

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Everything Must Go

Conrad Tao

When, half his life ago, the 12-year-old Conrad Tao was featured on the televised broadcast *From the Top — Live from Carnegie Hall*, he appeared in a trifecta role, as a violinist, pianist, and composer. In the dozen years since, he has consolidated a place as one of the most consistently interesting and impressive figures among young American musicians.

He has studied piano with Emilio del Rosario in Chicago, and also with Yoheved Kaplinsky (piano) and Christopher Theofanidis (composition) at The Juilliard School, when he also enrolled at Columbia University through a joint program between those two institutions. In 2011 he was named a Presidential Scholar in the Arts and the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts awarded him a YoungArts gold medal in music, for composition. That same year he was designated a Gilmore Young Artist (a signature achievement for emerging pianists) and was named to *Forbes* magazine's "30 Under 30" list of emerging musical leaders — the only classical artist on the list. In 2012 he was given an Avery Fisher Career Grant, and in 2018 he was named a Lincoln Center Emerging Artist.

Already by the 2013–14 season he was serving as the Dallas Symphony Orchestra's artist-in-residence; in connection with that appointment, he wrote *The world is very different now*, an orchestral work commemorating the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Among other notable organizations that have commissioned and premiered his music are the Pacific Symphony, Atlantic Classical Orchestra,

and Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, where he was the soloist in his *An Adjustment*, a work for piano, chamber orchestra, and electronics.

Tao's calendar as a piano soloist remains busy. He has appeared with The Philadelphia Orchestra and the Atlanta, Seattle, Nashville, and New Jersey symphony orchestras, and internationally with the Orchestra Verdi Milano, National Arts Centre Orchestra (Ottawa), Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (Rome), Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México, Staatskapelle Halle, Bern Symphony, Finnish Radio Symphony, and Malaysian Philharmonic. During the 2018–19 season, his engagements include appearances with the Swedish Radio Symphony (Stockholm) and Norwegian Radio Symphony (Oslo). He will also perform in recitals with his ongoing chamber colleagues Stefan Jackiw (violin) and Jay Campbell (cello).

His career has unrolled in a way that reflects his broad talents. Tao performs both classic piano literature and contemporary music, including his own compositions. He composes pieces he can champion himself as well as works expressly destined for others.

IN SHORT

Born: June 11, 1994, in Urbana, Illinois

Resides: in New York City

Work composed: 2018, on commission from the New York Philharmonic, Jaap van Zweden, Music Director

World premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 11 minutes

In the Composer's Words

Conrad Tao has provided this comment about *Everything Must Go*, beginning with five “starting points” underlying his conception:

One: the image of a cathedral gaining sentence as it melts, coming to life via its ostensible “decay.”

Two: the classic “French overture” rhythm, with its dots and double-dots and sometimes even triple-dots, and its power as a signifier of curtain-raising grandeur.

Three: the cinematic title sequences, the best of which function as distinct pieces of filmmaking that nonetheless relate, narratively or otherwise, to the full work.

Four: the feeling of a *pull*, an induction into something, into a particular mode of listening and perceiving time, sound, and harmony.

Five: grappling with the capacity of “pleasure” to be an ideological instrument of control, and considering how we may pursue pleasure with real intention and political charge.

Everything Must Go follows a sound mass undergoing various transformations. An opening fanfare keeps cracking apart, finally pulling itself together to build into chunky chords inspired by the harmonic series that, because of the reality of orchestral writing (this piece requires nearly 100 players) can only hope to be approximations. Different harmonic, sonic, and temporal worlds are placed in relation to one another, implying various dramatic possibilities. Motifs return like external forces, periodically emboldened, trying on different looks, seeing what’ll stick, what’ll allow them in. The sound mass leaves behind tendrils and residue as it gains and loses appendages, writhes, and delights in its own possibilities. Failure: generative; collapse: deliberate and necessary.

Yes, in the end, everything must go. What are we to do with this world until then? What will the world be after everything has gone?



He plays in mainstream concert locales, but he also seizes (or makes) opportunities to perform in unusual spaces, often attracting audiences whose tastes may not principally align to traditional concert-hall music. Last season he developed (with vocalist Charmaine Lee) a new multimedia work, *Ceremony*, premiered at Brooklyn's Roulette performance space. Not long before that, he presented a warmly received recital in Unison Media's *Crypt Sessions* series, in an underground chapel beneath the Church of the Intercession in Harlem. In 2013 he curated and produced the inaugural UNPLAY Festival at the Powerhouse Arena in Brooklyn, a three-night festival in which he and colleagues explored new works encompassing (among other things) electroacoustic music, performance art, ephemeral internet creations, and music's role in social activism. This week, he is curating the first installment of the New York Philharmonic's Kravis *Nightcap* series, post-concert events in Lincoln Center's Kaplan Penthouse designed to encourage an intimate connection among today's composers, performers, and listeners.

In 2012, when Jaap van Zweden became music director of the Hong Kong Philharmonic, he introduced Tao's orchestral piece *Páng* on his inaugural program there. Tao returned to that orchestra as composer-in-residence during the 2016–2017 season. In this concert, Maestro van Zweden leads the premiere of *Everything Must Go*, which, as Tao explains, was composed with “the knowledge (and thrill) that the piece would progress directly into Bruckner's Eighth Symphony.” It largely uses instrumentation similar to Bruckner's, though broadened through woodwind doublings, a greatly

A New Voice

Music Director Jaap van Zweden recalls an early meeting with Conrad Tao, which has led to collaborations including the World Premiere of *Everything Must Go* in these performances.

I have worked with Conrad Tao since he was, I think, a 17-year-old Juilliard student. He played a piano concerto with me — Rachmaninoff — and then he said, “You know what, Maestro? I also play the violin.” I said, “Really?” So I got him a violin and he played the Sibelius Violin Concerto for me, and I was completely amazed by him. And then he said, “The real thing I want to do is to compose.” So I said, “OK, make a piece for me.” He has now written several pieces for me, one is a big work of 45 minutes, about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, which I performed with the Dallas Symphony.

This young man is not known for his compositions yet in New York and I am so proud to present him in this town, where he lives and flourishes.

expanded percussion section, and the unusual requirement for three harps, which Bruckner expressed as a desire, though not a demand.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling alto flute, and one doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, three slapsticks, xylophone, marimba, temple blocks, tubular bells, brake drum, snare drum, large tam-tam, two bass drums, almglocken, tom-toms, kick drum, three harps, and strings.