

# Edinburgh International Festival Review: Melvyn Tan, 15 Aug (\*\*\*\*)

Singapore-born Melvyn Tan might not be the first pianist you would associate with the *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano by the notorious arch-experimentalist John Cage. The keyboard player made his name with exquisite, historically informed performances of Mozart and Beethoven, and even though he has expanded his repertoire enormously in the last decade, Cage might have seemed a step too far for many.

But his bold pairing of the radical US composer's rarely performed 20-movement masterpiece with short, witty sonatas by Baroque composer Domenico Scarlatti in the Edinburgh International Festival's second Queen's Hall concert brought fresh perspectives to both figures.

Tan joked that it had taken him hours to get to grips with the intricate preparation of the piano Cage requires for the work, involving the insertion of screws, bolts, erasers and other objects into the instrument's strings to create a wondrous array of bewitching percussion sounds.

The pianist seemed to revel in the weird and wonderful timbres he drew from his instrument – to such an extent that at times he seemed to lose track of the music's impetus, turning it into glittering aural wallpaper rather than creating an engaging musical experience that gripped the listener. His description of the works as being full of 'mesmerising, hypnotic, gamelan-like sounds' only reinforced this perspective.

He fared much better in the Scarlatti sonatas, though, rising to their mischievousness with impish humour and astonishingly secure fingerwork. His right-hand melodies were bell-like, and

he injected breathless life and energy into these somewhat slight works, charming the audience with his elegant, exuberant readings.

While there was perhaps too much of a contrast between his meditative Cage and his lively Scarlatti, it was nevertheless a joy to hear both in the hands of such a refined master.