

Toy Orchestra: Serious Art Instruments in the Performing of Melodramas

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Abstract

When people think of dramatic period pieces, they usually think of big, elaborate expressions, filled deeply with heritage and culture. When people think of orchestral music, they usually think of shiny instruments, painstakingly collaborating to produce a cohesive sound. But what do people think about toys? Perhaps they think of children laughing playfully, or older folks acting a little silly. The aim of this study was to challenge audiences to think of toys as legitimate musical instruments capable of evoking dramatic imagery. Interviews conducted revealed how pianist Margaret Leng Tan (for whom the first melodrama discussed was originally written) envisioned a creative new medium, how composer Ge Gan-ru was inspired by the Phoenix Hairpin (from 12th-century Chinese poet Lu You) to incorporate voice and toys together in dramatic fashion, and how the author (for whom the sequel was commissioned after successfully performing the first melodrama) sought to combine her unique interpretation of culture, language, and art. They all conspired to bring about an avant-garde experience that justified the toy piano and other toys as serious art instruments capable of rendering the emotions found in a classic romantic tragedy. To be successful, three aspects of this challenging process must be addressed: (1) assembling an inventory of toys capable of being incorporated into a credible source of sound; (2) composing a score that complements the particular performer with the unique sound of selected toy instruments; and (3) discovering personal interpretations, and performing in a genre that does not have any pre-existing performance traditions. The performance success of the toy orchestra in the first melodrama was not only evident from audience approval, but more importantly, the acceptance of the avant-garde experience was evident by the subsequent commission of, and reception for, the sequel.

Keywords toy orchestra, toys, toy piano, toy instruments, toy ensemble, Ge Gan-ru, Margaret Leng Tan, Lu You, Tang Wan

Art either evolves to reflect the times or serves to remind us of a counterculture. In today's overly extravagant world, there are great expectations around art performances. When people think of dramatic period pieces, they usually think of big, elaborate expressions of heritage and culture—large studios and movie sets where there are many more extras on set than there are actors with speaking parts. When people think of orchestral music, they usually think of shiny instruments moving painstakingly and precisely in collaborating to produce a cohesive sound. But what do people think about

toys? Perhaps they think of children laughing playfully, or older folks acting a little silly. The aim of this study was to challenge audiences to think of toys as legitimate musical instruments and reveal their capability to evoke dramatic imagery in classic melodramas. Two melodramas, *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* and *Hard, Hard, Hard!* were composed and performed, in which toy orchestras played key roles; from a 37-key concert baby grand toy piano, to a palm-sized toy tambourine; from a toy xylophone, to a toy harp, to a toy accordion. Furthermore, the vocalising artist was a solo performer self-accompanied by an entire toy orchestra! This set of melodramas challenged not only the listeners, but even more so, the performers themselves.

Methodology

If the aim of this study was to challenge audiences to think of toys as legitimate musical instruments and reveal their capability to evoke dramatic imagery in classic melodramas, then the methodology was for the author herself to first understand the serious potential of toys, and then collaborate with the composer to draw out their unique sounds in daring and dramatic fashion. The ambitious process was, not surprisingly, straight-forward and complex at the same time. Over the course of nearly three years, the author learned from and worked with two of the most influential pioneers of the contemporary avant-garde music genre: toy instrumentalist Margaret Leng Tan and composer Ge Gan-ru.

This journey began with discussions and conversations when preparing to perform the first melodrama in the set, *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* Armed with insight from the original performer, the author proceeded on a challenging search to procure toys, learn the nuances of their musical capabilities, reflect on the source art (in this case, *Phoenix Hairpin*'s regret-filled verses penned by 12th-century Chinese poet Lu You to his love Tang Wan) and ultimately, perform her personal interpretation of the romantic tragedy. Following what was a very successful performance, the process began anew with a second stage — the commissioning of a sequel composed with the author as the performer in mind. This entailed a more involved process: reflect on the source art (this time it was the poetic response from Tang Wan), discover more toys, incorporate the new sounds, perform the melodrama, and then collaborate with the composer to revamp the melodrama, with performance feedback that would be able to fully draw out a more unique experience.

