

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 2025.

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. Even before the premiere of *Plus or Minus* for 2 pianos and electronics, which is planned for 2024, the GrauSchumacher Piano Duo recorded the work for the Neos label with the SWR Experimentalstudio in Freiburg. The CD will be released in 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.

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 two CDs, *Plus Minus* and *Die Geisterinsel*. His music is published by Edition Peters.

2023/24 season

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