

Musical letters to friends

Singapore composer Chen Zhangyi says composing is like writing letters, but with musical notation



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When he was 10, Chen Zhangyi's painting of chrysanthemums won a \$1,000 Young Artist Award at the UOB Painting of the Year competition. He told reporters then that he wanted to be a painter.

Today, the composer transfers his visual aesthetic to award-winning musical scores that are as pleasing to the eye as to the ear.

Friends laugh at his obsessive tendencies: he writes his music only in Moleskine notebooks and insists that his scores be printed only on ivory-coloured paper. He can spend hours adjusting the alignment of musical instructions too.

Chen, who turns 32 this year, says: "I think music should look like what it sounds like. If the sound is very busy, the score should reflect that."

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory alumnus is one of the most established Singapore composers based here – fellow 30something alumni include US-based Emily Koh and Diana Soh. His resume includes the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council in 2014, plus a post as lecturer in the conservatory since last year.

In 2011, his work for orchestra and chorus, *Ariadne's Love*, was recorded by the London Philharmonic and Eric Whitacre Singers at the Abbey Road Studios, which also brought the music of the Beatles to the world. *Ariadne's Love* was aired on BBC Radio 3 and dubbed "music for a choral voice of the future".

That year, Chen also conducted the Tokyo premiere of his Singapore-inspired melody *Rain Tree*. The piece was performed by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) last year and so impressed music director Shui Lan that he commissioned another Chen piece for its tour of Europe this May.

The new six-minute work, of an ethereal symphony, took Chen three months to write and will be premiered at an SSO concert on Saturday. Shui says: "The composition has beauty of colour and atmosphere. The orchestra is proud to introduce it to European audiences."

Chen calls the piece "a six-minute overture to the orchestra's programme", which includes Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E Minor*, performed by Chinese violinist Yang Tianwa, and the suite from Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Local themes inspire Chen, who did a double master's in composition and music theory pedagogy at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore as well as his doctorate before returning here last year.

Last year's *Sandcastles* for piano and violin came from his childhood enjoying the beach at East Coast, where he grew up. In 2014, he wrote the operetta *Window Shopping* for ensemble Chamber Sounds, basing it on a favourite Singaporean pastime. *Laksa Cantata*, a homage to Bach's *Coffee Cantata*, was performed here in 2013, with singers squabbling over whether to serve laksa at a wedding.

But not every work gets glowing reviews. He wrote a two-hour children's opera for the Singapore Lyric Opera in 2013, *Pursuant*, which was panned as a production.



Chen Zhangyi's dream is to learn every instrument. He plays the piano, violin and viola. ST PHOTO: ALICIA CHAN

Straits Times reviewer Natalie Ng enjoyed the "neo-Baroque and Broadway" style of *Window Shopping*, but Straits Times reviewer Chang Tou Liang called *Laksa Cantata* an "enjoyable exercise" that would have been better with "a Peranakan or local idiom to spice up the work".

How to define what makes music Singaporean? He says: "The essence of being Singaporean is being not quite Chinese, not quite Western, but a confluence of cultures."

Music is how this otherwise quiet man communicates best, right down to proposing to fiancée and fellow composer Wynne Fung last month via a piano and violin concert at the Esplanade Recital Studio that featured their works. At the end of the performance, the musicians played Wynne's *Theme*, which he wrote for her when they were studying at Peabody, followed by him popping the question with flowers.

"It was the most romantic thing he ever did," says Fung, 25, an executive in Yong Siew Toh Conservatory's events planning department.

She was his junior in Temasek Junior College and the conservatory and got to know him only when they were studying in Baltimore – she also did a master's at Peabody. They will marry in July.

Music has always been important in Chen's family. His father played the flute in the Chinese orchestra set up by Radio Television Singapore but gave that up in his 20s for an electronics servicing business to support his wife and three sons; Chen's older brother is a school teacher and his younger brother is studying engineering in England.

"In those days, music was something that we say 'cannot earn money, cannot survive'," says Mr Simon Tan Teow Khoo, 61, who is proud that his son "can serve the country" through music now. He uses his dialect name but registered his son's name in hanyu pinyin.

He and his wife, Madam Anna Lek Eng Ngiang, 55, made sure their children took lessons in music, painting and Chinese calligraphy.

