

FRONT ROW CENTER

SPECIAL REPORT



CHEUNG CHI WAI/HONG KONG PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Personal history as musical muse

HONG KONG

Composer draws on his upbringing in China to inspire new sounds

BY JOYCE LAU

If you go by traditional Chinese belief, the composer Tan Dun did not have a very lucky childhood.

He was born in a village called Si Mao, or Silk Hair, named for trees that blanketed the countryside in flowing strands that were unusually white, the Chinese color of mourning. Because of this inauspicious landscape, other communities in Hunan Province designated Si Mao as the place to bring their dead.

"It was where old people were buried. It was very, very scary," Mr. Tan, 58, said in an interview in Hong Kong last month. "The plants had floating white hairs, and I grew up among crying songs,

mourning songs."

His first memory was of death. "I was eating my breakfast when I heard the funeral dirges," he said. "When I was 5, I followed the sound up to the foot of the mountain, where hundreds of coffins were being carried in a procession, led by a shaman and followed by music. To me, it was a river of sound — and I decided I wanted to be a shaman."

This "river of sound" has been Mr. Tan's inspiration from China to America, where he won an Oscar and a Grammy for his soundtrack of Ang Lee's 2000 film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon."

Now Mr. Tan is pursuing the use of water as a percussion instrument.

In September, he conducted the 2015-16 season-opener for the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, which performed "Nu Shu" (2013), based on a rare language spoken only by women in rural Hunan. A female percussionist stood at the back of the orchestra, "playing" a bowl of water. Large video screens showed footage of daily life — and when

the village women beat and washed their clothes in a pond, their splashing, too, made up part of the symphony.

On Nov. 14, Mr. Tan will restage "Water Passion," his response to J.S. Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," in the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The ancient Egyptian site will house 17 musicians tapping and

splashing in illuminated bowls of water while a choir and a baritone sing around them.

In "Living in Future," which will show in Venice until Nov. 22, string players perform while wading through a shallow pool, before abandoning their instruments in the water.

Mr. Tan often composes with a partic-

ular performer in mind. For "Nu Shu," it was Elizabeth Hainen, the Philadelphia Orchestra's harpist. Ms. Hainen accompanied Mr. Tan to Hong Kong, where she performed as the star soloist in "Nu Shu," her Western harp transformed into a clanging, strumming, Eastern-sounding instrument.

TAN, PAGE IV



ASIA SOCIETY

Global endeavor

Above, The composer Tan Dun and the Philadelphia Orchestra harpist Elizabeth Hainen after performing "Nu Shu" with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra in September. Left, Mr. Tan at the Asia Society Hong Kong Center, also in September.

Writing a new repertoire, and helping perform it, too

WROCLAW, POLAND

Composer-singer builds a following for classical contemporary music

BY GINANNE BROWNELL MITIC

With her right hand on her hip, Agata Zubel stood in front of a large black music stand, listening intently to the conversation between the members of eighth blackbird, a six-piece Chicago-based ensemble working on the contemporary classical piece "Madrigal," by the French composer Christophe Bertrand.

As the musicians discussed whether to use a metronome — in the form of an app on the smartphone of their pianist, Lisa Kaplan — Ms. Zubel made notes on her sheet music. The group was rehearsing for the Wratistavia Cantans, an international festival of oratorio and



ADAM WALANUS

The composer and performer Agata Zubel at the Academy of Music in Krakow, Poland.

cantata music held each September in Wroclaw, Poland.

As the musicians began playing — without metronome — Ms. Zubel started singing: a high-pitched vocal line, in French. The cacophony of sounds — from cello, flute, piano, clarinet, violin and percussion — resembled a musical version of spring gone awry, with shifting quick high notes and booming sporadic percussion. As the last note reverberated across the rehearsal room, the musicians relaxed and smiled at one another. Ms. Zubel laughed.

"So much work for such a short piece," she said.