With the conclusion of the performances, the last stage of the process began with collection of all articles and publications relating to the first melodrama, *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* including interviews, reviews, and the original performer's writings on the work. Live interviews with performer Margaret Leng Tan were then conducted to document her creative process and collaboration experience with composer Ge Gan-ru. Finally, the author organised all relevant information gathered through personally corresponding with and working closely with Ge on both melodramas. Further, to understand the context of the source art, an in-depth study of the two Chinese poems was also conducted, covering their origins, historical and cultural backgrounds, different interpretations and available English translations. Research on the poets Lu You and Tang Wan, particularly on their relationship (which was bound by social and patriarchal values), was invaluable in empathising with, and portraying their emotions.

Key Participants: Turning the Toy Piano into a Serious Art Instrument

Interviews conducted revealed how pianist Margaret Leng Tan (for whom the first melodrama we will discuss was originally written) envisioned a creative new medium, how composer Ge Gan-ru was inspired by the *Phoenix Hairpin*, a 12th century Chinese poem, and how the author (for whom the sequel was commissioned after successfully performing the first melodrama) sought to combine her unique interpretation of culture, language, and art. They all conspired to bring about an avant-garde experience that justified the toy piano and other toy instruments as serious art instruments, capable of rendering the complex emotions of a classic romantic tragedy.

John Cage wrote what is considered the first serious piece of music written for the toy piano, *Suite for Toy Piano*, in 1948. This work was the catalyst for Margaret Leng Tan to become enthusiastic about the toy piano (Chan, 2004). When Cage died in 1992 and Tan was asked to give a memorial tribute concert at New York's Lincoln Center, *Suite for Toy Piano* came to mind (M. L. Tan, personal communication, June 13, 2012). Through performing this work, which consists of only nine 'white' notes, Tan saw the potential of the toy piano to become a serious instrument. In a documentary film, Tan revealed, "And I got SO in love with the sound, and got all my composer friends excited that they decided to write for me, and then I became a toy pianist, quite by accident" (Chan, 2004).

The subsequent development of toy piano as an art instrument owed much to Margaret Leng Tan. Philip Clark (2008) remarked: "In fact, it was Tan who breathed new life into the instrument when, having been a fixture in every American kid's bedroom, it was struggling to survive against the electronic keyboard revolution of the 1970s. Tan heard a nobility and pathos in the toy piano that has bypassed more casual listeners. She has taken the instrument seriously as a creative sound source and, using Cage's 1948 *Suite for Toy Piano* as a starting point, has built a repertoire of transcriptions and new commissions" (p. 51).

In 1985, a few years before the Lincoln Center tribute to Cage, Margaret Leng Tan met composer Ge Gan-ru at one of her concerts (M. L. Tan, personal communication, June 13, 2012). Ge was regarded as "China's first avant-garde composer" (Zhang, 2012). His revolutionary solo cello piece *Yi Feng* (Lost Style), written the year before he left China, marked the first avant-garde composition in China's music history (Zhang, 2012). After hearing *Yi Feng*, Tan immediately asked Ge to write a piano work for her, and that started their collaborations (M. L. Tan, personal communication, June 13, 2012). However, it was nearly 20 years later, in the summer of 2003, before Ge Gan-ru agreed to write a short toy piano piece for Margaret Leng Tan. Ge knew Tan was becoming more interested in toy piano, but he confessed that he had not paid serious attention to it before then, and could not imagine writing for it. Having no idea what to write for toy piano, Tan suggested strongly to Ge that he borrow one of her toy pianos and become familiar with it. (G. Ge, personal communication, July 1, 2012). Tan insisted and Ge took home not only a toy piano, but also other toy instruments, including a toy harp, a toy xylophone, a toy drum and a plastic hammer (G. Ge, personal communication, July 3, 2012).

The toy piano sat in his house untouched for a long time, not to mention the other toy instruments. During this time he still met with Tan quite often. "She gave me

more of them every time we saw each other,” Ge laughed, as he recalled (personal communication, April 10, 2012). Included among these toys Tan gave Ge, were some cricket boxes and a paper accordion that Tan had bought from Chinatown. “I didn’t know what to do with all these toys!” (G. Ge, personal communication, April 10, 2012). After at least half a year, Ge’s view on the toy piano finally started to change. “When I gradually touched it more often, I started realizing it has a very distinctive timbre which is totally different from the regular piano” (G. Ge, personal communication, July 1, 2012).

