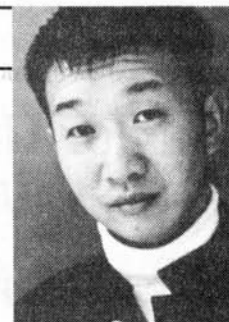

Interview: Melvyn Tan



A-430 is now the accepted Classical pitch in music

The excellent young fortepianist Melvyn Tan, born in Singapore and based in Britain, toured the United States with his New Mozart Ensemble over April 19-26. At the Renaissance and Baroque Society in Pittsburgh on April 24, the ensemble performed a vibrant program of Mozart, Haydn, and Boccherini, free of the stilted preciousness of most "antique" instrumentalists. The fortepiano is the older, 18th- and 19th-century piano, which is made entirely of wood and has distinct register voices modeled on those of the human singing voice. Mr. Tan was interviewed for EIR after the Pittsburgh performance by Charles Phelps.

EIR: You won a piano scholarship to the Yehudi Menuhin School in London, but how did you begin fortepiano?

Tan: It was not until I entered the World College in London in 1974. I had to choose a second study, so I chose the harpsichord; I became fascinated.

At that time I was given a break by the BBC, which asked me to participate in a recording involving an obbligato part on the fortepiano, a rather difficult concertante fortepiano part. I had never played one, but they especially wanted it to be done with a fortepiano rather than a modern grand piano. As I was making some BBC recordings on the harpsichord, they thought I might be interested, because I also played the piano, which was neither here nor there. But they lent me a fortepiano to practice for a week. And I just fell in love with the sound. I found the clarity of the sound so new. It was like having my ears washed out. And I found that I could play Mozart and Haydn's sonatas in a way which was so much more natural to me. I did this recording, and they were so pleased that they asked me to do some more solo recordings for them, and I began to experiment. Finally it was clear that I couldn't specialize in modern piano, harpsichord, and fortepiano . . . so I gave up the modern piano.

EIR: The Schiller Institute has a worldwide campaign to lower the pitch to the scientific tuning of C-256, which gives an A between 430 and 432, which *EIR* has covered. What's your reaction?

Tan: I always play at A between 430 and 435 anyway. I don't play modern instruments, but I've always noticed that

they play, particularly in Europe, awfully sharp. My fortepiano pitch is determined by the wind players I work with, because there is a certain pitch at which they just cannot play, particularly oboes and horns. I know for a fact that when I work with singers they prefer 430 over 440 when they sing the same songs, and they obviously don't work exclusively with me! When they've done a program concluding with songs, they much prefer to sing them with me at 430.

EIR: Why is your fortepiano tuned at A-430?

Tan: A-430 is now the accepted Classical pitch, in significant part, as I said, because of the wind instruments. It does vary. When I play solos, often I play at 425, if I'm playing a late-18th-century fortepiano. It depends on whether I play originals or copies. Some originals cannot go up to 430, just because they're 200 years old now; A-420, or 425 is the highest they can go, particularly pre-1800 instruments. I don't like to stretch the instrument. If I know any instrument will not go above A-430, then I will play it at the Classical pitch. Although sometimes for Haydn I like to play at 420-425, in general, at A-430 I feel most comfortable. And the pianos seem to like it!

EIR: Another major reason for the campaign to lower the pitch is that singing voice registers are stretched out of proportion.

Tan: I work with singers quite a lot and that makes a great deal of sense for certain things. For instance, Schubert's songs are written for higher voice, so a lower pitch makes it easier to sing. It certainly makes more sense than to screech!

EIR: What about register shifts in your fortepianos?

Tan: I certainly notice it more in earlier pianos than in the later pianos. For instance, it's much more telling when you play a Mozart concerto on a piano of Mozart's time—a well-made piano of his time or a good copy—because you can hear those different timbres of the different registers. To cite a crude example: If Mozart wanted the piano just to accompany, in a place where the oboes and flutes carry the melody, he would always write in the tenor register, a bit lower than the center of the keyboard, which is a kind of

muddy register on these pianos. But when he wants the forte-piano to really project, he writes in the high treble. Although it is a very thin sound, it really penetrates, much more than the rest of the keyboard. Similar is the very lowest bass register, which is the louder, or forte, register, where Beethoven really exploits the bass timbre.