The 37-year-old Ms. Zubel has, in a relatively short career so far, become one of Europe's most accomplished and internationally successful contemporary classical composers and vocalists.

In 2013 her composition "Not I" for chamber ensemble, electronic instruments and voice was deemed the best of the year by the International Music

Council's International Rostrum of Composers. The recorded performance of that piece, with Austria's Klangforum Wien, was listed as one of the New Yorker's Top Ten notable performances and recordings for 2014.

She has been commissioned to write pieces for global festivals and orchestras from Seattle to Tel Aviv. Her discography includes over a dozen albums, including "Dream Lake," with the Finnish pianist Joonas Ahonen, and "Stories Nowhere From," an album of experimental electronic music with the pianist and composer Cezary Duchnowski that will be released Nov. 6. The duo, who have worked together for years, perform as ElettoVoce.

In October, Ms. Zubel, who is married to a fellow Polish composer, Michal Moc, began a three-month fellowship in Austria, where she will be composing an opera for the Klangforum Wien. The group will also perform "Not I" at the ZUBEL, PAGE III

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CHRISTIAN FLORENZ

An enduring model adapts to changing times

Europe's radio orchestras hone skills and strategy in an era of tight budgets

BY GEORGE LOOMIS

When James Conlon, the music director of the Los Angeles Opera, was named in June as principal conductor of the RAI National Symphony in Turin, Italy, the announcement was greeted with interest — and may have prompted some curiosity besides. Why did one of America's leading conductors, who once served as principal conductor of the Paris National Opera, choose the podium of a radio orchestra to tilt his career back toward Europe, rather than that of a prestigious independent orchestra?

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"People used to think that recordings would replace live performances, but the opposite happened — the recording industry imploded," he said. "People want to experience a live event, whether in the concert hall or their own homes." In the early days, radio orchestras concentrated on the standard repertoire. "In a time before LPs and CDs there simply wasn't a supply elsewhere," said Nicholas Kenyon, managing director of the Barbican Center, where the BBC Symphony is Associate Orchestra.

Later, radio orchestras cultivated repertoire that is less mainstream than that performed by independent orchestras. In particular, orchestras such as the BBC Symphony have developed cutting-edge reputations for new music. German radio orchestras have also recognized a special duty to foster contemporary music.

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Giving classical music a new-media twist

Violinist's funny videos are part of a campaign to broaden his art's appeal

BY XAVIER FLORY

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Mr. Rosand also deplores the loss of a personal, nuanced sound in the pursuit of big tone, something Mr. Chen has been accused of. After a concert in Coral Gables, Fla., in February 2014, The South Florida Classical Review wrote that Mr. Chen played "too heavy and aggressive at points where the music needed more finesse." Even newspapers in Australia, where Mr. Chen is hailed as the new face of classical music, have criticized his approach.

Mr. Kaplan, the music professor, says Mr. Chen is simply "up on the ways of the world," and "handling his career brilliantly."

Mr. Chen insists that there is nothing wrong with a musician who revels in the performance aspect of music, uses social media to attract new audiences and plays personal concerts for Giorgio Armani in exchange for custom-made suits, as long as he remains serious about the music. And there are other musicians, he points out, whose images are partially manufactured: "The marketing team is still working."

A composer who likes to play

ZUBEL, FROM PAGE 1

Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in England in November.

In January, she will perform at New York's Ferus Festival, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic will premiere her commissioned work "Chapters 13," based on Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince." Next May the Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris will premiere a new instrumental electronic piece by her, and in October the Seattle Symphony will perform an orchestral piece she is writing for the company.

"She will do everything possible to bring the music to life and she is such an incredible stage animal, just to be on stage with her is an experience," said Mikhail Shmidt, a violinist with both the Seattle Chamber Players and the Seattle Symphony, and a longtime friend.

One of her best-known pieces was a work for the Seattle Chamber Players entitled "Cascando." The piece, written a decade ago, has become something of a calling card for her and has been performed by groups across the globe.