The Creative Process for the First Melodrama *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*

As Ge Gan-ru was searching for inspiration, he came across 12th century Chinese poet Lu You’s poem *Phoenix Hairpin*. At that moment, everything came together, as he recalled Tan’s interest in using her own voice in performance. In fact, when Margaret Leng Tan gave the performance of George Crumb’s *Makrokosmos* I and II in Carnegie Hall in 2004, Ge Gan-ru was present at the concert (G. Ge, personal communication, April 10, 2012). *Makrokosmos* are fantasy pieces that combine not just sounds from the keyboard and from inside the piano, but also the uttering of talismanic words and creating non-verbal vocal effects such as moaning, half-singing, and humming (Bruns, 2000-2015). Ge knew right then that he had found the perfect conception to tie everything together. He planned to write a piece utilising not just the toy piano and other toy instruments, but also Tan’s distinctive voice (G. Ge, personal communication, April 10, 2012). He envisioned Tan singing, accompanying herself with a toy ensemble, which led to the completion of the composition of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* in 2006.

Bringing out the unique aspects of a toy orchestra for a complex melodrama meant facing a distinct combination of new challenges: (1) assembling an inventory of toys capable of being incorporated into a credible source of sound; (2) composing a score that complements the particular performer with the unique sound of selected toy instruments; and (3) discovering personal interpretations, and performing in a genre that does not have any pre-existing performance traditions.

Sourcing Instruments

From Tan’s compilation of toy instruments, Ge Gan-ru finally settled on 17 instruments, including a toy piano, toy glockenspiel or toy xylophone, toy table harp, and smaller instruments such as a toy accordion, a plastic hammer, a toy drum and cricket boxes (Ge, 2006). Each of these instruments was selected for their outputs’ resemblance to traditional Chinese operatic percussion, as well as sounds that evoke the melodrama’s ancient setting. According to Tan, the toy drum, paper accordion, and the plastic hammer each cost only one dollar in Chinatown (2007). The fact that these ‘instruments’ were so inexpensive, allowed for a much more ambitious piece, with the number of instruments comparable to that of a chamber orchestra. Ge Gan-ru had not only considered Tan’s suggestions on toys but he also worked closely with Tan in the writing process, since Margaret Leng Tan knew how to play the toys better than the composer at that point (M. L. Tan, personal communication, April 1, 2012).

Overcoming Personal Reservations of Performing the Toy Orchestra

I first learnt about Ge Gan-ru's *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* for toy piano and spoken voice in August, 2009 from my piano teacher Dr. Robert Satterlee. At that time, I was just getting to know the toy piano and started to become interested in toy piano pieces. What excited me right away, however, were the words "spoken voice" since I have always been interested in works for vocalising pianist, and had yet to discover any Chinese composer who would incorporate spoken text into his or her piano works. Listening to *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* was quite a shocking experience. It struck me that the toy piano in the piece reminded me of the Chinese instrument *qin*, and I also heard many sounds unlike the toy piano. The instrumentation was not mentioned in the online recording. Other than the composer's name and the title of the work, all I could find was the performer's name, Margaret Leng Tan. Where did all of the sounds come from? I became very confused and curious about the sound source. What surprised me even more was how Tan spoke and sang in Mandarin, and that she was yelling at times as if she was going insane. While I was very impressed by both the piece and the performance, I could not see myself playing this piece, which seemed to require such a dramatic voice and intense character. A few months later, Dr. Satterlee mentioned this piece again when we were trying to finalise my recital programme that was scheduled for February, 2010. I thought that the idea of including the piece in the recital was insane and unrealistic. The first question that came to my mind was: 'Where would I find all of the instruments?'