Chen grew up enjoying xinyao music and Mandopop but learnt the

violin as a quirk of fate – there was no Chinese string ensemble in Gongshang Primary School. He studied violin with Mr Wu Ee Leng, who was in charge of the school ensemble, Mr Wu's daughter Bingling and former SSO concertmaster Alexander Souptel.

In Anglian High School, Chen joined the choir and string ensemble. In Temasek Junior College, he added the composition string to his bow for the first time. A portfolio of original compositions was a requirement for A-level music.

Ms Winnie Chew, 38, his teacher then, calls him "a natural composer". There are formulas for writing musical compositions, just as there are for English essays, so some students follow those to get a handle on the writing of music. Not so for Chen. "He had a natural ear for musical lines and for timbre," she says.

She has attended his concerts over the years and is proud that he has matured as a musician. She laughs at his obsession with the look of a score. "He used to be a typical JC boy, horrible handwriting, scruffy. I used to scold him about his handwriting. He's blossomed."

In his teens, Chen was obsessed with strings. He went through a guitar craze, playing along to songs on the radio, but as he did not have any friends to form an indie band with, planned to be a violinist.

He applied to Yong Siew Toh Conservatory hoping to major in the instrument, but was taken in for composition instead. "I was kind of disappointed but it's okay," he says.

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CHEN ZHANGYI on what makes music Singaporean

"Composition is nice because every note you write stays there permanently. You can practise the same passage on the violin for 10 to 12 weeks and, two weeks later, lose it."

His fiancée says: "He's very good at what he does." There is no competition between the two composers, especially since she prefers to do "smaller projects with friends", such as the December concert where he proposed.

His proposal took her by surprise because he is not demonstrative. "But he takes very good care of me," she says, recalling how he responded when her Baltimore flat was burgled.

Returning from the airport after a holiday, she found her door chained from the inside and called Chen immediately. "I lived alone and nobody else had my keys. Baltimore is a pretty rough place to live in, with high crime and homicide rates, so I was afraid of who might be inside my apartment."

She had tried calling Chen for help on another occasion, when she had an asthma attack. He had failed to respond then because he was asleep. But this time, he came immediately – in his pyjamas and hiding a huge kitchen knife in newspaper in case he needed to defend them. He stayed with her until the police came, broke down the door and ensured the flat was safe to enter. Her flat had indeed been burgled.

Chen is a person you can count on, say his friends. Mr Ding Jian Han, 21, a first-year composition student at Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, took violin lessons from Chen as a teenager. He says: "His teaching method is different. Before learning a piece, he'd ask me to analyse it, so I became interested in how music was created."

Chen mentored him through the writing process and helped him conduct rehearsals. They communicated via e-mail or social media when Chen was in Baltimore. While overseas, Chen gave him tips on preparing his portfolio to apply to the Singapore conservatory.

Chen enjoys working with students and says it leaves him time for writing music as well. "There's this romantic idea about com-

posers having inspiration but that's 2 per cent of the time. Most of the time, it's just the inspiration of the deadline," he says, laughing.

He likes to go on long walks to think about music. Often, a good night's sleep works wonders. "A teacher gave me this tip: If you have an idea, don't complete it until the next day. Stop in the middle so you can begin the next day with something."

He likes to handle the instruments he composes for. He plays the violin, viola and piano, and took a few lessons in the Carnatic violin. He enlists the help of other musicians when working on, say, percussion pieces. "My dream is to learn every instrument but that's not possible," he says glumly.

This means he never writes music a musician cannot handle, even if the score looks daunting initially. A violin melody written for the 2013 National Piano And Violin Competition had contestants worried, so he came up with a YouTube tutorial and a demonstration. After one part, he says, "they sat in silence for five seconds. It sounded like it was difficult but it was doable."

Like many composers, he does not consider his music complete unless it is performed. "When you write something, you don't really know how it will sound," he says.

So when he is workshopping a piece with friends, he might sit there listening because he is simply enjoying the performance.

"For bigger works like orchestral pieces, I approach them like I'm writing a letter to my friends. Composing is a lot like writing a letter, but with musical notation," he says.

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Chen Zhangyi at age three (far left) and with the UOB Painting of the Year Young Artist Award (left) when he was 10 years old. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CHEN ZHANGYI



Chen conducting *Rain Tree* (above) with the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra in 2011 and with composer-conductor Eric Whitacre (right) at Abbey Road Studios in London, where his work for orchestra and chorus, *Ariadne's Love*, was recorded by the London Philharmonic and Eric Whitacre Singers.

