

Clavier

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Photograph by James O'Malley

The Mission of N. Jane Tan

BY PRU PALECEK

Pianist N. Jane Tan is happiest helping others to play well. As a student at a small conservatory in the Philippines, she started the day with a morning lesson, then went to the practice hall. "When I heard the other piano students, I would go from door to door in the practice hall, knock, and suggest, 'There is a better way to play that phrase. Why don't you try it this way?' It was probably awful for the students because I was the youngest there." Years later she received a

Fulbright-Hayes scholarship to study with Leon Fleisher at the Peabody Institute and gave lessons to students every night and on the weekends.

As a part of teaching, Tan composed pieces for her students, a habit that started in the Philippines where music was scarce. "I had a stack of manuscript paper on top of the piano to write pieces and exercises, whatever I wanted students to learn. After many years of teaching, I imagined putting music together to teach basic musical skills from

the beginning lessons, but when I couldn't find the music, I continued to write." Her first published pieces were the *Recital Etudes*, which developed many of the basics of piano playing. Other materials followed including a method, *The Well-Prepared Pianist*, which includes teacher guide books, etudes, technical studies, and collections of repertoire now published by Piano Ensemble International. Tan also wrote the books *Arpeggios for Advancing Pianists* and *Scales for Advancing Pianists*, which have diagrammed patterns and mirrored fingering used in many college programs, and she and others have arranged over 40 classic works for an ensemble of five pianists, which she calls PianoTeams™.

Since retiring from Towson State University in Maryland, Tan founded and directs The Well-Prepared Pianist Institute, training teachers by traveling through the country to teach a program that develops a high standard of musicianship in young students.

How did you develop your ideas about teaching?

They came from teaching teachers at a Chinese college in the Philippines and from working with private and university students. When I taught in the preparatory department at Peabody, the students' playing left me dumfounded. There was something wrong, but I couldn't put a finger on it. The sound and the look of the hand were wrong. At that time I had taught by myself and couldn't compare the playing to other students. I have since found that this kind of playing is widespread.

After Peabody in my third year of teaching at Towson State University, I had a large class of freshmen piano majors and again saw the same problems, whether students had seven years of piano or 13 and 14 years of study. They played the same way, sounded the same, had similar reading problems, and made similar mistakes.

In the ensuing years I came up with a way to retrain poor learning so students could graduate after four years and have a career in music. The

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first two years of study were the makeover years devoted to retraining students' ears to listen. Next, I focused on how to practice, and then I taught the basic relationship between the movement of the hands and sound. Finally, I taught students to read between the lines of music to discover nuances and colors beyond the notes. At first they were unhappy to not have Beethoven sonatas and big Brahms and Schumann pieces like everyone else, but I believed the makeover project was important to becoming better pianists. Beyond developing finger facility, my students learned to use combinations of the natural weight of the fingers, hands, arms, and body for a beautiful sound.

What were some of the first teaching pieces that you composed?

As far as my early teaching pieces, after a student finished a composition, I threw it away. That was it. I never thought about copywriting or keeping those pieces. They were written, used, and finished with. When another student came in and needed a piece to refine a technical problem, I just wrote another one.

The *Recital Etudes*, my first published pieces, developed many of the basics of piano playing: the hand shapes on the keyboard to play pentachords, perfect fourths and fifths, chords, and inversions. My idea was to help students who read poorly and had little technique, even after seven to ten years of piano study. One common problem was reading music one note at a time without anticipating what is in the score. When this happened I asked the student whether he read books, one word at a time; the answer was usually no. It helped when I compared good score reading to the progression of learning to read prose, beginning with easy syllables, words and phrases, then groups of phrases that form sentences. Good readers anticipate how words are commonly grouped in meaningful phrases. After reading the first words of a phrase, they browse through the rest of the phrase to confirm their thoughts.