Sourcing New Instruments

I wrote to the composer Ge Gan-ru on October 21, 2009 asking for more information about *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* particularly about the instrumentation and how I could obtain the music. Ge Gan-ru replied, saying that all of his music was self-published, and that the work was for voice, self-accompanied by a toy orchestra, which does include a toy piano. I became nervous when I saw that it was for a "toy orchestra". How could I justify playing a toy orchestra in a piano recital? Before confirming my purchase of the score, I asked if the toys were easy to find. I found it difficult to commit to performing a piece if I did not have access to the instruments specified in the score. In response to my concern about the toys, Ge Gan-ru sent me the CD notes, written by Margaret Leng Tan.

The score came with neither a performance note, nor an instruction page, so the CD notes were the only written source of information I had for the piece. Not having any idea where to find all the toys other than the toy piano, I wrote Margaret Leng Tan an email in the beginning of December asking for her advice. I was ready to make a trip to New York City if necessary. Tan replied:

The trouble with toys is that they change all the time and when I decided that I should perhaps try to get some spares they were no longer available in Chinatown. So there is no point in your coming to New York. I suggest that you be a little creative and find suitable substitutions that would sound reasonably close to what you hear on the

recording as it would be impossible to duplicate the exact same instruments that were originally used.

(M. L. Tan, personal communication, December 7, 2009)

Thus began my interesting journey searching for toys. I first tried to determine the range I would need for the pitched instruments from the score, before I went to Toys “R” Us, a place that always excited me when I was a child. To my surprise I could not find anything suitable in the store. For example, I found a colourful miniature xylophone, but it barely covered the range I would need for the piece. After the first toy-shopping trip, which was rather discouraging, I started searching online and was amazed by the options available. Fortunately, I was able to find a 27-key toy glockenspiel, a 15-string toy harp, and a toy accordion online. By this time, we had also realised that the toy piano I borrowed did not have a sufficient range, so Dr. Satterlee obtained a Schoenhut (the ‘Steinway’ of toy pianos), a 37-key Concert Baby Grand Toy Piano.

While waiting for all of the ‘main instruments’ to arrive, I started searching for the smaller toys. Since there is no Chinatown anywhere close to where I live, I visited stores like Ben Franklin and Walmart. Ben Franklin had many animal-related toys and I found a bird shaker that could be used for the bird sounds. Not being able to find cricket boxes or cricket toys, I bought a toy duck that could make a duck sound and some electronic animal toys, thinking that perhaps these animal and insect sounds could replace the cricket sound. Inspired by Tan’s one-dollar toys, I also explored the One Dollar Store in town, where I found many potential sound makers, including a toy tambourine that I later used to replace Tan’s beaded gourd rattle (indicated as pearls in the score), and a hand clapper as a substitute for Tan’s plastic hammer. Indeed, I was always looking out for toy shops anywhere I went and was constantly shopping for toys of any kind. Meanwhile, I asked acquaintances if they owned any small objects that could make a sound, or if their children had any toy instruments I could borrow. The trick was to consider the sound the item made, rather than the way that it looked as a toy.

For toys or toy instruments that could not be found, I had to devise temporary solutions for the first performance scheduled for February, 2010. Having only one Chinese cup gong, I played on two glockenspiel bars to emulate the sounds of two higher pitched cup gongs. My biggest toy-related problem with the piece was to find a good substitute for the cricket boxes that Tan owned. Deciding that the cricket sound was too vital to the piece to be left out or replaced by another sound, I ended up using a cricket sound sample in my first performance. This was an important finding to note, as instruments were not simply used because of their ‘toy’ status, but they were selected for the sounds that they could emulate or emit.;

Preparing the Instrumentation Set-up and Adjusting the Choreography

Finding all of the instruments was only the first step. Tan’s drawing of her toy set-up in the CD notes was helpful in establishing my own set-up. As I was learning the piece, I realised how the challenges were not so much the notes or rhythm, but rather, what

one could not see in the score. These include having to move flexibly between different instruments like a percussionist. Because there was not an available video recording of the piece at that time, I had to use my imagination to come up with a plan for realising the score and developing my own choreography for the piece. Moreover, learning how to play the pitched instruments and trying to make them project could be tricky, given their small size and limitations as concert instruments.

