



Crown Heights Audio Network

ALAN CHAN

Biography

Working musicians in some large ensembles can be forgiven for zoning out from time to time between their assigned parts, as long as they come through on cue. But when you're performing the challenging big band music of **Alan Chan**, there's a good chance you'll mess up if you're not constantly on alert. "I like there to be surprises in my pieces, places where the music doesn't go where or how you'd expect," says the leader.

Shrimp Tale, the captivating debut album by the **Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra**—one of the brightest of recent additions to the Los Angeles jazz scene—is full of unexpected turns and instrumental combinations. On the title track, the composer briefly introduces a groove-based 5/4 passage, then a salsa section, before juxtaposing one over the other. There melody also quirkily shifts keys.

On "**Rancho Calaveras**," inspired by time spent with a friend in her vegetable and fruit garden, the musicians are directed to make animal noises with their instruments—that's right, cows and pigs and geese. "Having serious musicians do that sort of thing has a cool performance art aspect," Chan says, grinning. "It makes the concert experience more fun."

Though he's a classically trained pianist, Chan restricts himself to conducting the band in performance—except when he plays "very silly things," where called for, on toy instruments such as glockenspiel and animal noisemakers.

None of which is to suggest that Chan, a native of Hong Kong, doesn't take his music very seriously. Most of his big band compositions reflect the modern world in affecting ways and, without explicitly incorporating ethnic forms, capture important aspects of the Asian-American experience.

"**Tsu Zu Ku**," which translates as "to be continued" (a phrase he remembers appearing at the end of Japanese TV animations he watched as a boy), was written as an expression of hope for the victims of the 2011 tsunami that hit Japan. The early section of the song, featuring soprano saxophone and flute, is brisk and bright and flowing; Chan says he had the properties of water in mind. Then, suddenly, the music slows to a trickle, the melody carried by a mournful piano and taken down even lower by trombone and bass—before rebounding in optimism.

The politically charged "**Moving to a New Capital**" addresses the manmade health hazards in Beijing, including air pollution and water shortages, that led China's former prime minister Zhu Yong Ji to warn

that moving to a new capital might be the only option for citizens if efforts to improve the environment weren't quickly made.

Nature is represented by bird-song sounds inspired by Japanese *gagaku* melodies. The ecological threat is voiced through rough-and-tumble modern jazz. For added urgency, Chan draws upon Japanese processional music for the groove. "It's quite an experiment," he says. "It has lots of semi-open bars and free improv possibilities for the band."

Though Chan studied jazz arranging with **Gary Lindsay** as an undergraduate at the University of Miami in the late '90s (a time and place he nostalgically recalls on "**Shrimp Tale**"), he never thought he'd lead a big band. As a doctoral student at the University of Southern California, he primarily studied classical composition. (He acquired his master's in composition at the University of Missouri-Kansas City after being part of an exchange program at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna.)

But with the encouragement of two distinguished composer-arrangers at USC, **Shelly Berg** and **Vince Mendoza**, he became involved with jazz. And the more he listened to the work of artists including Thad Jones, Bob Mintzer, Uri Caine, Hermeto Pascoal, and the recently deceased Fred Ho, he says, "the more attractive jazz's harmonic language became to me. It felt like a bold new world."

In 2008, Chan became a member of the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop in New York City. Under the guidance of director **Jim McNeely**, he made significant advances as a composer and arranger, incorporating classical elements into the background of some of his pieces. That the musicians he worked with were so adept at performing his compositions from scratch gave him a major boost.

"In Los Angeles, the musicians' reading skills are pretty amazing," Chan says. "They can dive into what the personality of a piece is on the first reading. In New York, even when 17 people are playing, you can hear everybody's character, hear what each person is playing. It's really crazy."

Back in California, Chan became a strong advocate of jazz and other arts in the West Los Angeles community, where, with the Rev Dr. David McAllister of the Gateway Christian Church, he co-founded the Gateway Performance Series in 2009. (He is also artistic director.) After receiving commissions from around the world and having his charts performed by such ensembles as the Brussels Jazz Orchestra, Chuck Owen & the Jazz Surge, and the Millennium Jazz Orchestra of the Netherlands, he formed his Jazz Orchestra in 2011—the year he won the Dutch ArtEZ Jazz Composition Contest.

After a handful of successful concerts with his band, Chan decided to record an assortment of his compositions going back to 2005. He released an EP, *Rancho Calaveras*, in 2013. For *Shrimp Tale*, released on his own label, Crown Heights Audio Network, he gathered a group of topnotch studio and jazz players from Los Angeles—19 pieces in all, plus guest trumpeter **Wayne Bergeron** of Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band on the title cut—and produced the sessions himself.

"There's a lot of different kinds of writing on this CD," he says. One of the most winning touches is the spirited, offbeat spoken word performance by Lauren Marks, a young brain aneurysm victim who tells her amazing story in the forthcoming book, *A Stitch of Time: Diary of an Aphasiac*. She intones the poetry of writer/artist Elaine Cohen on two Mexican tales: "**Monte Alban**," about gazing down from ancient ruins at "the dusty valley spreading out and the city with its cathedrals, where everyone prayed for rain," and "**Solita**," about a woman who learns to love eating alone at a restaurant in the late afternoon.

"The way I write," says Chan, "I want to tell a story in every composition. My pieces tend to be open-ended. I go into different scenarios. They can read rough, jumping from one place to another, breaking

grooves, but I like that kind of phrasing because in a way that's almost like talking, the way we phrase and rephrase things."

When he was growing up in Hong Kong, where he was born on May 5, 1978, the country was still under British rule. Chinese music was marginalized there, and little jazz was available, so he was exposed mainly to classical and Chinese folk music.

Even when he immersed himself in jazz studies, he says, he never lost his connection to traditional Asian forms. Now, having established himself as one of the most original of young jazz composers and arrangers, he has begun incorporating traditional Chinese instruments into his work—and bringing a new dimension to his storytelling.

"It's not easy to find the right Chinese artists to play my music," Chan says. "Most of them are not trained to improvise." But in Min Xiao-Fen, a young master of the *pipa*, or Chinese lute, he has found a collaborator with brilliant improvising skills and great credentials to go with them: her past musical partners include John Zorn (at whose performance space, the Stone, Chan has performed) and Derek Bailey.

"She has a very powerful personality—we have dialogues that sometimes turn into arguments," he says with a laugh. If there's anything that his efforts with her tell us, it's that there's little danger of the surprise element in his music disappearing any time soon. •

Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra: *Shrimp Tale*

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