

PART
C

India's classical riches unlocked
Rare translation project spans some 500 books

C2



Full creative control
Singer Linda Wong spent six-figure sum on new album

C3



Kit Chan
In danger of elimination from China reality show

C12

Life!

Controlling *THE STRINGS*

A former child prodigy, violinist Qian Zhou now chairs a new international competition here that could change the lives of young musicians. **AKSHITA NANDA** reports.

C4



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THE RELUCTANT VIOLINIST

As a child, Qian Zhou wanted to be a dancer, but her parents pushed her to study the violin



Akshita Nanda
Arts Correspondent

As a new student at the Peabody Conservatory in the mid-1980s, China-born violinist Qian Zhou pinched pennies and lived on 15 meals a week.

All that changed when she swept every major prize at the well-known Marguerite Long-Jacques Thibaud Competition in Paris in 1987, a feat unprecedented in the contest's 50-year history. It launched her internationally as a soloist, a route which would lead to the now-American citizen becoming the founding head of strings at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory in Singapore.

Today, she judges similar life-changing musical contests around the world and is also the chair of Singapore's biggest-ever musical prize, the new triennial Singapore International Violin Competition for musicians aged 30 and below.

Hosted by the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music and supported by the National Arts Council of Singapore, the contest begins on Jan 10 and has attracted more than 30 award-winning violinists under the age of 30. Contestants from countries such as China, Germany, Japan, Latvia, South Korea and the United States, among others, will battle for a top prize of US\$50,000 (S\$66,560) plus a recording contract with music label Naxos, awarded on Jan 21.

Of Qian's role in the competition, the conservatory's director Bernard Lanskey says she has been "pivotal in shaping the contest to be so quickly recognised as potentially world class".

He adds: "Her international credibility is such that she was able not only to draw together quickly such a distinctive jury, but also that she could garner interest from so many of the world's top teachers."

The nine-member star-studded jury, for example, includes South Korea's Nam Yun Kim, who has also judged prestigious violin competitions such as the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels and Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, plus Israeli violin doyenne Shmuel Ashkenazi.

As the days count down to the first round of the competition, Qian, who turns 47 this year, barely moves from her office and command centre at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, working on Christmas Eve and holidays to ensure all goes smoothly.

Of the 35 shortlisted candidates, two are her former students - Singaporean violinists See Ian Ike and Loh Jun Hong. A third Singaporean, Phang Lijia, is also in the running.

As a member of the jury, Qian refuses to speculate on any of their chances, saying only: "I want this contest to discover the deserving. Deserving means talent level and musicianship."

She shares her memories of competing. A self-possessed child prodigy with an iron will, she commanded the stage from the age of seven when she played a debut concert at a sports stadium in her birthplace, Hangzhou.

Only once does she recall being nervous, when she was a teenager in the semi-finals of the China National Competition in 1984 in Beijing. Up against the home favourite, she was also recovering from an elbow injury that meant she was given special treatment in the earlier rounds and allowed to play her qualifying round in Shanghai a month after the other candidates. "The other parents were upset, how can you do that?"

Yet, instead of dirty looks, her strongest rival, the Beijing favourite,



Qian Zhou went on to win prestigious competitions and is head of strings at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory today. PHOTO: EDWARD TEO FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

came up to her backstage and said: "I didn't play well, so relax."

She smiles and shakes her head at the memory. "You don't see that any more."

Indeed, she says, at various moments in her life, influential strangers have stepped up to her rescue. This was prophesied by a fortune-teller her mother took her to before she left home in 1985 to study in the US. "He said: 'All your life, you'll have important people helping you.' And every time, someone has."

The list of people in her corner includes influential Soviet-born violinist and conductor Isaac Stern, who came to the Shanghai Conservatory when she was 10, heard her play and later got her gigs with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

Her teacher at the Peabody Conservatory, Berl Senofsky, taught her to be humble, renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma pushed her to continue a solo career as she tired of travelling in her 20s, while legendary American pianist Leon Fleisher and the late pianist-turned-musicologist Piero Weiss taught her to look beyond the notes to the art and culture that inspired composers.

But before all these were her parents, her mother Zhou Shunding, a dancer of traditional Chinese and ballet styles, and her late father, the noted composer and violinist Qian Zhaoxi. They pushed their only child towards the violin even as she rebelled against their decision.

"I wanted to be a dancer because of my mother and because it looks so pretty," Qian says. "We fought for two or three years. When I was seven, the Beijing Dance Academy selected me, but my mother said: 'No.' She feels the career of a dancer is too short. The violin - you can play when you're 70."

"It's not that I didn't like the violin, I didn't like being pushed," she adds.

At age four, she was also interested in

composition and one of her works was published in a book of children's songs. Yet for her parents, the focus was on playing the violin. They enrolled her in the Shanghai Conservatory when she was eight and her father visited once a month to oversee her education, until they also moved to the city.

At age 10, her performance caught the attention of Stern and, three years later, she was selected for an international student tour of Japan and Europe.

Tired of fighting with her parents for "control" over her life, she decided life outside China had more appeal. On the tail of her win at the China National Competition, she headed to Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory to study with Senofsky.

Life in the US was a rude shock for the teenage Qian. "I used to have five teachers just for me. Yes, five. A teacher who works on academics, so I don't have to pick up a pencil; violin teachers, an accompanist, one who takes care of daily things. But Senofsky taught me the life I led in China was not healthy. He said: 'You can never become a real musician if you have everything done for you.'"

