

Players >

ALAN CHAN

Tonal Personality



NEVIN WONG

When the Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra is on the stand at the North Hollywood jazz club Upstairs at Vitello's, distinction is evident from the first downbeat. This isn't standard 4/4 swing in the mold of Count Basie. Compositions that unfold and morph, challenging structures, inventive voicings and ever-changing orchestral colors set this group apart. Chan has given Los Angeles a jazz big band with an utterly unique tonal personality.

Narrative is important to his work, but don't look for a decorative chirp to sing featured numbers. A muted trumpet and mallets on tom toms evoke ancient Beijing in the programmatic "Moving To A New Capital," and "Rancho Calveras" has a spoken text by poet Elaine Cohen.

"I like big-band jazz for the way that I can use all of the things I know to tell a story," the 34-year-old composer and bandleader said. "And the way that soloists have a conversation with the composition."

Chan didn't grow up thinking he would become a jazz composer. Born and raised in Hong Kong, he knew Chinese folk music and was steeped in classical music studies in piano and composition. "I liked Mahler for the way he could tell a story," he explained. Chan didn't discover jazz and big bands until he moved to the U.S. to study at the University of Miami in 1997. He graduated from Miami in 2001 as a music theory and composition major.

Beginning in 2004, Chan studied music composition at University of Southern California, where he graduated in 2008 with a doctoral degree. Shelly Berg, an endowed chair in the jazz studies department at that time, suggested that Chan study jazz composition for a year. Vince Mendoza helped to further sharpen his focus. "He taught me a lot about bringing out my own voice in a piece," said Chan.

A contingent of Chan's band gathered around a table at Typhoon restaurant in Santa Monica after a recent Vitello's gig.

"Alan doesn't dumb his writing down for anyone," trumpeter Michael Stever said.

Chan added, with a grin, "We have great readers and I torture them."

"You have to be reading when you have a rest, because you won't come back in at a standard point," drummer Jamey Tate pointed out.

"And when I play an ensemble part," trombonist Paul Young asserted, "I may be playing it with a trumpeter and saxophonist."

Veteran trumpeter Rick Baptist is the "old man" in the band, known for his studio work and time spent in orchestras led by Bob Florence and Bill Holman. His first night as a sub with the Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra, he knew he was involved in something special.

"I had no idea what the music was," Baptist mused, "but I was very inspired by Alan and his young guys; they're all amazing musicians. The writing was obviously from a legit point of view. But the colors he's able to get out of a big band—I hadn't heard anything like that in a long time."

"Every now and then," Baptist continued, "you'll see a note or a chord that's questionable. But you play it through a second time, and you always say, 'Oh—it really does go there.' I think Alan is bringing a set of sounds that haven't been heard before in an L.A. big band. It's very heady stuff."

The Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra has released an EP, *Rancho Calveras*, and is readying a full album for 2014. Chan also has global aspirations. "I'm exploring possibilities with some people in Hong Kong," he said, "to bring big-band jazz to China. I've accompanied student bands on a tour there, and it's been very encouraging. In some cities they have a real taste for big band jazz." —Kirk Silsbee

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