THE JAMES NAUGHTIE INTERVIEW

MELVYN TAN

In the late 1980s, Tan took the world of period performance by storm with masterly performances on the fortepiano. Now, having returned to the modern instrument, he celebrates his 60th birthday with Liszt

PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN MILLAR**

Liszt was 11 years old when his teacher, Carl Czerny, took him to meet Beethoven. The atmosphere was gloomy. Beethoven only cheered up, according to Liszt, when he asked the youngster to play a Bach fugue and, immediately he'd finished, suggested he transpose it and play it again. Liszt followed all that with a performance of the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1, whereupon the master kissed him on the head.

Those musical associations are the theme of Melvyn Tan's 60th birthday concert at Wigmore Hall in October, when he explores the links between pupil and teacher, Czerny being the link between Beethoven and Liszt – the pupil of one and teacher of the other.

It's also his way of coming to Liszt. 'I've always wanted to play the B minor Sonata. I'd lived with him for many years, but had never got to grips with him. I began to think that I'd never play this piece. So now I will.'

And when we talk about his career, and what lies ahead for him, it's natural we should explore his own connections, with teachers who knew Franck, Fauré and Debussy, and his celebrated journey into the world of the fortepiano, which forced him to forget much of what he'd learned from them.

In his concert – and on a CD featuring the same programme – he'll play the rarely performed funeral march Czerny wrote for Beethoven (though it wasn't played at the funeral itself) – 'in C minor, of course, what else?'. Alongside will be a late Beethoven sonata, and the Liszt will follow.

'I see Liszt's B minor Sonata now as much more of a Classical work than I used to. It's so structured – more so than many of the late works we hear – and there's a lot of Czerny in it. You can hear him, which means you are moving straight on from Beethoven.'

When thinking about a birthday concert, it's not only tempting to look back and trace the contours of musical history, but to take a look at your own past. So we delve into Tan's musical background, discussing his own musical training after he arrived from Singapore at the age of 12.

I want to know about Nadia Boulanger, who knew Stravinsky before World War I and whose pupils included Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, Philip Glass and Daniel Barenboim. She was a visiting teacher at the Menuhin School where Tan spent four years.

'I was about 14 when I had my first experience of her. She was extraordinary, of course – quite terrifying too. Softly spoken but always very firm. Tall and quite frail, with very thick glasses; she was already about 70 per cent blind and always wearing that grey flannel suit. We'd play in front of the whole school.

'Yehudi was often there. And even Margaret Thatcher came – she was secretary of state for ▶

A LIFE IN BRIEF

STAGE PRESENCE: Melvyn Tan performs in 2000

Early life: Born in 1956 in Singapore, Tan began learning the piano aged five after copying a piece his sister was playing by ear.

Development: In 1969, aged 12, he moved to England to study at the Yehudi Menuhin School, where his teachers included Nadia Boulanger and Marcel Ciampi.

Partnerships: In the 1980s Tan formed a close partnership with Sir Roger Norrington and the London Classical Players, who were at the forefront of the period performance movement. He won acclaim for his performances on the fortepiano, an instrument he championed widely.

Return: In 1996 Tan returned to the modern piano to perform repertoire from the Romantic era. He remains a prolific artist on both historical and mainstream instruments.