Performing the First Melodrama

Playing such unique instrumentation required a better understanding of the inspiration behind the melodrama. As I got to know the source poem better, I felt that if I recited the poem first before playing the piece, it would help me to get into character and project the emotions of the romantic tragedy. This was how I began my first performance of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*, reciting in the dark. The lights gradually came up when the melancholic toy piano introduction started.

A few nights before my performance I decided that I would put additional toys into use. An insect-like sound made by a toy duck joined the bird sound and cricket sound at the end of the piece. At the conclusion of the performance I picked up an electronic toy and started winding it, then I placed it on the stage floor and stared at it for a while. It was joined by some other electronic toys (manipulated by a few friends sitting in the front row of the hall) while I started slowly walking offstage. The insects were gradually taking over the scene in the quiet night after we heard the familiar theme coming back.

I first performed *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* in my doctoral recital on February 28, 2010. It was a concert of contemporary piano works, including a toy piano solo piece on the first half of the programme. ‘Wrong’ was the first piece after intermission. To my surprise, it received a very positive response from the audience and became the highlight of the recital.

The Sequel: *Hard, Hard, Hard!*

The rewarding experience of performing with the toy orchestra and achieving the distinct sound experience led to the idea of commissioning another piece from Ge Gan-ru in May, 2010. Ge graciously agreed to write me a piece, asking if I had any thoughts about the content. I told him about my areas of interest and he proposed the idea of writing a sequel based on the companion poem written by Lu You’s beloved Tang Wan.

In June 2010, I received an email from pianist Genevieve Lee, a professor at Pomona College, who had just watched my performance of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEUU7J_4OsM). She had heard about me from Ge Gan-ru when she contacted the composer to ask about the piece. As with most of those who contacted me and were interested in this piece, she wanted to discuss the practical aspects of finding the “unusual ‘instruments’”. I later asked Lee if she would be interested in co-commissioning the new piece Ge Gan-ru was writing for me. Lee expressed interest and agreed.

Expanding the Toy Inventory

Preparing for the second melodrama was a very different experience from the onset. Even though Ge Gan-ru had intended to use the same instrumentation as *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* for the new piece to enable future performers to play them as a set, I thought it would be exciting to consider including new instruments. A number of supporters came forth with additional toys that would reflect the ancient Chinese setting in terms of sound and sight. A Chinese scholar and university colleague mentioned how toy and miniature instruments were popular among children in China and offered to bring some back for me after returning from a trip to her home country. She brought back many different Chinese instruments, including a wooden frog, which makes an authentic frog sound when rubbed with the striker, a temple cup gong, a mini gong, and a small-sized *pengling*, which is a pair of bowl-shaped cymbals connected by a string.

Crickets and bird boxes, toy paper accordions, and Chinese hand drums found in San Francisco's Chinatown were added to the orchestra by Genevieve Lee. Even though the cricket sound samples in my performance worked from an audio standpoint, I was glad that I now had working props for my performance! Moreover, the paper accordion, which comes simply with a two-note compass, was the instrument Ge Gan-ru originally intended to be used in *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* It is also more desirable because of its lightness compared to the toy accordion during performances. More importantly, the limitation and simplicity of a paper accordion reflects the Chinese society of the period more than a sophisticated, multi-pitch toy accordion, especially since the pitch was inconsequential. Given the fact that I would be performing the melodrama live in concert, to be recorded for video, having both audio and visual senses engaged was the key to a successful outcome.

Writing the Sequel

On April 11, 2011, after five months of poring over the new toy orchestra, Ge Gan-ru sent me the score for the sequel. I found the new piece *Hard, Hard, Hard!* to be technically and musically more challenging than *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* Professor Genevieve Lee agreed: "This new piece is definitely harder, but maybe it's also because I don't have a model to emulate" (personal communication, September 15, 2011). The world premieres were given by Lee on October 1, 2011, in her solo recital at Pomona College in Claremont, California (G. Lee, personal communication, July 30, 2012), and by me at the Bowling Green New Music Festival, 2011, "Method In Madness" in Bowling Green, Ohio on October 15. *Hard, Hard, Hard!* was programmed in a concert of the festival entitled "Playthings", along with other pieces written for unusual instrumentation. A few people thought *Hard, Hard, Hard!* was the most interesting piece in the programme, because the toys were used in an unexpectedly serious manner, as opposed to most other pieces on the programme, which were meant to be more playful.