Since then, Ms. Zubel has become a very good friend of the Chamber Players. "Sometimes," Mr. Shmidt said with a laugh, "I feel like we almost subcon-

sciously are creating our seasons with some kind of possibilities that she would come here."

Jeffrey Zeigler, a cellist formerly with the Kronos Quartet who performed with Ms. Zubel at the Ferus Festival last spring, said that as a performer, Ms. Zubel had "that 'thing' that 'it' that quality where you walk in a room and go, 'Wow, that was good.'"

"I don't care if you like a completely different style of music, you, too, would be engaged by her artistry," he added.

Though Ms. Zubel did not come from a musical family — her mother works in nanotechnology — she was drawn to music from an early age. She recalled that in her kindergarten in Wrocław there was a piano that none of the children were allowed to touch during class.

But in the afternoons, when many of her classmates had gone home, she and fellow students were allowed to play on it. "I remember other children would ask their parents to pick them up early," she recalled. "I always begged my mom to come very, very late, as it was the only time I could play the piano."

Music lessons began when she was about 7, and though she started on the violin, her teacher noticed she had a good sense of rhythm and switched her to percussion. Unlike a piano or a violin, which is limited to specific sounds it can

make, percussion music, she said, can be anything. "Whatever you want can be an instrument," she said. "It can really open your mind and your imagination for the world of sound."

Having won a children's competition for composition when she was 10, Ms. Zubel was inspired to take her musical writing seriously. Later, while studying composition at the Karol Lipinski Academy of Music in Wrocław, she discovered her voice as a singer. Asked to write a piece for a contemporary female vocalist who was coming to Wrocław to perform, Ms. Zubel composed the experimental electronic piece "Parlando." Later, in an academy musical showcase, she could not find anyone else to perform the piece and so decided to sing it herself.

"It was a very nice and strange moment after this concert: My composer colleagues went crazy, they started writing pieces for me to sing," she recalled recently over tea in a café near Wrocław's new National Forum of Music.

"That experience, she said, made her think that it might be important to train her voice — an idea that, as a percussionist, intrigued her. "This is a very small and very tiny instrument which is here to produce thousands of different beautiful sounds," she said. "even if they are somehow strange and even if you are not used to it as a musical sound."

The combination of being a composer and a vocalist is not only rare in classical contemporary music, but it also makes Ms. Zubel interesting to work with, fellow musicians say.

"She is like a virtuosa performer," Mr. Zeigler, the cellist, said. "In classical music, to actually have classical composers writing compositions on paper, that is a very unusual thing, and she does everything at such a high level. She is a special talent, for sure."

Matthew Duvall, the percussionist of eighth blackbird, agreed. He first saw Ms. Zubel perform in Chicago a few years ago during the Contempo Festival, where she will perform again in February. "A lot of vocalists have really remarkable instruments and really great stage presence, but she has a deeper sense of musicianship," he said. "The reason I was excited about working with her, regardless of what she does — be it violin, piano, harmonica or voice — is she was clearly an intuitive chamber musician."

That intuition also comes across in her composing, which she does from her home office with a pencil and paper. She has a doctoral degree in composition and teaches the discipline at her alma mater in Wrocław.

Classical music did not have broad appeal, but that it was music that reflected the here and now — not unlike classical music from previous centuries.

"This is art of my time," she said.



CINCINNATI MAY FESTIVAL



CLIVE BARDA/ARENAPEAL, COURTESY OF SEMYON BYCHKOV

Taking the lead

Such as the BBC and Radio France. In return for providing live concerts that can be broadcast by their parent companies, they are funded through revenue from audiovisual license fees paid by taxpayers. In Germany there are around a dozen radio orchestras; Britain has five, France two.

Because they are considered to fulfill a public service, radio orchestras remain a vital part of the European cultural landscape. Nikolaus Pont, manager of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra — perhaps the finest of all radio orchestras — pointed out that a mainstay of his orchestra's schedule has long been "live radio broadcasts, on the highest level possible, to people's homes of Friday evening concerts during the subscription season."

