



Pianist Azariah Tan hopes to use the \$10,000 grant to attend the Sarasota Music Festival in Florida and Karlovac Piano Festival in Croatia. PHOTO: 3 ACES

Hearing-impaired pianist wins \$10,000 NUS grant

This year's Paul Abisheganaden Grant goes to talented musician Azariah Tan, who has not let his limited hearing affect his passion

Nabilah Said

He may be hearing impaired, but pianist Azariah Tan, 25, is blazing the trail with his talent and determination.

The pianist was announced as the recipient of the Paul Abisheganaden Grant for 2017, in a statement issued by the National University of Singapore (NUS) Centre for the Arts.

The prize, in memory of Singapore music pioneer and Cultural Medallion recipient Paul Abisheganaden, is awarded to NUS students and alumni who have contributed significantly to the performing arts.

Tan, a graduate with a degree in music from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in NUS, has bilateral sensorineural hearing loss – the result of a condition that damages the inner ear's tiny hair cells.

The degenerative disease, diag-

nosed by a specialist when he was four years old, has left him with only 15 per cent of his hearing.

He uses hearing aids and will eventually go completely deaf.

But this has not stopped the talented musician, who also has two master's degrees in music and a doctorate in piano performance from the University of Michigan.

His musical journey began with keyboard lessons at the age of five.

His teachers discovered he had perfect pitch and he went on to achieve Grade Eight when he was 13, after skipping a couple of grades.

Since then, he has topped a number of piano competitions internationally.

In 2012, he was awarded Best Solo and Best Concerto in the college division for The American Prize, a prestigious award for the country's finest performing artists, ensembles and composers, which is based on recorded performances.

Despite his many achievements, the United States-based musician describes the win as an "undeserved honour".

"Much of the credit should go to all the people who helped me, especially my teachers for their guidance and patience," he says.

The bachelor also gives credit to God "for his gift of music to me" and

his parents "for being the biggest influences in my life".

He is the only child of a former sound engineer and a university lecturer, who homeschooled him up to university, as they felt that mainstream education was unable to accommodate his hearing impairment and talent for music.

Calling him "one of Singapore's finest young musicians", Ms Sharon Tan, director of the NUS Centre for the Arts, heaps particular praise on Tan for "his commitment to community and sharing the gift of music".

The musician often devotes time to play at charity events.

He is also a staff accompanist at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance, and helps piano students prepare for their examinations. He also teaches piano at summer music camps.

He expects to return home to Singapore for good in July and plans to work on performance collaborations with the NUS Piano Ensemble and Symphony Orchestra.

"Thereafter, I can expand and reach outwards to the rest of the music circle in Singapore," he says, without revealing details.

As for the \$10,000 grant – which recipients must use to pursue developmental courses – he has his

sights set on attending two music festivals, the Sarasota Music Festival in Florida and the Karlovac Piano Festival in Croatia, where he will take music masterclasses to hone his skills further.

He admits that his hearing impairment can be frustrating at times.

In particular, he says hearing aids cannot differentiate between noises and voices as well as human ears can.

"It can also be especially frustrating not being able to differentiate musical sounds and, more importantly, the subtlety of sounds. I have to imagine them and hear them in my head," he says, adding that he holds out hope that researchers may one day discover a way to reverse his impairment.

"But even if not, I try to view what I have as a gift and I try to make the most of it while I still have some hearing left."

He remains positive and upbeat, and says he wants to make music fun and accessible to as many people as he possibly can.

"My dream is to unite everyone through the language of music and touch people's hearts with this special gift of music."

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