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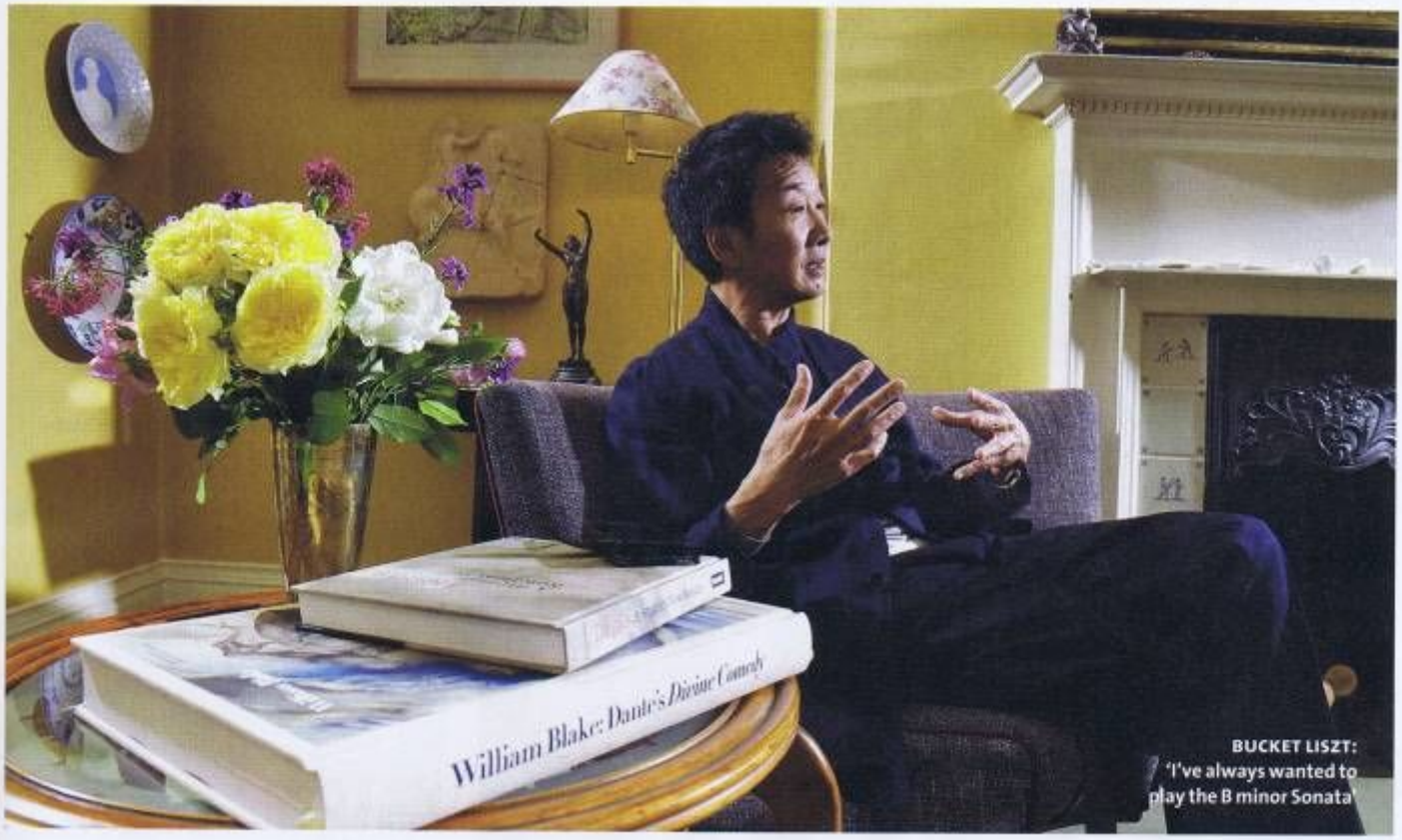


BUCKET LISZT: 'I've always wanted to play the B minor Sonata'

education at the time – so it was an ordeal. And Boulanger was insistent. The big thing was memorising as much music as possible so that you could even write it down.

'The other thing which was difficult was that she would ask you to play a Bach fugue – say the D major for the first book of the '48' – and then ask you to sing one of the lines.

'Terrifying, but a wonderful way of being trained. To hear all the different strands. It was incredibly good brain-training, although I don't think any of us realised it at the time. She came regularly, maybe twice a term when I was there, and of course it was unforgettable.'

Those were stirring years. Tan was there on the night the great jazz violinist Stéphane Grappelli came to play – in an atmosphere of some sniffiness among traditionalists – and watched Nigel Kennedy, a fellow pupil, get out his fiddle and join the Frenchman on the stage.

'You should have seen his face when Nigel started to play,' recalls Tan. 'I'll never forget it. I don't think his professor was that keen, but in the end Yehudi decided that it was OK, and the rest is history.'

Tan's own career took one important turn with his fascination with the fortepiano, so different in its demands from the player. He worked alongside the conductor Sir Roger Norrington, with whom he began to explore the possibilities of recording concertos.

'We were constantly experimenting with how to balance instruments; it was a constant sense of discovery in what we were trying to do in these performances and recordings, and it was so new at that time. Pianist friends thought we were crazy to take up fortepiano.

'But I decided that if I was going to do this project I had to give up the modern piano. We pianists are trained to play on modern instruments that are so different. But the fortepiano responds so strongly that you don't need all the arm raising that we're taught to do. You have to stop that. You have to learn to back off with your energy, and that takes a long time if you've been thundering away on Liszt. In between, however, I had been playing the harpsichord, so I was kind of halfway there.'

