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Cancer, comfort, and a concerto that sings the journey

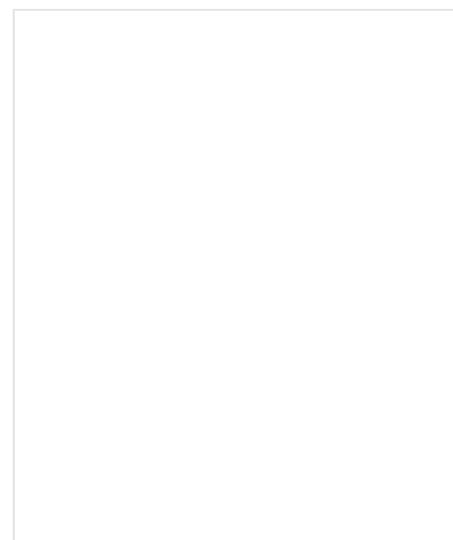
By **Matt Tenbruggencate**, Saturday February 2, 2013



The late artist Luc Leestemaker's journey with cancer inspired a concerto.

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In 2011, Vincent Ho's patron, collaborator and friend Luc Leestemaker phoned. He had cancer.



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The LA-based visual artist and entrepreneur, who had financed Ho's first recording when the composer leapt from academia to the professional world, told his friend how doctors had given him three months to live, tops. Leestemaker was rejecting western medicine's death sentence, however, in favour of alternative healing practices – psychotherapy, herbal medicine, shamanism and meditation.

And he wanted his friend Vincent to compose something: a musical score for cancerland.

"That's what started the journey, using art as a form of healing," says Ho, who's just come from the first rehearsal of From Darkness to Light, his contribution to this year's New Music Festival featuring percussion muse Dame Evelyn Glennie. The piece has its world premiere at [Winnipeg's Centennial Concert Hall on Saturday, February 2.](#)

"Luc always felt art wasn't just a commodity you purchase for entertainment when you have money in the bank or you've got everything paid off. He felt art was something you turn to when you've lost everything; when you've been challenged like this and you needed some form of comfort. In a sense, he believed the arts had this engrained ability to heal in some form whether emotionally or spiritually that would consequently help the physical."

Leestemaker spoke to Ho about writing a musical translation of the journey he observed himself and other patients on: the initial trauma of diagnosis, the brutal physical and emotional grind of treatment, the mind-bending prognosis of life or death.

"He felt this was something that needed to be translated in musical terms. We should try to create a work that doesn't just express ideas, but puts the audience on an journey of healing – some sort of musical ritual, he would say, that not only expresses the horrors of the disease but also the journey that it encompasses and the spiritual clarity that comes at the end."

Ho admits he was daunted by the piece, never having been diagnosed with cancer himself. As well as in depth discussions with Leestemaker, Ho interviewed a number



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of patients and survivors, asking about their personal experiences. "Vince and I originally met when I was in the Guardian Angel Fashion show and he was volunteering as an escort," says Winnipeg psychotherapists Risa Altman. "He came up and started chatting and we maintained a friendship."

In 2008, Altman entered cancerland when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Though by her own account a private person, she was willing to talk to Ho about her journey. "I have some reservations around the 'Yee haw, let's celebrate' aspect of performance." Altman says. "I want clarified, this is devastating. It is a devastating experience. It leaves you shell shocked. And ambivalent about cheering, but just wanting to cry everyday because you've lost time and you haven't been there for your children. It's devastating.

"Vincent knows that I'm a very private person, but I think this is important. I think that this tribute – he's not calling it that, but I think it is a tribute to those affected – it was something that I wanted to be part of and I was humbled that he asked."



Ho found other patients shared Altman's cautious commitment to his project. "A lot of them felt it was something people needed to understand, but it's not really easy to tell through words. When I told them I was

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writing a piece, that Dame Evelyn Glennie was on board, they thought 'Okay, maybe this will get the message across what it's like going through what we've been through.

"People were brutally honest about the details of their illness, physically, emotionally, because they really wanted to get across to me the reality of what cancer is."

On May 18, 2012, that reality killed Luc Leestemaker. It was his birthday. He had just turned 55. "Luc always lived life to the fullest, a life of great poetry. When he was admitted to the hospital, my piece *The Shaman* was being performed in Taipei by Dame Evelyn Glennie. The second movement of that piece is inspired by his painting *The Voyageur*. For him to pass while that piece was being performed half a world away, it was so him in the sense that he would go out in style. He would enter immortality the day he entered the world, but with a musical send off – that was just him. I was devastated, but it just seemed so fitting for a guy like that."

Ho says the loss of his friend deepened what he wanted the piece to say, what he wanted to say on behalf of his friend. The birth of his first child a month later only added to his hopes for *From Darkness*. Hopes of healing, which Ho says line up with the ancient spiritualism of the shaman. "For me, music is more than just musical motifs or melodic gestures, it's something that needs to put the audience in a different state of being... This goes in line with the history of shamanism, because shamans historically are spiritual healers. They use rituals to try to improve the health of their community. And a lot of the times, all of them in fact, they use music and incantations and dance to intensify the spiritual nature of the ritualism."

That's Ho's hope for *From Darkness*. That with the help of Dame Evelyn Glennie – a woman he calls "the musical shaman of our times" – the audience travel on a course of healing, nourishing their souls and bodies.

Risa Altman will be there, experiencing the concerto informed by her own story. "I'm expecting to be blown away. I think that I will be overcome with emotion, as music can do. But in a celebratory way. If there's any

celebrating, through music and the beauty of his music, that I can enjoy.”

Matthew TenBruggencate is a Winnipeg-based writer. He is owned by two cats. Follow him @tenbruggencate, where is he spreading nasty rumours about you.

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