A Little Suite for Christmas, A.D. 1979*, he was inspired by Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel in Padua. The two books of *Metamorphoses* are a return to the mysterious process of transmuting sight into sound. In the notes to his score for *Metamorphoses, Book I*, George Crumb points to Modest Mussorgsky as the first composer to transform visual art

into music, in his cycle for piano *Pictures from an Exhibition*. Crumb wonders “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.’” Each movement is inspired by a different painting. Rather than aiming for precise musical analogs, Crumb responds to the ethos—the characteristic expressive tone—of the painting, and often to the title as well. The music explores a dazzling expressive range, and Crumb positions the movements in each Book with the mastery of an expert gallery curator. The two books of *Metamorphoses* mark another return for the composer. Though he had begun using extended techniques in *Five Pieces for Piano* (1962), Crumb’s most comprehensive exploration of new modes of expression for the piano dates from 1972–73, with the two volumes of *Makrokosmos*, which were composed for pianists David Burge and Robert Miller. (Burge and Crumb were faculty colleagues at CU Boulder from 1962–64.) As he was composing *Metamorphoses, Book I*, Crumb met regularly with pianist Margaret Leng Tan, to whom the work is dedicated. She gave the world premiere at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 2017. Ms. Tan’s recording of [Book I for Mode records](#) joins her earlier releases of the *Five Pieces for Piano* and *Metamorphoses, Volumes I & II* (also released on DVD).

1. “Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black” (Paul Klee, 1925) George Crumb begins *Metamorphoses, Book II*, as he did *Book I*, with two movements inspired by this especially musical painter. Klee uses a quilt-like grid—12 squares tall by 13 squares wide—to focus on the problem of color harmony. Art historian Andrew Kagan ranks *Alter Klang* as one of the artist’s principal masterworks, the finest of the “magic square” paintings. He views the “stately evolutionary rhythms, of earth tones, vegetation greens, and fruit burgundies out of primeval darkness” as Klee’s homage to Leonardo’s *St. John the Baptist*.

Crumb’s sophisticated awareness of the past, like Klee’s, underlies a deceptively simple surface. The prevalent interval of the perfect fourth evokes the archaic sounds of medieval organum, as well as the rustic, rough drones of music from the countryside. The sostenuto pedal allows seven notes to ring as a continuous drone. In contrast to the solemn parallel fourths, intermittent melodic flourishes of

perfect fifths flicker in the treble register. The effect is analogous to Klee's use of black underpainting to intensify the effect of each colored square.

2. "Landscape with Yellow Birds" (Paul Klee, 1923) Klee places seven yellow birds in a fanciful, moon-lit forest against a black background. Miniature fir trees are dwarfed by overgrown, apparently imaginary plants. Birds are perched on leaves, another is in the shadows at the bottom, and one hangs improbably upside-down from the cloud bank at the top of the picture. The scene is at once childlike and uncanny.

Crumb's music evokes the nervous chirping of birdsong in alternation with slower passages, in which the languid melody is punctuated with glissandos and lengthwise scrapes on the bass strings. The sostenuto pedal holds the dampers away from the strings of the bottom octaves so that the "finely etched" twittering of the bird music creates, in the composer's words, a "dreamlike pattern of echoes."

3. "Christina's World" (Andrew Wyeth, 1948) Wyeth's neighbor Anna Christina Olson appears in four of his paintings; in this famous picture, we see her from behind. According to curator Laura Hoptman, the title "Christina's World" indicates that the painting is "more a psychological landscape than a portrait, a portrayal of a state of mind rather than a place," a view that Crumb shares.

The movement is to be played "slowly, plaintively (like a broken idyll)," with the damper pedal held down throughout. In the opening and closing sections, an introspective treble melody is subtly colored by very soft harmonics activated by a fingernail lightly scraped over the metal windings of bass strings, while the thumb touches the appropriate harmonic nodes. Perhaps in response to the curving lines of Wyeth's dry, grassy field, the melody in the first section is twice interrupted by gestures that sweep rapidly upward; these contours are answered later by descending gestures that lead to the slower closing section. The unsettling middle section provides contrast.

4. "Purple Haze" (Simon Dinnerstein, 1991) In Dinnerstein's picture, a reclining woman floats above the hazy purples and grays of a Manhattan nightscape. The

artist conceived the work as part of a series that explores “the different psychological states” produced by placing a similar nude figure against different backgrounds. George Crumb cites Jimi Hendrix’s famous “Purple Haze” as an added inspiration for the bluesy elements of this movement.