Piano students do exactly the same but with pentachords, intervals, scale patterns, and all the chords. They have to know them so well the eyes trigger the hands to form the right shapes for the piano keys. The ears anticipate the sound before the keys go down, as the brain anticipates the next set of intervals or patterns. Once students recognize and play these patterns, which would be the words in my analogy, the next step is to combine them into melodic and harmonic phrases.

There are standard phrases in classical music, similar to grammatical syntax. A musician who



Tan grew up playing a daily routine of technical exercises. She says young students should religiously play etudes, scales, and arpeggios to learn skills that become tools for bringing out the poetry in music.

knows classical style can sightread many pieces in that style because he has the vocabulary of the style. It is in his eyes and ears and in his hands and mind. His eyes read more than one note at a time, his hands predict the shapes they will take on the keys, his ears anticipate the sound, as his mind analyzes the process. If you give the musician something new, such as a modern piece, he only reads note-to-note and the process is slow again; he cannot anticipate what is ahead because he does not know the vocabulary.

Why do so many teachers who grew up with classical music resist teaching 20th-century repertoire, even introductory pieces by Kabalevsky and Bartók?

The problem is a poor foundation. Students need to hear all types of music from the first lessons, not just pieces in traditional I-IV-V chord progressions. Once they cultivate a taste for all styles, including contemporary music, they will absorb whatever the teacher selects to study. When my daughter was an infant, I realized that if she ate only American baby food, she would grow up without an appreciation of Chinese food, which is my heritage. I wanted to expose her to other tastes, so I made

Chinese food, ground it in a blender, and fed her both kinds of baby food. It's that same way with music.

What prompted you to bring back some of the forgotten teaching pieces by Alexander, Nettie Ellsworth, and Newton Swift?

As a child I played the music of these composers, but when I taught pedagogy classes at the university, I had a difficult time finding their works. There were wonderful materials at the beginning of the 20th century to teach the art of piano, but most of them are no longer in print. Somebody had to bring them back. I found some in the Library of Congress, and during vacations my husband and I hunted through old shops for old music. One time we found a music store that had been through a fire, and everything was wet and smelly. We brought home as much music as we could and cleaned it up in

the garage. I sat up nights reading and looking through everything, having a lot of fun.

The Lambert book turned up at a used bookstore in Philadelphia during a vacation to the east coast. After the clerk let me look through old music he was about to throw away, I carried home a box of it and found the Lambert pieces. All of these old gems are now in the *Solo Repertoire & Reading Preliminaries* series of *The Well-Prepared Pianist*.

What can teachers do to help students develop greater technical facility?

Assign them more etudes. As a youngster the first things I played were etudes, scales, and arpeggios. It is through etudes that students learn new techniques and how to transform their technique into tools for musicianship to bring out the poetry of each work.

Technique is not gymnastics – fast, busy playing – on the piano. The contents of articles in the *Etude* magazines of the early 20th century showed that teachers paid close attention to technique and artistry beyond the written notes. Students who are brought up with good etudes will develop the technical skill to play music for years with all the tools

they gain. Those who play only the notes of a piece, no matter how fast, won't be able to transfer that skill to other pieces once they stop practicing it; they don't really know the piano.

How did you come up with the idea of a simmering pot in your teaching – having students remember all their pieces for a solo house concert at the end of the year?

The idea of simmering is an image that means a piece continues to grow as the pianist fine tunes the gestures, intensity, balance and phrasing, even the subphrasing of the music. A simmering pot is a pianist's library. When a student learns a piece, he tucks it into the library to simmer before the next performance. A piece continually goes through changes as a pianist grows and matures. He may look at a piece of music in a certain way one year, but six months later it will appeal to him in a different manner. This is why I ask students to let their pieces simmer; it is not a review of the work, which can be dull and boring. A review means to play every note of a composition to help memory.

To carry the image of simmering further, I had students imagine the rich blend of tastes in soup that has simmered for several hours; a new pot of soup is rather bland. Music has to simmer so that the pieces stay with a pianist forever. As a child grows from one to ten years of study, he develops an expanding library of pieces he can draw from to play.

