

Music to the Ears

By Dr Jipson Quah, Editorial Board Member

Time Travel with Melvyn Tan

Melvyn Tan

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music Concert Hall

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Danny Thomas was a poor struggling actor in the 1930s. Facing a low-paying career with little future, he also had a young child with heavy hospital bills. Helpless, he turned to a church in Detroit and prayed to St Jude Thaddeus, the patron saint of hopeless causes: "Help me find my way in life, and I will build you a shrine where the poor and the helpless and the hopeless may come for comfort and aid."

Thomas eventually became a celebrated American media personality and fulfilled his end of the bargain.

His shrine, the St Jude Children's Research Hospital was established in 1962, as a hospital for needy children. It was built on the powerful premise that "no child should die in the dawn of life". Since then, it has revolutionised the

treatment of childhood cancers and drastically improving five-year survival and cure rates to 90%.

The VIVA Foundation for Children with Cancer, set up in 2006, has a magnificent aim: to improve cure rates of children with cancer; in particular childhood leukaemias, in Singapore and the region to those comparable to St Jude Children's Research Hospital. Through developing cancer centres, promoting clinical research and advancing clinical skills, it seeks to attain zero mortality for children afflicted with leukaemias.

It is for this noble vision that Singapore-born British pianist Melvyn Tan initiated this concert – a perfect marriage of music and Medicine. Tan has achieved phenomenal success in Europe and the UK for keyboard performances, notably on the fortepiano – an early predecessor of the pianoforte that we know today. A legend for his interpretation of works from the Baroque and Classical eras, he is a true superstar in the classical music scene.

His concert, Time Travel, is a diamond of a rare quality: showcasing different keyboard instruments and genres in a single performance, which is not only a first for Tan himself but also for Singaporean audiences. I was overwhelmed with excitement when I first came across the concert programme!



Viva-University Children's Cancer Centre at National University Hospital

Three different keyboard instruments were presented during the performance – L to R: fortepiano, pianoforte and harpsichord



The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music Concert Hall was the venue for this momentous performance. Upon arrival at the hall, one was greeted by three majestic keyboards, the harpsichord, fortepiano and pianoforte – each eagerly vying for the audience’s attention with their exquisite designs and warm colours.

As the name of the concert suggests, Melvyn Tan brought to life the evolution of the keyboard: from the delicate harpsichord in the Baroque period, to the enhanced fortepiano through the Classical period, before metamorphosing into the titanic pianoforte we know today. The works he chose also highlighted how composers interacted with the instruments of their time and sought to bring out timeless beauty.

The three movements from Suite in A Minor by Jean-Philippe Rameau were rock-solid Baroque dances. The lushly green harpsichord sang beautifully and sweetly under Tan’s fingers, despite its intrinsic monotone timbre. The double manual keyboards were well utilised to showcase the beautifully terraced dynamics, an important feature of keyboards of the era. Rameau was the pioneer of classical Western harmony, having written the monumental “*Traite de L’harmonie*” (“Treatise on Harmony”) which outlined the principles of harmony and composition.

The harpsichord was superseded by the fortepiano, a slightly more robust successor with an ability to contrast tones just by touch. The fortepiano, invented by Bartolomeo Cristofori, brought pure joy of music that evening.

Tan’s renditions of Mozart’s Sonata in B Flat Major K333 and Beethoven’s well-loved *Moonlight Sonata* were nothing but superb. While Mozart’s piece exudes exemplary classical elegance and brilliance, Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* set the standard for composers and pianists of the Romantic era.

The fortepiano brought out a wispy quality of moonlight in the first movement, before rampaging with ferocious intensity in the third. Now, on the fortepiano, it sounded vastly different from piano disc recordings that we have become so accustomed to. The strings sound strained and yearning, as though the instrument was desperately inadequate to express its frustration. And indeed, the magnitude of Beethoven’s compositions drove keyboard manufacturers to create stronger and more powerful instruments, before culminating in the grand pianoforte. I was watching a manufacturing industry at work, inspired by

a visionary. It was akin to the development of new surgical techniques and new cellular receptor blockers!

The second half of the concert revolved around themes of love. Unsurprisingly, as reflected in their music, musicians often had turbulent love lives! Frederic Chopin was undoubtedly the Parisian prince of piano and he wrote almost exclusively for the instrument. Mazurkas are characteristic of Chopin’s romantic nature, while scherzos portrayed Chopin’s deep love for his homeland. Poland was besieged by the Russians, and he was never able to return to his beloved country.

The stormy Scherzo No 1 was tremendous under the masterly hands of Tan. Empowered by a mammoth steel-enforced nine-foot Steinway grand, Tan made Chopin’s agitation over the war raging in his homeland resonate through the hall. As Anton Rubinstein suggested, “the pedal is the soul of the piano”, Tan marvellously illustrated Chopin’s tormented soul.

Lastly, Melvyn Tan closed off the concert with works by Claude Debussy, who translated Impressionistic styles from art into sound. His *Estampes*, *Pagodes* and *Jardins* portrayed the Orient mystique and misty garden drizzle beautifully. *L’isle Joyeuse* was extremely boisterous – “Isle of Joy” indeed! Finally, Tan’s rendition of Debussy’s *Clair de Lune*, which means “moonlight” in French, served as a shimmering encore, and was a delight to savour.

In pianist Melvyn Tan, we have a world-class artiste of international renown, one deserving of the highest accolades and acclaim. His intellectual approach to his lecture-concert presentation was a stimulating eye-opener – truly a standout performance in 2013.

Meanwhile, we hope that VIVA Foundation’s continued endeavours will help us groom the next Dr Peter C Doherty and Dr Rolf M Zinkernagel, both of St Jude’s and co-recipients of the 1996 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for their research in Immunology. We can help make 100% cure rates in childhood cancers a reality! **SMA**



Dr Jipson Quah is a keen observer of the music and arts culture in Singapore. He will attend and review interesting events for SMA News for as long as he can – before enlistment beckons! For more information on VIVA Foundation for Children with Cancer, please visit <http://www.viva.sg>. If you have any interesting upcoming cultural events to share, email SMA News at news@sma.org.sg.