But you go into the 19th-century pianos, the six-and-a-half-octave pianos, they have that characteristic, too, but the registers begin to get more ironed out. And as the century goes on, the pianos get more and more ironed out, so by the 1830-1840s they get quite even, although not as even as the modern pianos. Also, I believe the change in the size gauge of the hammers from the treble to the bass are much less than the Mozart piano, where you can really see the gradation.

EIR: Recently you gave a concert tour on Beethoven's own Broadwood piano. What was your impression?

Tan: Actually, I found the 1815 London Broadwood action is very much like modern piano action. The action of the Viennese pianos are much more telling, much lighter, and the actual sound is much more direct. There is not the after-resonance, like there is on the Broadwood; so, on the Viennese pianos you can actually hear every single note that you strike—with or without the damper.

I think this distinction in timbre is much more evident in Viennese pianos than in English pianos. Also, I think this explains why most of the composers had Viennese pianos. Beethoven had this Broadwood, but it was actually a gift. Most of his life, when he could hear, he had heard Viennese pianos, as did Mozart, Schubert, and Schumann.

EIR: What's the difference in technique between playing fortepiano and the modern grand piano?

Tan: It's a great difference: First, the action is completely different. The biggest difference, if you went from a Steinway piano, to a Mozart piano, like the one I have here, is, first, the action. It took me many years to adjust my technique to play these much lighter-action fortepianos, because you use different muscles in your arm to put the key down. You hardly exert any physical effort to put the key down on a piano like that. It is so light, you hardly touch the key, and the key beats. It is immediate.

With a modern piano the key depth is much, much deeper and much heavier, so you use very different muscles. You use much more finger work and articulation, and you don't use a lot of arm length, which you need on the older fortepiano. It sounds like all you need to do is adjust, but it is very difficult to adjust for any pianist who is very used to "laying" to the instrument. So, it takes a long time to readjust those muscles, because you could very easily break all the hammers in one go on that fortepiano. I have broken the shanks by playing too hard. They are very, very delicate.

But the music often demands this, particularly in early Beethoven, where he humorously exploits the instrument's

different voices. You can hear the instrument being stretched, aurally as well as physically. If a modern pianist were to play this way, it would sound very crude, but there are lots of nuances and phrasings which are much more naturally achieved on the fortepiano.

EIR: You've recorded all the Beethoven piano concertos on fortepiano. Do you agree with the recent big emphasis on what are supposed to be Beethoven's metronome markings, or do you think too much attention to metronome markings hinders musical expression?

Tan: I think those metronome markings are very interesting. But Beethoven always said in his letters: "You should never play two bars metronomically the same—you are not like a machine!" I believe the metronome marking only applies to the first bar, to the *mood* of the piece. If metronome markings are taken literally it is quite dangerous. When I first started doing those concertos, conductors had played them much slower, so it was quite a revolution to play them at the faster, written marking speeds. But, having said that, you cannot play them *metronomically*, at the faster speed. Particularly in the slower movements, like the C-minor Concerto, or especially in the earlier concertos, the quick movements. And many scholars now are very skeptical about Beethoven's own metronome. They say probably his Chinese metronome was not functioning the day he used it. So you just take the marking for what it is—and then you reinterpret it.

EIR: You don't believe in Benjamin Zander's insistence—for example, in his essay on the markings—following which he conducted the Boston Philharmonic to get Beethoven's Ninth Symphony down to 57 minutes?

Tan: Well, in the symphony it might be different; at least those are Beethoven's own markings. In the fortepiano concertos, they are the markings of Czerny, Beethoven's assistant. And Czerny did not write them down until about 1835-40, by which time he was a virtuoso and getting quite old. How could he really remember what Beethoven wanted in the 1820 or 1810s? So, metronome markings, interesting as they are, are only what he remembers. One can be mistaken after 30 years.

EIR: How did your New Mozart Ensemble come about?

Tan: The idea is to play without a conductor. Having worked with a lot of conductors, I realized that Mozart was much simpler without a conductor! I don't say that for Beethoven or Schubert or Schumann, but so much of Mozart's music is conceived as chamber music, that it is not really a huge orchestral effort like Schumann. A lot of it is very "chamber conceived." I was very encouraged by EMI, my record label, to form a group with which to record all the concertos gradually, and, of course, to do concerts and tours. And what we've done is to create a whole ensemble to encourage younger players.