



# Across the universe

Sri Lankan-British pianist, composer and linguist **Tanya Ekanayaka** introduces her new album of works inspired by the planets and melodies of indigenous people

**D**ue to my multicultural and multilingual background, I have always been moved by the beauty of difference and interconnectedness between people, the natural world and the universe. Among the many sources of inspiration for my creative work are traditional, folk and indigenous musics, framed

within a conscious awareness of their differences and similarities. Viewed in terms of their common core, namely the organisation of sound, human music since prehistoric time tells the evolving story of humanity. The universe too tells a story of evolution representing past, present and future, while comprising core elements that constitute and unify this evolution.

My latest album offers a reflection on these parallels between music and the universe, each of which may be seen to project a linear narrative as well as a metaphorical collapsing of narrative into a 'moment in time'. I also believe strongly in a vision of harmonious co-existence among all living beings, hence the album's title *The Planets & Humanity – Piano Reflections*.

With the exception of 'Earth-Life', which is about and dedicated to everyone enduring the current pandemic, I paired the remaining seven planets of our solar system with earth's seven continents. Except for Antarctica, which has no permanent human population, my reflections on the remaining six continents involve 'trans-creations' of six melodies originating from six indigenous peoples, namely the Asháninka, Cree, Gond, Hadzabe, Numbulwar and Sámi peoples. The album's vision for a world of harmonious coexistence finds musical expression in the unification of the varying musical styles and themes comprising each work.

The term 'trans-creation' is important because it highlights the fact that the works are not representations of the indigenous musics or their peoples. I believe such representation can only be achieved meaningfully by the peoples themselves. Each work is therefore a personal reflection evolved through the interaction of differing musical ideas with a specific indigenous melody.

For example, 'Neptune: Asháninka Kindled', the longest piece I have composed to date, contains a number of trans-creations of a melody of the Asháninka people. This melody represents a very old yet still extant musical tradition. It is interpolated with several other themes and contrapuntal elements, the latter echoing the early era of Western classical music in which I was trained.

The evolution of this work's musical narratives also draws on my reflections about the most distant planet in our solar system: Neptune. The final version of my piece exists in the present, the 'now' of our world's music, which I understand as a conflation of time and genres into a 'moment'.

When it came to choosing the indigenous melodies, I devoted a lot of time to listening to musics from around the world and researching their peoples, languages and cultures. Fundamentally though, it was my intuitive personal connection with each piece that prompted me to evolve my trans-creations.

My exposure to a wide array of musical genres since an early age means I do not locate myself within any specific musical tradition. While every musical idea is consciously developed, every note and space has purpose, and there is no improvisation involved once a work is complete. As such, my works are not notated but reside in my memory. This has always happened automatically without any conscious effort, and influences the character of my works in general.

Every piece from my new album has roots in musical genres that evolved within distinct cultures entirely outside the pianistic tradition. This reflects a wider artistic vision I have as a South Asian female composer-



ARJUN SUNDARALINGAM

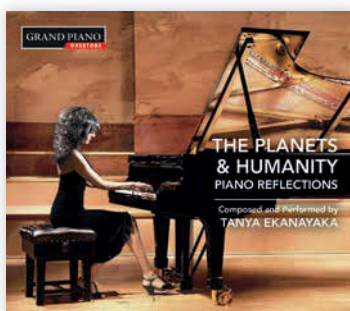
pianist to broaden the cultural syntax of the piano across time and space, rendering it more inclusive.

The roots of this artistic vision lie in my childhood experience in Sri Lanka, where I studied the piano in the Western classical tradition. I yearned for a pianistic lineage that could express a lived South Asian female experience but encountered no such works in the piano repertoire, despite Sri Lanka's complex history of European colonisation. In fact, it was due to the country's colonisation, which lasted over 400 years until 1948, that the piano became part of the nation's musical heritage in the first place. By the time I was born, pianos were present in many Sri Lankan homes, schools and universities.

As a child, I therefore spent many hours at the piano, evolving my own musical ideas which I felt aligned with my multicultural and multilingual life experiences. The piano became the language of my being at a very early age. Looking back, I recall it felt natural and liberating to be weaving such musical tapestries – thereby indigenising the language of my being.

I hope listeners will be touched by my new album. It includes explanatory notes, which I also hope will encourage people to delve deeper into the indigenous musics and be inspired by them. **IP**

*Ekanayaka in recital at the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London*



*Tanya Ekanayaka's The Planets & Humanity – Piano Reflections is now available on the Grand Piano label (GP879). [tanyaekanayaka.com](http://tanyaekanayaka.com)*