

Ming Tsao, Composer

Biography

The composer Ming Tsao writes music with a sensuality that arises out of a focus on the inherent qualities of sound – what the composer calls its “materiality” – coupled with an extreme formal rigour and a highly precise, finely crafted compositional style. His music is foregrounded by a contemporary conception of musical lyricism, which is fractured, multi-faceted and problematised to reflect the modern experience.

Many of Ming Tsao’s works are the result of a critical and deep-thinking examination of the Western classical tradition, as well as his serious engagement with Chinese traditional music. Increasingly, opera is the forum where Ming Tsao brings these interests together. The chamber opera *Prospero’s Garden* (2009-2015) consists of two acts that are also separate works: *Die Geisterinsel*, commissioned by the Staatsoper Stuttgart and premiered in 2011, is a re-working of Johann Rudolph Zumsteeg’s 18th-century opera on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*; *Mirandas Atemwende*, premiered in Berlin in 2015, takes Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* as the starting point for an expressionist exploration of character. Ming Tsao is currently composing a large-scale music theatre work that reinvents the most important Kunqu opera from the Chinese Ming Dynasty, *Mudan Ting (The Peony Pavilion)*, which will have its world premiere at the National Theatre Mannheim in 2026.

Ming Tsao has composed works for ensembles including the Arditti Quartet, ELISION Ensemble, ensemble ascolta, ensemble recherche, Ensemble KNM Berlin and Ensemble SurPlus and has had premieres at the Darmstädter Ferienkurse, Donaueschinger Musiktage, MaerzMusik Berlin, Wien Modern and the Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik. In recent seasons his major projects include two works for large ensemble: *Refuse Collection* (2017), a reaction to the oeuvre of French filmmakers Danièle Huillet und Jean-Marie Straub; and *Plus Minus* (2012-13), the first full realisation of Stockhausen’s open composition of the same name. In May 2022 the Ensemble Musikfabrik under Emilio Pomàrico premiered the *Triode Variations* in Cologne, a piece for 18 instruments lasting about half an hour, the recording of which was released in 2023 on the Kairos label. A second realization of Stockhausen's *Plus Minus*, titled *Plus or Minus*, will premiere at the Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik Festival in 2025, with the GrauSchumacher Piano Duo and the Experimental Studio Freiburg, and it will be performed as CD release concert at the Kontakte Festival of the Akademie der Künste in June 2025 in Berlin. An evening-length portrait concert featuring many of Ming Tsao's chamber works will be presented in Mannheim in March 2025.

Ming Tsao was born in Berkeley, California. His father emigrated from China and his mother’s parents emigrated from Austria. He studied violin and viola before travelling to Suzhou, China, to study with the renowned Guqin (Chinese zither) performer Wu Zhao-ji. He studied composition at Berklee College of Music in Boston and Ethnomusicology at Columbia University in New York before studies in Logic, Philosophy and Mathematics. Returning to composition, he gained a Ph.D. in Music Composition from the University of California, San Diego under Chaya Czernowin as well as studying privately with Brian Ferneyhough. He was Professor of Composition at Göteborg University and Visiting Professor of Composition at the Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2021 for music composition. In 2024, he was appointed as Birge-Cary Professor of Music at the University of Buffalo in New York, a position formerly held by Morton Feldman.

A selection of his chamber works was collected on the portrait CD *Pathology of Syntax*, released in 2014 by Mode Records. Kairos Music has released his works on three CDs, *Plus Minus*, *Die Geisterinsel*, and *Triode Variations*. A fifth CD will be released in June 2025 under the title *Plus or Minus* with the Neos label. His music is published by Edition Peters.

2024/25 season

This biography is to be reproduced without any changes, omissions, or additions, unless expressly authorised by the artist management

Link to the artist page: <https://en.karstenwitt.com/artist/ming-tsao>