Collaborating to Rewrite the Sequel

On November 6, 2011, I was surprised to receive an unexpected e-mail message from Ge Gan-ru regarding his decision to rewrite *Hard, Hard, Hard!* He described how he had some thoughts about the piece after hearing Genevieve Lee's live performance in California. He had intentionally kept his thoughts and decision from me, knowing that I was soon performing *Hard, Hard, Hard!* at the festival. Ge wrote:

I felt that this piece sounded like another version of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* rather than a totally different piece. Even before composing it, I knew this could be a problem. Somehow, I didn't deal with this problem as seriously as I should. So, I would like to rearrange this piece and make it a more interesting one. I hope the rewriting will not waste the efforts that you have put in this piece. Many of the old materials can still be used.

(G. Ge, personal communication, November 6, 2011)

I was impressed by the composer's sensitivity and openness. He seemed to be the best listener and critic of his own music and knew what he was looking for before hearing others' opinions. I received this email from Ge Gan-ru just a few days after I had received an invitation from Phyllis Chen to perform *Hard, Hard, Hard!* at the UnCaged Toy Piano Festival, New York City, for the December 1 concert.

When Ge Gan-ru sent us the score in April 2011, he was certain that what he sent was not the final version of the piece. He requested input and urged us to be critical, as our ultimate goal was to make the composition better. However, I did not have any constructive thoughts or ideas until after I had finished learning the piece, and even more so after having performed it twice and having received some feedback from the audience. Since the New York premiere of *Hard, Hard, Hard!* was scheduled directly after Thanksgiving, I asked Ge Gan-ru if it would be helpful for me to arrive a few days early, in the hope of working some things out together before the performance. Even though it seemed unwise to start the rewriting process just a few days before the performance, I thought that was probably the best time to do it, given that I could be there with all of the instruments. Ge Gan-ru liked the idea of using the Thanksgiving holiday to rework the piece and invited me to spend the holiday with his family. He was hopeful that I would be able to perform the new version on December 1.

While the emphasis on the toy instrumentation is obvious, instead of starting off with a toy piano introduction (as in *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*), I was inspired to not let this dictate the performance. I imagined a mysterious opening with a fading cricket sound that would evoke a quiet night (as if the piece were continuing from the ending of *Wrong*), and a woman singing softly the first few words in a free melisma, before she suddenly screamed on the third word *e* (evil or wicked), cutting straight to measure 29 of the original score with the piano cluster, and intensely waving the bird shaker to evoke "terrifying birds", then continuing with the toy piano melody in measure 34. I recorded myself singing and playing and sent it to Ge Gan-ru. While the composer welcomed and appreciated my input, he thought we could use what I suggested later in the piece.

This conversation continued the first night I arrived in New York on November 25, 2011. We were brainstorming in Ge Gan-ru's studio and Ge shared this thought: "When I saw Genevieve laugh in the middle of the piece, it was very shocking to me, and I asked myself why I didn't start with that intense laughing." Apparently we both conceived of starting the piece very differently from *Wrong*, opening it with voice rather than toy piano, but what Ge Gan-ru and I were envisioning were two extreme opposites, with one being insanely dramatic and the other being introspective. As a performer, I knew I would be much more comfortable with the latter. I had reservations about starting immediately with what I consider the most challenging part of the piece—an outburst of laughing/crying as a result of Tang Wan's long-suppressed emotion (suggested by the poem text "pretending to be happy"). Nonetheless, the composer was certain about the opening; I trusted his strong instincts and clear vision about his piece, and agreed then to take on the challenge to begin the piece that way.

The writing process started the next morning. I was stationed on one side surrounded by all the toys while Ge Gan-ru sat on the other side with his keyboard and working desk. The composer would describe to me what he had in mind, often playing on his keyboard to demonstrate, and I would try it out on the 'real' instruments and with my voice. If he did not like what he heard, he would encourage me to try different ways of playing, or to try a different instrument. I was also able to provide instant feedback from a performer's point of view and to make suggestions. Then Ge requested that I either sketch out or make notes of what I did, which allowed the composer to continue on with his thought process. For more complicated instrumental passages, Ge would sketch out and show them to me so that I could play them for him. We were able to go through the entire poem and had the complete piece sketched out by 6:30 p.m. the same day. We had a productive first day and were very pleased with our progress.