> Tan helped to bring the fortepiano in from the cold

For many years Tan was an innovator who helped to bring the fortepiano in from the cold, and to develop a style that brought many people to the instrument who'd previously have shied away. But in his maturity, perhaps it was inevitable that he would return to his roots.

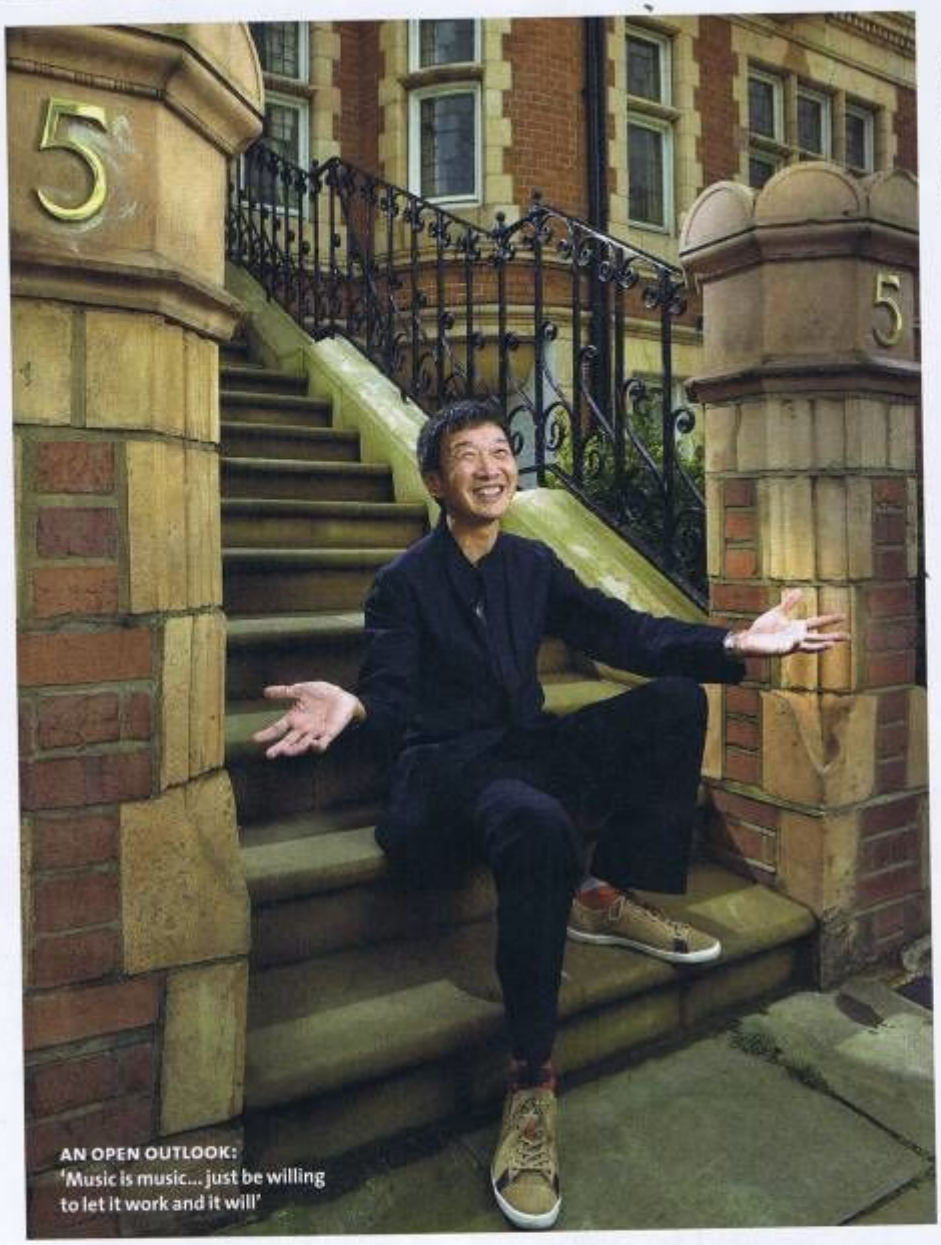
'There came a time when I realised that my repertoire would just stop – maybe with Weber and Schumann. After ten years or more, I thought I might just try and do a bit of Debussy. And I did and enjoyed it, and looking back on it now it was a kind of natural going back. I wanted to expand my repertoire again.'