The United States does not have a state broadcaster and assesses no license fees from the public, but America did have a radio orchestra: the NBC Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Arturo Toscanini. During the 1930s, Toscanini, who had left the New York Philharmonic for

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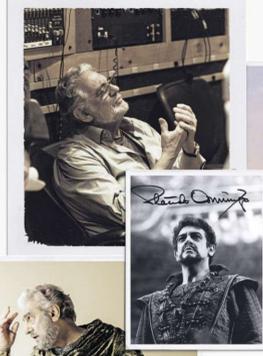
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You'd find a familiar ground." He thinks artistic directors need to guide classical music novices so that they don't come to their first performance hoping for the melodicism of Tchaikovsky and ending up with the "supremely atonal" Ligeti.

Mr. Chen is also accessible on stage, conveying the emotions of Tchaikovsky as much through his facial expressions and swaying body as through his sound. Although he insists that this onstage persona is natural, Aaron Rosand, who taught Mr. Chen for five years at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, begs to differ. The demonstrative movements of musicians today are largely an affectation, of which Mr. Rosand disapproves. "Heifetz was rooted to the ground," he said. "Something is lost when you're trying to put on a show; your heart and soul isn't in the music. I

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Mr. Rosand also deplores the loss of a personal, nuanced sound in the pursuit of big tone, something Mr. Chen has been accused of. After a concert in Coral Gables, Fla., in February 2014, The South Florida Classical Review wrote that Mr. Chen played "too heavy and aggressive at points where the music needed more finesse." Even newspapers in Australia, where Mr. Chen is hailed as the new face of classical music, have criticized his approach.

Mr. Kaplan, the music professor, says Mr. Chen is simply "up on the ways of the world," and "handling his career brilliantly."

Mr. Chen insists that there is nothing wrong with a musician who revels in the performance aspect of music, uses social media to attract new audiences and plays personal concerts for Giorgio Armani in exchange for custom-made suits, as long as he remains serious about the music. And there are other musicians, he points out, whose images are partially manufactured: "The marketing team is still working."

A composer who likes to play

ZUBEL, FROM PAGE 1

Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in England in November.

In January, she will perform at New York's Ferus Festival, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic will premiere her commissioned work "Chapters 13," based on Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince." Next May the Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris will premiere a new instrumental electronic piece by her, and in October the Seattle Symphony will perform an orchestral piece she is writing for the company. "She will do everything possible to bring the music to life and she is such an incredible stage animal, just to be on stage with her is an experience," said Mikhail Shmidt, a violinist with both the Seattle Chamber Players and the Seattle Symphony, and a longtime friend.

One of her best-known pieces was a work for the Seattle Chamber Players entitled "Cascando." The piece, written a decade ago, has become something of a calling card for her and has been performed by groups across the globe. Since then, Ms. Zubel has become a very good friend of the Chamber Players.

"Sometimes," Mr. Shmidt said with a laugh, "I feel like we almost subcon-

sciously are creating our seasons with some kind of possibilities that she would come here."

Jeffrey Zeigler, a cellist formerly with the Kronos Quartet who performed with Ms. Zubel at the Ferus Festival last spring, said that as a performer, Ms. Zubel had "that 'thing' that 'it' that quality where you walk in a room and go, 'Wow, that was good.'" "I don't care if you like a completely different style of music, you, too, would be engaged by her artistry," he added.

Though Ms. Zubel did not come from a musical family — her mother works in nanotechnology — she was drawn to music from an early age. She recalled that in her kindergarten in Wrocław there was a piano that none of the children were allowed to touch during class. But in the afternoons, when many of her classmates had gone home, she and fellow students were allowed to play on it. "I remember other children would ask their parents to pick them up early," she recalled. "I always begged my mom to come very, very late, as it was the only time I could play the piano."