The background in Crumb’s composition is a constant two-bar harmonic pattern in the bass, which the left-hand plays on the keys. The damper pedal blurs the sound throughout. Above this hazy backdrop, the right-hand produces melodic figures—sometimes on the keys, sometimes pizzicato—derived from the minor seconds and thirds of the bass ostinato. The piece begins softly, gradually grows to a loud climax, and then gradually fades to a very quiet conclusion, which is punctuated by a final loud chord ringing in the treble register.

5. “Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold)” (Gustav Klimt, 1907) This portrait is among Klimt’s most famous paintings from his “golden period,” 1906 to 1909. The subject’s pale head and hands are enveloped by shimmering patterns of gold and silver, and isolated patches of contrasting colors.

Crumb responds to Klimt’s shimmering surface by emphasizing the “luminous coloration of the piano’s resonance.” The composer creates the “metallic, glistening, iridescent” quality indicated in the score by means of “the collision between two ‘opposite’ whole-tone scales.” The intricate patterning of the painting is reflected in music that presents a succession of ideas in the treble, each articulated by contrasts in texture, rhythm, and volume. The damper pedal allows the glittering sonorities to ring freely, and, in the opening and closing sections, the pianist gently brushes metal wind chimes after each statement of a four-chord motive. Crumb signals the end with a single glissando across the bass strings, followed by resonant strokes with a yarn mallet on a metal crossbeam of the piano and soft, fragmentary echoes of the opening.

6. “Spirit of the Dead Watching” (Paul Gauguin, 1892) The painting is the best known of Gauguin’s various representations of a frightened young woman lying nude on her stomach, usually with a shadowy figure in the background. George Crumb considers this one of Gauguin’s most disturbing images, and his music is intended to suggest the “somber and unnerving mood” of the painting. Sounding

throughout is a Death Drone, an eerie rainbow of harmonic partials that is produced by continuous, rhythmic scraping motions along the metal winding of the low C-sharp string. The left-hand adds to the darkly mysterious atmosphere with glissandos across the bass strings, as well as quiet strokes on spring coil drum and large sizzle cymbal. The imposing ancestral spirit of J. S. Bach is manifested by the musical letters of his name—B-flat, A, C, B-natural—played by a fingernail scraping the bass strings. From this famous chromatic motive, Crumb derives all of the movement's main melodic ideas.

7. “Guernica” (Pablo Picasso, 1937) The artist created this painting in reaction to the April 1937 annihilation of the Basque village of Guernica; Nazi Germany and fascist Italy had carried out the bombing at the request of Spanish Nationalists. The matte, monochromatic palette of the monumental 12' x 26' canvas is a grim depiction of the trauma of war. In 1947, painter Ad Reinhardt recalled the story of a Nazi official who, looking at a reproduction of “Guernica,” asked the artist, “So it was you who did this?” Picasso answered, “No, you did.”

Crumb's score instructs the pianist to express the music “savagely, brutally (with an apocalyptic sense).” The movement opens with a rapid figure suggestive of machine-gun fire, played on the soundboard with a hard yarn mallet. Cork-backed metal rulers rest on the strings, producing jangling distortions throughout. Dark percussive effects in the bass result from striking the center of one of the rulers, as well as from slamming the muting stick against the strings. As this violent movement unfolds, the music builds to a ferocious climax, and then collapses from the highest register down to the lowest. A series of throbbing bass notes leads into the dolorous lamentations of the closing passage, during which the pianist softly utters “Guernica!” three times.

8. “From the Faraway, Nearby” (Georgia O’Keeffe, 1937) O’Keeffe declared that “the meaning of a word—to me—is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make more definite statements than words.” George Crumb has expressed analogous thoughts about music. O’Keeffe once audited a class at Columbia University where students were asked to draw in response to recorded music. The experience sparked her interest in exploring “the idea that music could be translated into something for the eye.”

Crumb views O’Keeffe’s imagery as “a profound lesson on the fragility of life,” and he translates the desert sands and dessicated deer skull into the dry sounds of the maraca and bamboo wind chimes. In this slow, introspective movement, a “ghostly music of shadows” is expressed in three broad phrases. At the beginning of each, the pianist strikes one of the piano’s metal crossbeams with a mallet, then softly strikes the lowest strings with the muting stick. Each of the three phrases ends when the pianist quietly strikes the metal coil drum and whispers O’Keeffe’s evocative title, “From the Faraway, Nearby.”

