



## Sounds Heard: Phyllis Chen—UnCaged Toy Piano

Concert Artists Guild Records CAG104

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The toy piano has always struck me less as a "toy" or "piano" than a "poor man's celesta." The fragility of its wonderfully dreamy chime-like sonorities is made ever-so-slightly more volatile by the instrument's inevitably imprecise intonation—there isn't always a Bösendorfer-type exactitude for getting the sizes right for those steel plates that the keys strike to produce sound. So in a way it's the ideal new music instrument—portable, magical, and slightly off-kilter.

So it's a bit baffling that, despite the general availability of modern toy pianos since the Philadelphia-based Albert Schoenhut set up his workshop in the 1870s, the earliest composition created especially for the instrument was John Cage's extraordinarily pretty five-movement *Suite for Toy Piano* from 1948. Imagine what Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, or even Bartók might have done with the instrument! But perhaps more surprising is that despite a few brief cameos in works like George Crumb's *Ancient Voices of Children* in 1980, new music composers would not start writing for the instrument in droves until the 1980s when, prompted by wanting to present the Cage piece, performers opened the door. German composer/pianist Bernd Wiesemann, conceptualist Wendy Mae Chambers (who has subsequently composed a massive spatial work scored for 64 toy pianos), and piano soloist Margaret Leng Tan began performing recitals on the toy piano in which they premiered lots of original pieces that were created specifically for them. And then some extremely inventive indie bands got into the act as well. Remember Pianosaurus, the first-ever all-toy-instrument rock group?

Anyway, by millennium's end there was a small but distinguished canon of toy piano literature and several notable recordings, including discs by Wiesemann, Tan, and yes, Pianosaurus. And a few years into our present millennium, there was even a two-day toy piano festival with concerts and colloquia at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts—academic respectability no less! And now, a brand new disc has been released featuring yet another star

toy piano performer, Phyllis Chen. It's out on the recently launched label of the Concert Artists Guild, a nearly 60-year-old organization devoted to discovering, nurturing, and promoting upcoming young virtuosos. The toy piano has finally arrived!

**Chen's debut CD, *UnCaged Toy Piano*, mixes old and new solo pieces and works featuring toy piano in combination with a CD player, a toy boombox (cute), a music box, a frying pan, and bowls. Not quite the kitchen sink, but close enough. John Cage's *Suite* in this context sounds like standard repertoire, and it's nice to know it has become that. *Mirabella a tarantella* by London-based American expatriate Stephen Montague and Julia Wolfe's *East Broadway* (the piece with the toy boombox), both previously performed splendidly on Margaret Leng Tan's *Art of the Toy Piano*, get equally exciting accounts from Phyllis Chen here. And two more recent works, *Kalimba* by Austrian Karlheinz Essl and Australian Andrián Pertout's *Exposiciones*—both of which were selected for presentation at Clark University's festival based on the results of their composition competition—are well served here in their world premiere recordings.**

**But the real delights for me are the two selections from Chen's own 2007 composition, *The Memoirist*. There's something to be said for the idiomatic sensitivity of the composer-performer, even one whose instrument is the toy piano. Particularly entrancing is the very appropriately titled *Dream* in which toy piano and bowls engage in an almost ritualistic sounding dialogue. Given the barely 30-minute duration of the recording, it's somewhat frustrating that only movements one and three are featured on the current disc, but we toy piano junkies will take whatever we can get.**