

Playing the piano to reach out

Tan Jia Hui

When he was three, Clarence Lee Zheng Le could play note-perfect renditions of jingles he heard on television on his toy piano.

Recognising his gift, his mother, Madam Chan Hong Choo, a professional singer then, taught him to play the piano.

He later honed his skills under a few teachers and won the Young Pianist Competition and Yamaha Piano Competition in 2007.

More accolades followed and on Saturday, Lee, now 24, will be performing his debut solo piano recital titled *Passion And Poetry* at the Victoria Concert Hall.

The recital is part of the renewed Young Virtuoso Recital Series, which was founded by Dr Chang Tou Liang, *Life!*'s freelance classical music reviewer, in 2005.

The series celebrates young Singaporean pianists and composers and provides them with a platform to showcase their talent in a full-length recital. Each musician must have at least one local composer's work in his repertoire.

In the past, pianists such as Lim Yan, Albert Lin, Sandi Koh and Nicholas Loh have been featured in the series and gained more recognition after. For instance, Lim has performed extensively in Europe



Book it

PASSION AND POETRY

Where: Victoria Concert Hall

When: Saturday, 7.30pm

Admission: \$18 to \$38 from eventClique (call 6602-9900 or go to www.eventclique.com)

Clarence Lee is studying for a master's in music.
PHOTO: JOHN ZHANG

and worked with many leading conductors and orchestras.

The annual series was stopped after 2009 due to a lack of funding. It returned in 2013 and this year's recital is presented by Ars Nova Concerts.

On how he picks the musicians to feature in the series, Dr Chang, 49, a family physician, says: "I've been following them over the years and attending their recitals since they were kids."

The local music scene has grown, he adds, pointing out that from 2013, the series has showcased "a new generation of pianists who have studied locally" rather than internationally, with Abigail Sin, Azariah Tan and, now, Lee.

The award-winning Sin has played in concert

halls across the globe, with her performances broadcast over national television and radio stations in Romania, Hong Kong, the United States and Singapore.

Tan, who is hearing impaired, has performed with the Singapore Symphony and Silesian Philharmonic (Poland) Orchestras and given concerts in the US, Japan, Serbia and Montenegro.

In a telephone interview with *Life!*, Lee says he chose to study music in Singapore to prove that local musicians can be just as good.

"Many people, both foreigners and locals, tend to undervalue Singaporean artistes and generalise us as being second-rate, even if that is contrary to reality," he adds.

He was offered a place at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at the National University of Singapore when he was 15 and is now in his final year of a master's degree in music.

His achievements include clinching second place in the Artist Category at the 2011 National Piano & Violin Competition and the Professional Open Class at the 1st Hong Kong International Music Competition for Young Pianists last year.

Lee views music as a personal and emotional instrument to reach out to others, rather than merely focusing on its technical and intellectual aspects.

"Every artist has his own distinct identity. For me, as long as your music has something to say, it's the most important thing."

The title of his recital, *Passion And Poetry*, reflects his philosophy.

"I play the music from my heart, so hopefully my music will touch the audience and awaken elements of empathy and humanity."

On Saturday, his recital will include pieces by Rachmaninov, Liszt and Mozart. The first two composers had sparked his love for classical music.

He is also premiering local composer Phang Kok Jun's piece, *Waves*, which he describes as a composition of technical and musical ingenuity, with a distinctly Asian feel. The use of the five-note pentatonic scale also makes the piece more accessible to the local audience.

Phang, 26, says he was inspired by the dynamism of the waves during a walk to the inner harbour in Baltimore in the US.

Despite his rising profile, Lee has a simple wish. He says: "Hopefully, my music will be able to make the world a more beautiful place."