9. “Easter” (Marc Chagall, 1968) In the original French (*Les Pâques*), Chagall’s title refers to the Christian feast of the resurrection, though his painting incorporates imagery from the Jewish feast of Passover (*La Pâque*). The duality is reflected both in the painting and in Crumb’s music. A white moon casts snowy highlights on the shadowy bottom portion of the painting, where four figures are seated for the Passover feast alongside other images from Chagall’s childhood shtetl. A golden Angel of Death soars over the rooftops, rising toward the vibrant red and green at the top of the canvas. A yellow creature (the Lamb of God?) looks on from the top right.

The movement is marked “boldly resounding, joyously (like cathedral bells),” and bell sounds of every kind ring throughout. The unusual timbre of the opening passage, which recurs in varied forms, is produced by pressing a felt-covered muting stick on the strings at the fifth-partial nodes while playing the notes on the keyboard. As in Chagall’s painting, in which brilliant patches of color glow above the darkness, Crumb’s bright, treble sounds are heard against string glissandos and fingernail scrapes, as well as other bass sonorities. Toward the end, delicately oscillating melodic figures are twice obliterated by explosive chromatic clusters in the bass, only to reemerge faintly as the clusters decay.

10. “The Starry Night” (Vincent van Gogh, June 1889) Van Gogh’s iconic *The Starry Night* was painted when he lived in the asylum at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. In the foreground, a dark cypress looms above the distant village during the dim, pre-dawn hours. Luminous, concentric brush strokes magnify

each star amid the swirling blues of van Gogh's sky, with Venus and the moon shining brightest of all.

Many critics see the turbulent brushwork as an expression of the painter's troubled inner state, but Crumb translates the painting into quiet music that is "slowly pulsating; desireless, with infinite calm." Three main ideas seem inspired by van Gogh's haunting scene, and each recurs throughout the movement. First, the gently rising and falling lines introduced at the opening trace the swirling patterns in the sky. Second, extremely soft, chromatically wandering lines in the low bass suggest the terrestrial darkness at the bottom of the canvas. Third, delicate figures in the high register evoke the radiant stars. As the movement gradually fades to silence, "a ghostly 'wind-music,'" the pianist's airy whistling, is heard twice. In this beautiful closing movement, George Crumb casts a spell that rivals van Gogh's mesmerizing painting. — Steven Bruns

Steven Bruns is on the music faculty at the CU Boulder, where he teaches courses in music theory and analysis. These notes are adapted from those written for Marcantonio Barone's recording of *Metamorphoses, Books I & II* (Complete George Crumb Edition, volume 20, Bridge Records, NY, 2021).

About the performer

Singaporean pianist MARGARET LENG TAN is one of the most highly regarded performers in American experimental music. Tan, whose work embraces theater, choreography, and performance, has been hailed as the "diva of avant-garde pianism" by *The New Yorker*. She is renowned as a pre-eminent John Cage interpreter (her mentor of eleven years) and for her performances of American and Asian music that transcend the piano's conventional boundaries. A great admirer of her artistry, George Crumb composed for Ms. Tan *Metamorphoses (Book I)*, a major piano cycle that she has performed to critical acclaim throughout Europe, the USA, Australia, and Asia since 2017.

The first woman to earn a doctorate from Juilliard, Margaret Leng Tan is recognized as the world's first toy piano virtuoso. Her groundbreaking 1997 recording, *The Art of the Toy Piano* (Point/Universal), transformed a humble toy

into a real instrument. The BBC, CNN, National Public Radio (USA) have all profiled her career as a concert toy pianist. Tan is a recipient of The National Endowment for the Arts' Solo Recitalist Award. In 2015 Ms. Tan was awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's highest artistic accolade.

Major works written for her include *Curios* by Phyllis Chen, a solo music-theater piece for toy instruments commissioned by the 2015 Singapore International Festival of Arts. *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep* is a dramatic sonic portrait of the artist with music by Erik Griswold. It is Tan's fully-fledged foray into theater in collaboration with Chamber Made, Melbourne. In 2020 *Dragon Ladies* premiered in Arts Centre Melbourne at Asia TOPA, the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Performing Arts that co-commissioned the work with Esplanade-Theaters on the Bay, Singapore where the work received its Asian premiere in 2021. *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep* won Work of the Year (Dramatic category) in the 2021 Art Music Awards presented by APRA, AMCOS and the Australian Music Centre.

Margaret Leng Tan's iconoclastic practice has led to two feature documentaries, *Sorceress of the New Piano* (2004) by Evans Chan and Chuang Xu's *Twinkle Dammit!* (2020) which won Best Director (Feature Documentary Category) at the NÒT Film Festival 2020 (Italy) and Best Foreign Language Documentary at the 2020 Kadoma International Film Festival (Japan). A comprehensive list of her recordings is available at margaretlengtan.com.

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