Why did you have students play house concerts?

To avoid the fear of playing in recitals. Students should first perform where they are comfortable, and that is at home, not in a threatening recital hall. Further, I never wanted students to learn a piece just for the sake of performing it at such-and-such a time and place. That approach just doesn't appeal to me. At the end of the year, most students have learned and are simmering at least two albums of pieces, so they simply sit at the piano and share them with friends and family. Even for a house concert all the students play by memory, because the pieces are a natural part of them. They play by heart, not from memory.

My students gave house concerts in June and July and in addition I had recitals twice a year for everyone in the studio. I had few problems with the students not performing; my problem was everyone wanted to play as many pieces as possible. That is the beauty of the simmering pot.

Who were some of your mentors?

My teachers in the Philippines included Manuela Monseratt, Aida Sanz Gonzales, and Maria Luisa Lopes Vito. Edward Mattos was a Schnabel pupil and the cultural attaché at the American embassy in the Philippines when I met him. He liked me and said I should study in the States. At that time I had the scholarships to go but not



Masterclasses and lectures for teachers during a recent tour of China.

enough money to buy a plane ticket. My parents were very poor. He took me in, gave me free lessons, and prepared me for the Fulbright. That is how I arrived here. Mattos had the knack of diagnosing and solving a problem with one or two words. Of course, he nailed it immediately.

At Towson I was injured in a bad car accident and often had great pain. As a new faculty member, I feared losing my job if I could not demonstrate at the piano. Then I thought of Mr. Mattos. If I couldn't diagnose a student's problem, I kept quiet but laid awake at night thinking about it. I tried to remember the sound of the playing, the phrase, and visualized the student's hands as he performed. Then the next day I would go to the piano to imitate the student and compare what he did to my playing. During the next lesson I corrected his gestures, position of the fingers, hands or wrists, the body, phrasing, or other problems.

Konrad Wolff, my piano literature teacher, was another mentor. When I taught at Towson State, a colleague of mine, Diane Jezic, and I often invited him to visit from New York to give masterclasses. His mind was like a humongous library that remembered everything about music. He was wonderful.

Wolff and my teacher Leon Fleisher were friends at Peabody, and both men studied with Schnabel. Fleisher often painted a picture of music with words, like a canvas with a palette full of colors. He would explain everything to the point that you could see it and hear it, and then he would demonstrate with his left hand what you had a hard time playing with two hands. He was an amazing teacher. In that respect he was the opposite of Mattos, although in these two teachers I had the best of both worlds. Both demonstrated beautifully on the piano. Wolff and Fleisher

Didn't you also study with Mieczyslaw Munz?

Yes. I met Munz in the Philippines scouting for students to bring to Peabody. He considered my playing to be an audition for Peabody and thought I would study with him, but I never did. I wanted to find out how he taught so after graduating from Peabody, I went to him. As it turned out, Munz was different from Fleisher in that he never explained



After a concerto performance with the Manila Symphony, Antonio Buenaventura conducting.

a thing. Munz would tell you to play something a certain way and give you the fingering. A student had to think beyond the words and discover the reasons by himself or he ended by playing mechanically. There were two kinds of Munz students: those who did what he asked but thought for themselves and played imaginatively; and those who followed his instructions blindly and played mechanically. He had some very good pupils and produced some wonderful pianists, but they were inspired enough to go beyond just following instructions.

I studied with Fernando Laires long after my sessions with Fleisher and Munz. Laires was a little like Munz in that he did not demonstrate at the piano; he told a student what to do and let him think it out for himself. Laires said I needed to think about the silences in music and why they were there. He was the second teacher to tell me this, the first being Fleisher. If one teacher tells you something, you apply it but don't give it a second thought. When another teacher comes along and questions the same thing in everything you do, then you pay attention.

What inspired your idea of arranging music for an ensemble of five pianists?

At Towson I was disheartened to find that students knew only three or four audition pieces and

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