At Peabody, if a violin string broke, she had to have a spare on hand and fix it. The onus was on her to prepare to get the best out of a lesson, rather than be spoon-fed. "I wanted to go home immediately," she says, leaning back and laughing. "He didn't do anything. You feel you were loved and now you're not loved."

Added to that, as part of a full scholarship, she had to subsist on 15 subsidised meals a week and was not allowed to compete for prize money initially. "I felt - why was I here?"

She set her sights on the prestigious and rich Queen Elisabeth Music Competition in Brussels, which today offers winners a €25,000 (S\$40,000) prize.

"For practice", she headed first to Paris and the then-Marguerite Long-Jacques Thibaud Competition (today the €25,000 Long-Thibaud-Crespin) and took not only the grand prize, but also the other five major prizes bestowed for performance.

Qian laughs on recalling Senofsky's reaction. "I called him and he said: 'Fourth? You won fourth?' I said: 'First'. He said: 'Fourth?' My pronunciation was not good."

Once the misunderstanding was resolved, however, Senofsky insisted she take no recording contracts. "He said: 'You're not ready, but concerts you can go play.'"

Her solo career has included appearances with the famous London Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and ensembles from the US to Tokyo.

However, her strong will got her into trouble with one maestro she declines to name. When they argued over music, she lost her concert and several subsequent engagements. "I was very naive," she says. "In the real world, you don't fight with the maestro."

Advice from noted pianist Fleisher saved her - he suggested she "take the time to learn something".

Immersing herself in musicology, she found new appreciation of the notes she played and also realised she did not enjoy touring and travelling as much as playing and appreciating music with those who loved it as well. "I don't like travelling so much. I want to go home."

The offer to set up the strings department at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory in Singapore was heaven-sent and she moved here in 2003.

Her father had cancer and she wanted to be near him as well as transition to a career in teaching. Until his death in 2005, she visited him often in China and they talked about everything from Song dynasty poetry to her still unresolved feelings over his heavy-handed parenting.

"He didn't remember anything," she says, half-smiling. "He felt he was very loving. I said: 'That's not true, you put your dreams on me.' We were frank with each other. We became great friends."

Her mother, now 71, still lives in Hangzhou and Qian lives alone in Singapore. She was married once in her 30s to another violinist she declines to name. It ended because of "tension" over rival careers, just like her first relationship when she was 19 and also dating another musician. "I don't think two violinists should be together," she says firmly.

She is instead enfolded in a "family" of fellow musicians, including colleagues and former students.

Many of the latter, who are already well established in the music scene, ascribe their success to Qian's "strict and caring" style and keep in touch with her via instant message and e-mail. They say that while she holds them to high standards, she also encourages them to find their own musical voice.

Yi Zhao, 28, assistant concertmaster of the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, cried after her first lesson with Qian in 2007.

"After I played, she asked me if I wanted to be a violinist and, if I am not into it, I should quit music and do something I was really interested in. I cried immediately. However, she didn't give up on me. She gave me a challenge to memorise that piece, a very long Bach fugue, within a week. She totally changed me afterwards."

Xiaoxiao Qiang, 28, first violin of the St Louis Symphony Orchestra, says: "She is a true, caring friend."

When she fell sick in her junior year before a major concerto competition at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, Qian offered her guest room as it was more comfortable than the dormitory.

Loh, 25, recalls being ripped apart by Qian's scolding before his graduate school auditions, but her comments that he had "no rhythm, no phrasing and no intonation" made him practise twice as hard and get into the Juilliard School of Music. He completed his master's degree there last year.

"The strict side can be quite scary if one is unfamiliar with her. However, once you get to know her, we know she has our best intentions at heart," he says.

Indeed, Qian makes her students look beyond the notes on the page and immerse themselves in the culture they come from.

"I tell my students: 'How can you play Tchaikovsky? It's not just listening to recordings. You need to look at the paintings from that time, listen to Russian music, watch ballet, then come to Tchaikovsky. I tell them, but they don't always listen.'"

She shrugs and smiles quietly for a while, tables turned on the rebellious prodigy. "Music is like an ocean. Outside, it's only water and water, but inside, there is so much more."

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For details of the Singapore International Violin Competition, go to singaporeviolincompetition.com. Tickets from \$10 are available at Sistic (go to sistic.com.sg or call 6348-5555)

THE LIFE! INTERVIEW WITH Qian Zhou

My life so far



Qian Zhou at age 18 (right), after winning the 1987 Marguerite Long-Jacques Thibaud Competition in Paris; and in 1996 (above), signing photographs after a concert. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF QIAN ZHOU



"I felt for many years the violin was my boyfriend. I was quite occupied. I couldn't go out. If I went out, I felt guilty. When I was 19, my best friend told me I should date, so I dated. Unfortunately, he (her first boyfriend) was a violinist as well, so when we dated, there was tension."

Violinist Qian Zhou on dating

"Music is music, why should you be the maestro? I still feel that way. You have to have respect for each other as musicians. But in the real world, you don't fight with the maestro."

On ego tussles with maestros



With her father, composer and violinist Qian Zhaoxi, in 2005.

"I go to museums a lot to trace the truth of the composers. We don't have recordings, but we have paintings to tell the truth of those times. In my 30s, I hung out with painters a lot. I needed to learn how to look at paintings, how they would look at paintings."

On why she loves art