Music lessons began when she was about 7, and though she started on the violin, her teacher noticed she had a good sense of rhythm and switched her to percussion. Unlike a piano or a violin, which is limited to specific sounds it can

"A lot of vocalists have really remarkable instruments and really great stage presence, but she has a deeper sense of musicianship."

make, percussion music, she said, can be anything. "Whatever you want can be an instrument," she said. "It can really open your mind and your imagination for the world of sound."

Having won a children's competition for composition when she was 10, Ms. Zubel was inspired to take her musical writing seriously. Later, while studying composition at the Karol Lipinski Academy of Music in Wrocław, she discovered her voice as a singer. Asked to write a piece for a contemporary female vocalist who was coming to Wrocław to perform, Ms. Zubel composed the experimental electronic piece "Parlando." Later, in an academy music showcase, she could not find anyone else to perform the piece and so decided to sing it herself.

"It was a very nice and strange moment after this concert: My composer colleagues went crazy, they started writing pieces for me to sing," she recalled recently over tea in a café near Wrocław's new National Forum of Music.

That experience, she said, made her think that it might be important to train her voice — an idea that, as a percussionist, intrigued her. "This is a very small and very tiny instrument which is here to produce thousands of different beautiful sounds," she said. "even if they are somehow strange and even if you are not used to it as a musical sound."

The combination of being a composer and a vocalist is not only rare in classical contemporary music, but it also makes Ms. Zubel interesting to work with, fellow musicians say.

"She is like a virtuosa performer," Mr. Zeigler, the cellist, said. "In classical music, to actually have classical composers writing compositions on paper, that is a very unusual thing, and she does everything at such a high level. She is a special talent, for sure."

Matthew Duvall, the percussionist of eighth blackbird, agreed. He first saw Ms. Zubel perform in Chicago a few years ago during the Contempo Festival, where she will perform again in February. "A lot of vocalists have really remarkable instruments and really great stage presence, but she has a deeper sense of musicianship," he said. "The reason I was excited about working with her, regardless of what she does — be it violin, piano, harmonica or voice — is she was clearly an intuitive chamber musician."

That intuition also comes across in her composing, which she does from her home office with a pencil and paper. She has a doctoral degree in composition and teaches the discipline at her alma mater in Wrocław.

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Taking the lead such as the BBC and Radio France. In return for providing live concerts that can be broadcast by their parent companies, they are funded through revenue from audiovisual license fees paid by taxpayers. In Germany there are around a dozen radio orchestras; Britain has five, France two.

Because they are considered to fulfill a public service, radio orchestras remain a vital part of the European cultural landscape. Nikolaus Pont, manager of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra — perhaps the finest of all radio orchestras — pointed out that a mainstay of his orchestra's schedule has long been "live radio broadcasts, on the highest level possible, to people's homes of Friday evening concerts during the subscription season."

The United States does not have a state broadcaster and assesses no license fees from the public, but America did have a radio orchestra: the NBC Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Arturo Toscanini. During the 1930s, Toscanini, who had left the New York Philharmonic for

FRONT ROW CENTER

A season of high spirits on stage

A look at the opera, dance and orchestral offerings at the world's leading performing arts centers this autumn.

Opera and Ballet

AMSTERDAM

Dutch National Opera operaballet.nl

In the late 18th century, as the French government clamped down on religious institutions in an effort to forge a secular nation, a group of cloistered nuns unwilling to renounce their faith went to the guillotine. Francis Poulenc's 1957 "Les Dialogues des Carmélites" tells their story, and ends with the sound of an offstage guillotine. The director Robert Carsen's sleek, pared-down production of the opera will be revived here in November. In December, Lotte de Beer, who cut her teeth with avant garde operas across Europe, will mount a major new staging of Engelbert Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel."