Ge Gan-ru spent the following two days notating the piece. I helped by reminding him of what we had decided on by playing from my rough sketch. Putting everything into exact notation enabled us to detect problems or performance issues that we had missed previously. The new version of *Hard, Hard, Hard!* came into being on November 28, 2011. The instruments selected were: toy piano, toy harp, toy glockenspiel, toy gong, penny whistle, hand clapper, Chinese hand drum, two temple cup gongs, a *pengling* (a pair of bowl-shaped cymbals connected by a string), wooden frog and a striker (also used where woodblock is indicated in the score), a pair of shakers, wind chimes, bell, bird shaker and cricket boxes. Even though some materials from the first version were used, the new version was an entirely different piece, not only from its first version, but also from its precursor *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!*

We only had time for two intense rehearsals prior to the performance, making minor changes and thinking about ways to make the piece work more effectively. It was challenging enough to have to learn the new piece, given the variety of toy instruments in the orchestra, not to mention having to get fully comfortable with it in only one-and-a-half days before we left for New York. Needless to say, my close collaboration with Ge Gan-ru was meaningful, engaging, and memorable. As a composer he knows exactly what he wants, but at the same time is very open and respectful to performers' opinions and feedback.

Performing the New Sequel

The premiere of the new version of *Hard, Hard, Hard!* took place on December 1, 2011 in the Gershwin Hotel, New York City, as part of the UnCaged Toy Piano Festival, hosted by pianist/toy pianist/composer, Phyllis Chen. During the performance everything came together magically. I felt exhilarated to the point that I forgot that I was actually performing. The initial outburst of Tang Wan's crying/laughing was punctuated by the crying of the penny whistle, creating the imagery of the howling wind accompanying the intense crying/laughing, before the poetess started revealing her emotions and feelings through words.

The atmosphere of the second section of the melodrama (second stanza) was set by the constant beat of three meditative sounds starting with a higher temple cup gong, *pengling* (a pair of bowl-shaped cymbals), and a lower sounding temple cup gong. This constant three-tone cycle of sounds marked the passing of time, foreshadowing the melancholic mood of the second stanza that began with *ren cheng ge* (each goes his or her way), *jin fei zuo* (today is unlike yesterday). Soon after the second stanza began, the sounds of a frog appeared (created by rolling up and down the wooden frog with a striker), interspersed between every other three-tone cycle, suggesting a quiet, lonely night. This meditative cycle was soon interrupted by the glissandi of a toy harp that was eventually stopped by a glass, before the glass was moved across the strings, resembling the gliding qualities of a *qin*. Along with the trembling voice that described "how the sick soul is like ropes of a swing haunting me", the mood intensified and grew darker. Following that was the verse *jiao sheng han*, speaking about the cold horn sound. Here the horn sound was imitated again by the penny whistle, with a more distant tone this time. When the gong strike came in, it signaled another passing hour, with the night getting deeper and then waning (going with the next verse *ye lan shan*, meaning that the night is waning).

After an intense long cry on the last word *man* (hide) echoed by a glissando on the harp, I stroked the harp aimlessly before joining in with my voice. With every stroke, I repeated the word *man*, sometimes louder and sometimes softer, without a sense of where to go, as if the situation was hopeless. The speaking and playing then became faster and more intense, but I suddenly stopped and looked up at the audience, before pantomiming shouting the word *man*. By hiding the voice for the word "hide", the word translates itself and vividly suggests Tang Wan's long suppressed distress as a result of having to conceal her true emotions.