And then came an invitation from composer Jonathan Dove, then running the Spitalfields festival in London, that Tan describes as life-changing. 'He asked me if I would play Messiaen's *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*. I was surprised, to say the least, but it changed my life, my musical being. The way I looked at myself playing, the way I heard myself.'

The work takes two hours to perform, and Tan found it demanded a new discipline. 'I used to get quite nervous. But you have to be very secure inside in order to get on stage and play it. It's so extraordinary. Jonathan knew the way I played and he was interested to see how I would approach it. I'm so grateful for that moment.'

It was a turning point. 'I've come back to the modern piano, and it's funny because I think in the meantime people – great pianists – were becoming more aware of the fortepiano. When I came back, so to speak, there was much more understanding of these early instruments.

'Everyone does both, or at least they're much more aware of how old pianos work. That's brought back an understanding of why Beethoven wrote in the way that he did. And applying it to the modern piano you have a certain awareness of the style, and as a result the Classical style has really changed. Listen to ▶



AN OPEN OUTLOOK: 'Music is music... just be willing to let it work and it will'

recordings of 30 of 40 years ago and you can hear it very clearly.'

Beethoven sonatas are played now, he insists, with much more of an understanding of why his style developed in the way it did and how the music was constructed. So what would Beethoven have thought of modern pianos?

'He would have been very enthusiastic, I'm sure. He was so demanding about pianos and was never satisfied with the instruments he had. And the way modern pianos have developed is what he wanted: more sustaining, with more singing – he loved *cantabile* – and more pedalling. A rounded sound, projecting the whole. In his time, he was so limited; he might have written slightly differently, but he would have embraced these instruments, because the qualities are infinite compared with what he had.'

So as he enters his seventh decade, in sprightly form with a great enthusiasm for his many new projects and a hectic touring schedule to boot, Tan senses a circularity in his own career. Looking back to Nadia Boulanger and her insistence that everything begins with Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues, which she made the foundation of all her pupils' studies, he realises that he had let them slip away. Now they're back.

'I'm reminded of how wonderfully complex they all are. That was what I learned from Boulanger in the first place. She didn't teach us harmony, she taught us our instrument and what it can do. Above all, she showed us how to concentrate solely on the piece we were working on at any moment, how to listen to yourself, and how to let the music take you away.'

Those days at the Menuhin school, the years spent with the fortepiano and the landmark recordings on that instrument, then the expansion of his repertoire that he sees as a return to the modern piano – all this amounts to what he feels is a comfortably rounded career.

'I want to continue to develop the idea of new and old. Perhaps play more contemporary music. But I certainly want to explore the connections that you begin to see more clearly with time, and with experience.'

There is also the feeling of obligation in passing on that experience. We speak about Asia, where he travels a great deal, and of the much-heralded classical music explosion in some countries. He has one sharp observation, and one that you seldom here in this country: that there may be too much money around.

'In Singapore they're starting a chamber orchestra, which is great. And of course there are fine halls. The music talent is huge across the continent, but it's not focused enough.

'Take the Singapore's Conservatory of Music. It's *obscenely* well-endowed. But that's not always a good thing. When I was a student in London I used to get up at 7am to walk across the park to the Royal College to practise in a freezing cold room because it was the only time I could do it.

'Many students in Singapore are on comfortable scholarships. Some of them could do with a bit of hardship. You've got to be hungry for the struggle? When they come over here – they may think "O my God, this is the real world!". I hope so.'

There's no anger there, just a feeling that there's too much of a mechanical feeling about teaching and performing in places where they speak of a revolution in classical music.

One of the places where Tan has rediscovered the essence of the belief that drives him on is in Soweto in South Africa, the vast township on the edge of Johannesburg. He's come to know the pioneering project Buskaid, which has introduced young black musicians to the European tradition.

'I worked with them on a Mozart concerto. They'd never heard such a thing before. But they were wonderful and they learned. When they played, the refinement, the colour, the feeling was tear-making. A few months ago I did a recital in Johannesburg and some of them came. I was so moved.

'Do you know what it tells us? That music is music. You just have to let it come to you. Listen, that's all. You don't have to know anything. You just have to be willing to let it work, and it will.' ■

BBC RADIO 3 *Melvyn Tan's 60th birthday concert takes place at London's Wigmore Hall on 13 October at 7.30pm* *(see p112)*