BERLIN

Deutsche Oper deutscheoperberlin.de

Benedikt von Peter, whose career has so far straddled traditional and avant garde opera, will direct a new production of "Aida" here in November, one of the theater's major premieres of the year. Tatiana Serjan will play Aida, and Alfred Kim will play Radames, the military man who falls in love with her and rescues her from slavery, only to seal her gloomy fate. Mr. von Peter takes over as the artistic director of the Luzerner Theater in Switzerland next year. In December, the opera house will stage a concert-style version of Donizetti's "La Favorite."

Staatsoper staatsoper-berlin.de

Mozart's buoyant "The Marriage of Figaro" will get a new revival here in November under the direction of the theater's artistic director, Jürgen Flimm. The Venezuelan conductor Gustavo Dudamel will conduct the production, and the Estonian baritone Lauri Vasar will sing the title role. In December, the opera house will open a new staging of Verdi's "La Traviata," with Sonya Yoncheva in the role of the



MATTHIAS BAUS



DREW DIR

Carlos Acosta's new version of the story is showing on dates through Nov. 12. The short ballet features music adapted from Bizet's original. It is part of a mixed bill that also includes works by Liam Scarlett, Jerome Robbins and George Balanchine.

MELBOURNE

Opera Australia at Arts Center Melbourne, opera.org.au

As summertime approaches in Australia, Opera Australia will stage two of the liveliest mainstays in the opera canon — "The Marriage of Figaro" and Donizetti's "The Elixir of Love." David McVicar, who mounted a well-loved production of "Figaro" for the Royal Opera in 2006, will take on the work once again here. From Nov. 21-28, the company will revive Simon Phillip's production of the Donizetti opera, set in the Australian outback at the height of World War I.

ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

Mariinsky Theater, mariinsky.ru

The opera company's director, Valery Gergiev, stepped down as chief conductor at the London Symphony Orchestra in October but kept his post as artistic director here. He will sink his teeth into a new production of Tchaikovsky's "The Oprichnik" in November. The opera takes place during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, among a group of oprichniks — high-ranking government henchmen, who the tsar instated to protect him from threats. Other performances in the company's autumn season include revivals of dance and opera mainstays, like "La Sylphide" and "Boris Godunov."



CATHERINE ASHMORE / ROH

Teatro, conducts. In December, the company opens a new production of Wagner's final opera, "Parsifal."

LONDON

English National Opera, eno.org

Benedict Andrews, an Australian director known for subversive opera updates, has staged a new "La Bohème" for ENO. Set in the present day, the production includes several updates to the material. (Mimi, for example, suffers from heroin addiction rather than tuberculosis.) The production, which runs through November, capstones a busy autumn season for the company, which is also staging productions of "The Barber of Seville," "The Mikado," and Verdi's "The Force of Destiny." "Destiny" is directed by Calixto Bieito, also known for bold reworkings of his source material (for a 2006 production of "Un Ballo in Maschera" here, he famously sat the chorus on toilets).

Royal Opera House, roh.org.uk

Two takes on Bizet's "Carmen" are running simultaneously at the opera house this fall. A high-profile revival of the opera, featuring stars like Jonas Kaufmann, runs on dates through November. Elena Maximova and Anita Rachvelishvili trade off performances of the role of the ill-fated gypsy, Carmen. Meanwhile, the dancer-choreographer

TOKYO

New National Theater, nntt.jac.go.jp

Verdi's final opera, "Falstaff," focuses on the lighter aspects of Shakespeare's loveable antihero, the obese drunkard Falstaff. Jonathan Miller directed this production, which last showed at the opera house in 2007. The Georgian baritone George Gagnidze plays the title character. Other productions in the theater's autumn season include "Tosca" and a danced production of "The Tales of Hoffmann" (which is usually performed as an opera) choreographed by Peter Darrell.

VIENNA

Vienna State Opera, wiener-staatsoper.at

A mysterious, 300-year-old opera singer with a dwindling supply of the elixir of life is at the center of Janacek's 1926 opera "The Makropulos Case." Peter Stein directed the company's production, and Jakub Hrusa will conduct. The production sinks or swims on the strength of its lead soprano, who will be played here by the American singer Laura Aikin.