I froze after my last word. Just when everyone thought the piece was about to end, I gradually picked up the wooden striker and gave the most powerful strike I could imagine on the gong. The sonorous gong sound was so powerful that it stayed ringing for a while in the room. I had forgotten that the gong was a 'toy'. As I stood up I could see Margaret Leng Tan standing in the audience, whose face I recognised through her pictures on recordings and websites. I was finally able to meet the legendary pianist, who was the motivator behind everything that led to that night's performance. If she had not asked for a toy piano piece from Ge Gan-ru many years ago, *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* would not exist and *Hard, Hard, Hard!* would not have come into being. Meeting Tan felt like going back to the origin of a circle. To add to this, both Ge Gan-

ru and I were very glad that we made the bold decision to rewrite *Hard, Hard, Hard!*, fully realising the potential of the new instrumentation for the New York performance.

The Legacy

As much as I had been exposed to the full range of contemporary piano repertoire, discovering *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* in 2009 truly opened my eyes to a new kind of music. I was initially drawn to the piece because of my interest in music written for a vocalising pianist. However, I felt intimidated by the idea of performing it as soon as I found out that it was not just written for voice and toy piano, but for toy orchestra, in which the performer sings intensely while playing all of the miniature toy instruments. Even after I had gathered most of the toys and started learning the piece, I still had doubts about whether I could ‘trust’ the toys. With this piece I would have to see myself as not just a singer and reciter, but also a multi-instrumentalist. Above all, I had to be an actor. How could I justify using toys in portraying myself as the protagonist? The unusualness of including toys in the composition contributed to the dream-like atmosphere. The toys became a means for me to enter the poet’s state of mind, and helped me to express the emotions I had associated with the story. Playing on childhood toys is a sentimental, intimate, and personal experience. Having picked out each of the instruments myself added to the intimacy.

I gradually learned how each of these toys has its unique personality, and how they can create sounds that many ‘real’ instruments cannot. A friend who saw the performance of *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* expressed her thoughts: “The sounds created images that were so real that they were almost vivid. They brought us right back to the olden days of China with wooden chairs, wooden table, wooden window and a lonely man singing about his lost love...” (Y. Chee, personal communication, November 26, 2010). The Chinese calligrapher Huang Shenchen was so drawn by the sounds he heard in *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* that it led to the idea of collaborating with him in a live calligraphy demonstration, with me improvising on Chinese toy instruments to convey the liveliness and spontaneity of calligraphy. Indeed, *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* had not only inspired the writing of *Hard, Hard, Hard!* but more importantly, it revealed the potential of toys as serious musical instruments.

Margaret Leng Tan reminded me of how *Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!* would not have come into existence if it were not for toys: “The only reason why it came into existence, is because it is within a toy frame. I will not see myself doing it otherwise. As a concept it will not even come about” (M. L. Tan, personal communication, April 1, 2012). In other words, toys had inspired the writing of the melodramas. Avant-garde pianist Margaret Leng Tan saw something new in toys that others did not see, eventually requesting a toy piece from Ge Gan-ru. Avant-garde composer Ge Gan-ru discovered a new voice in toys that had not been heard, culminating in the two melodramas based on the complex emotions of Lu You and Tang Wan’s 12th-century romantic tragedy.

The performance success of the first melodrama was evident from the audience approval, but more importantly, the acceptance of the avant-garde toy orchestra experience was evident by the subsequent commission of the sequel and its reception. It demonstrated that art is at its core in terms of how to be creative in telling a story in ways that are refreshing, yet entirely unexpected.

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Biography

Born in Malaysia, Chinese pianist **Yen-Lin Goh** is an avid performer of contemporary music integrating culture, language, and multi-disciplinary art. She has premiered solo and chamber works across North America, Europe, and Africa; collaborating with composers Chen Yi, Ge Gan-ru, David Lang, Tom Lopez, Mayke Nas, and others. Yen-Lin's interest in improvisation led her to form contemporary improvisation ensembles; incorporating instrumentalists, vocalists, dancers, actors and theatre directors. Among her many awards are the Phi Kappa Phi Love of Learning Award, and the Graduate Scholar Award from the Seventh International Conference on the Arts in Society. Yen-Lin received her D.M.A. in Contemporary Music from Bowling Green State University, where she studied piano with Robert Satterlee and composition with Marilyn Shrude. She also holds degrees in Piano Performance and Communication Arts/Radio-TV-Film from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Oklahoma City University. She is currently a lecturer at Tumaini University Makumira in Tanzania.
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