

Tuesday Musical: a conversation with pianist and composer Conrad Tao

by Mike Telin



It's difficult to know where to begin when talking about pianist-composer Conrad Tao. At age twenty-one, he has already amassed a list of accomplishments worthy of an artist three times his age. Called a musician of "probing intellect and open-hearted vision" by the *New York Times*, and a "thoughtful and mature composer" by NPR, Tao was named a Presidential Scholar in the Arts in 2011. In addition to a very busy concert schedule which

includes serving as the Dallas Symphony Orchestra's artist-in-residence, his new CD [Pictures](#), on the Warner Classics label, was released in October.

[Conrad Tao](#) will make his Northeast Ohio debut on the Tuesday Musical series on Wednesday, November 18 at 7:30 in Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall. Tao's fascinating program, the 2015 Margaret Baxtresser Piano Recital, will include works by Lang, Bach, Carter, Wolfe, Rachmaninoff, and Mussorgsky.

During our extensive telephone interview, Tao revealed himself as thoughtful and down-to-earth, as well as a person who is acutely aware of the passage of time. The following is an edited transcript of that conversation.

Mike Telin: Your Akron program includes David Lang's cage and wed, as well as Julia Wolfe's Earring, and I noticed that your repertoire list includes many more works by the original Bang on a Can composers. When did you first discover their music?

Conrad Tao: I started listening to Bang on a Can stuff when I was around 11 years old. I had been working with the composer Christopher Theofanidis when I first moved to New York at age nine, and eventually we started to structure our weekly meetings by

spending a half an hour talking about a single piece. He'd give me recordings and I'd also bring him stuff I was working on. I was listening to a lot of music by Arvo Pärt, John Adams, and Bang on a Can. The first album of theirs that I became familiar with was *Renegade Heaven*. So I was introduced to their music pretty early on. It was astonishing to get this kind of education at such a young age.

What I love about their music is that there is often a sense of propulsion behind it, or some sort of visceral quality, and sometimes that visceral quality is the opposite of propulsion.

I would say that a lot of David Lang's music is deliberately mannered and held back. I think he likes to explore some tenuous emotional place in his works. From a purely theoretical level he achieves this in fascinating ways that are designed to create emotionally curious affects. When I first heard his *Little Match Girl Passion*, I was responding to how judiciously he used silence. With Julia Wolfe's music I was hearing a primal approach to rhythm, which I responded very strongly to.

So their music has been part of my life for a very long time, and I took that for granted until I got older. I didn't realize that I was lucky because my frame of reference was already widened at a very early age.

MT: You're including an interesting mix of composers on your program.

CT: Thanks. I'll start with Lang's *cage*, then I'll go right into Bach's *Tocatta in f-sharp*, and then to Elliott Carter's *Two Thoughts about the Piano*. [Tao's program will also include Rachmaninoff's *Étude-Tableaux in a*, Op. 39, No. 2 and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.]

Of course this juxtaposition is deliberate, but at the same time I shape my playlists by putting pieces next to each other that work together, but in surprising ways. What I love about juxtaposition is that the possibility of friction is embedded inside it. For me friction is potentially more generative than some sort of easy fusion.

I like the idea of friction where you're not mixing as much as you're rubbing things against each other, and then something happens. I also like it because many times that actually happens between the pieces.

When you put two pieces next to one another the scores do not change, but because they are in close proximity, something may change in how they are perceived. The goal is to open a synoptic pathway that we didn't know was closed. I don't think there's anything

radical about putting a work written 250 years ago next to a work that was written two years ago.

This program has been good for me to try to let go of that idea that a big audience reaction is the only good reaction. I've been lucky enough to have audience members come up to me and tell me that they didn't love everything. It's great to have a conversation about what they heard, what they felt, and how they were responding to it. It's just nice to hear that people do respond actively even if they're not screaming from the rafters.

MT: Congratulations on the new CD. Is it true that you launched the album with a [Groupmuse](#) "massivemuse?"

CT: Yes it is. I've worked with Groupmuse before, and it's funny because it was also at a massivemuse in Boston where I recorded "Pictures at an Exhibition" for the album. Not all of the album is live, but that track is basically a live recording.

I think what Groupmuse is doing is cool. They have a clear idea of what they want to be doing, which is really key. I'm so happy that I managed to work with them.

The whole album was great because the process of making it was pretty spontaneous, but at the same time it was clear to me from the beginning what I was interested in exploring with it. So it was both spontaneous and focused, which is a lovely combination.

MT: I was amused by a tweet you sent back in September: "someone please hire me to play tchaik 1 somewhere, please, there are things i want to say in that piece rn." Has anyone taken you up on this?

CT: [A big laugh] No it hasn't happened yet, but I did tell my managers that this is something I want to do. This is a business that schedules things years in advance. In a way it's really great because I know what I'll be paid in however many months. But sometimes it's hard because you start feeling like, 'wait, I have this thing I want to do but because of scheduling it doesn't happen.' That's hard and I don't have an answer for it. When you are inspired, how do you not let that fade away for however many months you have to wait before you can act on it? I don't think that will ever get any easier.

I have a lot of friends who are freelancers. That's exciting in certain ways, but I also know that there is a lot of instability that goes with that because there is no guaranteed funding, or health insurance.

What's weird is that you're always working for something that's fifteen months out. This was unthinkable to me when I was younger and first started working. I couldn't wrap my head around that. I'm still a hyper-mercurial person so it continues to be a little bit hard. But now, three years seems like a short amount of time.

MT: I'm so happy to see that you're part of the performer-composer movement.

CT: There's been a resurgence over the past fifteen years at least, and happily so. I think that Bang on a Can is essential to the discussion of popularizing the notion of the composer-performer, as well as the increased profile of people like Meredith Monk, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass — all those people who were iconic in the '60s, then gained popularity in the latter half of the 20th century and onward.

Then there's this recent phase of people like Marc-André Hamelin, Stephen Hough, Daniil Trifonov, who are pianists playing their own music. It's coming from a different place, but spiritually I think there's something shared there.

I hate this word because it's been co-opted by the bourgeois, but it's a more "holistic" approach. By so aggressively compartmentalizing and specializing performance as completely independent from writing and making new things, you end up short-changing the creative possibilities of performance. You are implicitly telling performers that all you have to do is read what you are given. And whoever reads it best is the best. If you start to accept that logic, it's really depressing. It is spiritually unhealthy because then, to a certain extent, you are a lackey.

I was just with the Pittsburgh Symphony. They have an initiative where they bring something like eight composer-performers in to work with the orchestra. That's really wonderful, but I'm waiting for the day when it doesn't have to be a special initiative. But in the tiny little bubble where I live, it isn't that big a deal. Most of my musician friends who are my age are all jazz people. They do free jazz and free improvisation, and for them to perform is to create something new. This often means writing something, but other times it means interpreting something. The next step is to make this more visible and seeing if it could possibly become the norm.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 16, 2015.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)