Orchestra

BERLIN

Berliner Philharmoniker, berliner-philharmoniker.de

After a busy November spent largely on the road, the orchestra returns to the Philharmoniker on Nov. 29 with several concerts featuring the soprano Anna Caterina Antonacci, conducted by François-Xavier Roth. The French-inspired evenings will include works by Ravel, Debussy and Berlioz, among others. The company's artistic director, Simon Rattle, returns on Dec. 16 to conduct several semi-staged performances of the opera "Pelléas et Mélisande," directed by Peter Sellars.

HONG KONG

Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, hkphil.org

On dates beginning in November, the Philharmonic's music director Jaap van Zweden tackles Beethoven, conducting his nine symphonies in the course of four nights. (The cycle ends with the most iconic, the First and Ninth.) Other concerts in the company's bustling fall season include crowd-pleasers like an evening of Mozart and Strauss led by the rising conductor Karina Canellakis; and an evening of holiday and pops music modeled on the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's Eve concert tradition, which takes place at the end of December.

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

Seoul Philharmonic, seoulphil.or.kr

The Finnish conductor Osmo Vanska will play his first concert with the orchestra on Nov. 13, leading performances of music by two fellow Finns, Kimmo Hakola and Jean Sibelius, as well as by Beethoven. The orchestra's star conductor, Myung-Whun Chung, returns to Seoul in December for two performances of Beethoven's 9th symphony. Mr. Chung will also conduct the symphony — which includes the "Ode to Joy" — at the Bunkamura Orchard Hall Tokyo in December, in a concert marking 50 years of friendly diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea.

VIENNA

Vienna Philharmonic, wienerphilharmoniker.at

The conductor Daniel Barenboim will descend on Vienna for two concerts of music by Mahler in November. But it's the Latvian conductor Mariss Jansons who rules the Philharmonic's calendar in the months to come. He will lead the orchestra in concerts of music by Stravinsky and Shostakovich in November. And in December, he will conduct the orchestra's famed New Year's Concert, a double program that takes place on both the last day of the old year and the first of the new. The concert program is yet to be announced. COMPILED BY CHRISTOPHER D. SHEA

Composer finds inspiration in the trials of childhood

TAN, FROM PAGE 1

Many of Mr. Tan's works seem influenced by his turbulent upbringing, which he recounts almost entirely through auditory memories.

In 1966, when he was 9 years old, the Cultural Revolution swept across China, and the government commanded that music be silenced, even for funerals.

"Then one day, I heard this dunc-dunc-dunc sound," he recalled, pounding his hands. "The Red Guards had smashed a local campus and lined 10 pianos to use as a barricade. The pianos made that sound as they were hit by machine-gun fire."

He added: "My mom was yelling, 'Come back! Please! You're crazy!' But I had to follow it — machine guns playing the piano. It was so beautiful."

His parents, both physicians, were "sent down" to the countryside, which is what the Communist Party did to citizens it deemed overly educated or bourgeois. When Mr. Tan was in his teens, he was also assigned to a village he called "primitive." And yet, in telling these stories, he repeats how lucky he was.

"Most kids thought they were suffering in the countryside, but I didn't mind," he said. "I started to write down these village songs. I'd organize farmers to perform their old operas."

In 1973, the Philadelphia Orchestra made a historic trip to China — the first Western ensemble to do so during the Cultural Revolution. Mr. Tan was still toiling in the rice paddies, but he heard the concert broadcast over the village loudspeaker.

"It went boom-boom-boom-boom," he said. "It was Beethoven, although I didn't know that name at the time. I was shocked. Western music was so straight-toned, so loud. Our music is like calligraphy."

Three years later, Mr. Tan took advantage of the end of the Cultural Revolution to leave for Beijing to study music properly.

