

MEETING THE SORCERESS OF THE NEW PIANO

WHETHER IT'S A BACH FUGUE, A MOZART SONATA OR A CHOPIN NOCTURNE, THE SCORE IS THE ONLY LINK BETWEEN THE PIANIST AND THE COMPOSER. BUT WHAT IF TODAY'S CONCERT PIANIST COULD ACTUALLY CONSULT THE COMPOSER HIMSELF? FOR PIANIST **TRICIA DAWN WILLIAMS**, CONVERSING WITH THE COMPOSER IS NOT A SÉANCE WITH THE DEPARTED BECAUSE SHE SPECIALISES IN CONTEMPORARY REPERTOIRE AND IN MOST CASES THE COMPOSER IS ALIVE AND KICKING.

THANKS TO ARTS COUNCIL MALTA'S CULTURAL EXPORT FUND, WILLIAMS TRAVELLED TO NEW YORK FOR MASTER CLASSES WITH PIANIST **MARGARET LENG TAN**; A MUSIC JOURNEY THAT TOOK HER FROM THE PRINTED SCORES TO AN ENCOUNTER WITH AMERICAN COMPOSER **GEORGE CRUMB**



In 2015, Tricia Dawn Williams decided to tackle the ground-breaking work *Makrokosmos* by George Crumb which is divided into two volumes: *Volume I* was composed in 1972 and *Volume II* in 1973. This monumental work is unlike any other piece ever written for the piano. In fact *Makrokosmos* remains the most comprehensive and influential exploration of the new technical resources of the piano from the twentieth century. One of the major challenges of this work is that it requires the pianist to exercise many unorthodox playing practices, like plucking strings inside the piano, playing glissandi across strings, sliding a scrape along a string, damping the strings with various objects (like paper, a metal chain, glass) as well as whistling tones and vocal utterances. This dazzling exploration of musical timbre is probably the most famous aspect of *Makrokosmos*. Virtually every imaginable pianistic tone colour is exploited in the work.

Williams soon realised she could only go so far without professional coaching to master the required technique. The only problem was getting to New York to attend sessions with pianist Margaret Leng Tan, hailed by *The New Yorker* as 'the diva of avant-garde pianism'. A few years ago this would have been difficult to achieve but, thanks to the work of the strategy team within Arts Council Malta (ACM), artists and cultural operators can now benefit from travel grants to develop their skills, build networks and engage in international collaborations.

On November 20, 2015 Williams was at the piano in Leng Tan's private studio in Brooklyn for her long-awaited master classes. Not only is Leng Tan the most important protagonist of Crumb's piano music but she has progressively perfected an individual style fusing sound, choreography and theatre, inspiring composers to create performer-specific works for her, among them John Cage, Tan Dun, Ge Gan-Ru, Aaron Jay Kernis, Alvin Lucier, Michael Nyman, Somei Satoh, Toby Twining and Julia Wolfe. Award-winning filmmaker Evans Chan has captured the many facets of Leng Tan's talent in his *Sorceress of the New Piano: The Artistry of Margaret Leng Tan* (2004), a 90-minute documentary feature which has been screened at several international film festivals.

Williams was thrilled by this experience. Not only did Leng Tan instruct her in the necessary technique for *Makrokosmos* but, most importantly, she gave her the keys and insight to tackle any of Crumb's music.

SHE HAS PROGRESSIVELY PERFECTED AN INDIVIDUAL STYLE FUSING SOUND, CHOREOGRAPHY AND THEATRE

Leng Tan's commitment to give Williams a complete experience also translated in an encounter with Crumb himself in his Philadelphia home. Williams had the opportunity to spend a whole afternoon with the 86-year-old composer, discussing various aspects of his music and conducting a short interview.

Williams acquired all her formal music education in Malta. When at the young age of 12 she had the opportunity to further her studies abroad she had to decline because back in the 1980s Malta did not offer the necessary support to foster artist mobility and funding. Today the internationalisation strategy of ACM offers several different strands that allow artists to forge their own itinerary. The Travel Grants strand offers financial assistance for the outgoing mobility of artists and cultural operators. Artists and creative practitioners can apply for artist residencies, professional training, participation in festivals, showcases, networking sessions, conferences, partner search for exchanges and so on.

There are two other strands within the Cultural Export Fund: Presentation and Touring targeting the export of artistic work and/or international tours of Maltese or Malta-based artists working in the sector; and the 'Translation Grant' which aims to increase the visibility of Maltese creative writing on international platforms. For more information log on to: www.artscouncilmalta.org/funds/cultural-export-fund



TRICIA DAWN WILLIAMS SPEAKS WITH AMERICAN COMPOSER **GEORGE CRUMB**

MAKROKOSMOS TAKES THE PIANO KEYBOARD TO UNCHARTED WATERS OF MUSICAL TIMBRE. HOW DID YOU GET INTO EXTENDED PIANO TECHNIQUE?

I have to confess that when I started this motive writing for the piano I had not yet heard my first work by John Cage or by other American experimental composers. I had read that the piano could be extended in certain ways but I had to do it by myself and find my own way of doing it.

MAKROKOSMOS IS A VERY DEMANDING WORK FOR THE PIANIST BUT THE TECHNICAL COMPLEXITY DOES NOT DISTRACT FROM THE LISTENING EXPERIENCE. THE WORK IS SO ORGANIC THAT THE AUDIENCE CAN SIT BACK AND ENJOY THE JOURNEY.

I'm glad it comes across that way because I think music after all is a mode of expression and not fancy technique. I too like music that does not have an overload of technical tricks.

IN MAKROKOSMOS, THE PIANIST HAS A STRONG THEATRICAL PRESENCE. YOU SEEM VERY DRAWN TO THE 'CHOREOGRAPHIC' ASPECT OF THE LIVE MUSICAL PERFORMANCE. HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS ASPECT IN YOUR MUSIC?



I think it was always important in music even of earlier centuries. If I watch a good string quartet playing Beethoven, they don't look like investment bankers. Their bodies express the rhythms and contortions that reflect the music. A flute player bends with the music. A cellist sometimes even sings along with the cello. That's nothing new. It just became a little bit more overt in some 20th century music.

SOMETIMES YOU INTRODUCE FURTHER THEATRICALS, SUCH AS IN VOX BALAENAE WHERE THE THREE MUSICIANS ARE WEARING MASKS AND THE MUSIC MAY BE PERFORMED UNDER DEEP-BLUE STAGE LIGHTING TO FURTHER ENHANCE THE THEATRICAL EFFECT.

In the original programme note I wanted to symbolise the voice of nature and I thought if they had masks that would reduce the human element. Then another colleague says "You know George, that doesn't really work. The mask attracts attention to the players. It has the opposite effect." So I left it at that. But the feeling behind it was to depersonalise the stance of the music. Sometimes it's done as a straight chamber piece without special lighting, without masks and that's OK too. I must admit I am delighted when they have a deep-blue lighting that they can use and they can wear masks.