"The conservatories came to life," he said. "The students and professors arrived, our jackets still stinking of pigs and cows. And we were so lucky!"

The first time Mr. Tan felt the emotional power of an orchestra was when Herbert von Karajan led the Berlin Philharmonic on a historic China tour in 1979.

"The first time I saw Karajan, I thought, 'He is a shaman,'" Mr. Tan

"Most kids thought they were suffering in the countryside, but I didn't mind. I started to write down these village songs. I'd organize farmers to perform their old operas."

said. "He can hear something between this life and the last life. The orchestra is a tool that can be used to transcend. I wanted to be this kind of shaman."

Mr. Tan left China in 1986 after receiving a fellowship at Columbia University, where he has been based ever since.

America has given him many of the major commissions that make a composer's career. His soundtracks were also used for Hollywood martial-arts blockbusters like "Hero" (2002) and "The Banquet" (2006). The Metropolitan Opera premiered Mr. Tan's "The First Emperor" (2006), which was written for Plácido Domingo. The New York Philharmonic commissioned "The Fire" concerto (2008), written for the Chinese pianist Lang Lang.

To do the initial research for "Nu Shu" into the women's language, Mr. Tan visited an isolated part of Hunan about 20 times over several years.

"It was difficult to get into the women's world, especially the old women," he said. "They didn't trust men. During the Revolution, they had been chased, jailed and called witches because nobody could understand them. When I arrived, they tried to hide themselves. They had suffered so much."

The women were baffled the first time they met Mr. Tan. But with a good dose of Chinese village humor, they made him go through a particularly spicy meal as an initiation.

"It was burning, but I ate it," Mr. Tan said, laughing. "And after 32 courses of chili, we became friends."

When Mr. Tan began his research, there were only 13 elderly women literate in Nu Shu; today, there are seven. He recorded 200 hours of raw video, which he hopes to donate to a museum. Mr. Tan is now working on a major piece tentatively called "The Buddha Passion," plus an opera to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the opening of the National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing in 2017.

Mr. Tan called China's gleaming new performance halls "a miracle." But he is interested in more than just putting on spectacular concerts back home. He wants to use music to awaken something deeper in his native land.

"The most urgent problem is belief," he said. "When I was growing up, we believed in Buddhism, Taoism, incarnation, the future, resurrection — the idea that a good person would benefit in the next life, that one needs to have a good heart. After the Cultural Revolution, those beliefs were lost."

"My religion is music," he added. "It's the only belief in which I can embrace the beauty of all other cultures."

Autumn offerings

From top to bottom: "Der Fliegende Holländer" at the Berlin Staatsoper, in which much of the action takes place inside a gigantic painting frame; a new "Hansel and Gretel" in Brussels; "La Sylphide" at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia; "Carmen" returns to the Royal Opera in London.

beautiful, doomed courtesan Violetta. Several popular productions — like the opera house's version of "Der Fliegende Holländer," in which much of the action takes place inside a gigantic painting frame — run alongside the new productions.

BRUSSELS

National Center for the Performing Arts, chncpa.org

The military and political leader Yang Jingyu fought valiantly for the Chinese in the second Sino-Japanese War. "Yang Jingyu," an opera about his efforts against Japan and for Communism, runs in December, part of the center's ongoing celebrations marking the end of "70th Anniversary of the Victory of the Counter-Japanese War and the Anti-Fascist War." Arts companies visiting this autumn include the Mariinsky Ballet, the Taiwan Guoguang Opera Company and the Martha Graham Dance Company.

BUENOS AIRES

Teatro Colón, teatrocolon.org

Prokofiev's "The Fiery Angel," which had its world premiere in Venice in 1955, tells the tale of Rupprecht, Renata and Heinrich, three star-crossed lovers whose love triangle is further complicated by the fact that one character is possessed by a demon. A new production of the opera will premiere here on Nov. 3, starring Elena Popovskaya as the possessed Renata. Ira Levin, who works prolifically at the