

The Observatory to play with 30 guitarists

The home-grown experimental rock outfit feature their biggest stage line-up for a gig, which closes NUS Arts Festival

Eddino Abdul Hadi
Music Correspondent

Home-grown experimental rock outfit The Observatory usually perform as a quartet, but for their latest gig at the University Cultural Centre Hall tomorrow, the band will feature their biggest stage line-up yet.

The concert, titled *Vibrational*, will see them collaborate with 30 guitarists who are students and staff from the National University of Singapore (NUS).

It is not the first time that the band are playing with an orchestra of guitarists, though.

The performance, the closing show of the two-week-long NUS Arts Festival, is similar to the first time the band staged *Vibrational* in France in 2015. That gig saw them perform with 19 musicians from French guitar group *Guitarkestra*.

The band's drummer and percussionist Cheryl Ong says: "We decided to be a little more ambitious by increasing the number of electric guitarists from 19 to 30."

Many of the NUS musicians were classical guitarists who were not familiar with the electric guitar, so there was the added challenge of having them learn a new instrument and its accessories, such as amplifiers, as well as to familiarise themselves with The Observatory's songs.

Ong, 31, adds: "We thought that it would be nice to expose them to something different, a different instrument, a different style of learning and playing."

"Musicians tend to get stuck in the circle of their own genres, so it's not every day that classical musicians get to play rock music or vice versa, just to experience learning and playing music from another perspective."

For Mr Lee Chun Yat, vice-president of the NUS Guitar Ensemble, the first practice session with The Observatory was "a culture shock".



"We were so used to having scores to practise with, that working without them left us quite at a loss at what to do and how to carry on at the rehearsals."

The 22-year-old adds that The Observatory – which also comprise vocalist and guitarist Leslie Low, vocalist/keyboardist Vivian Wang and guitarist/electronic artist Yuen Chee Wai – "were really patient and understanding".

Also, working with a rock band, without a conductor, was "both liberating and terrifying", he says.

"We were advised by the band to feel and listen to the music rather than count the number of bars, and that was something that took us quite a while to get used to, especially when the music genre is so vastly different from what we usually play."

"On the bright side, this experience has helped us all become better at following the music organically."

The Observatory, which formed in 2001, also enlisted two former members – guitarist Dharma and multi-instrumentalist Victor Low – to help out with the complexities of staging the show.

Yuen, 41, says that it felt "natural"

to make music with the pair.

"Working with them again brought a familiar sense of warmth, assurance and solidarity," he says, adding that the band do not rule out featuring them again in future projects.

The setlist will feature songs from the band's 2014 album *Oscilla* as well as their latest release, last year's *August Is The Cruellest*.

They will also play a new song, also titled *Vibrational*, which was inspired by their work with Balinese instruments that were found in the 2015 album, *Continuum*.

Low, 45, explains that they want to have the ensemble of guitarists to achieve the tonal colour found in traditional Indonesian ensemble music, the *gamelan*.

"Everyone is tuned to standard, but minute differences in temperature and player still create the audio phenomenon that we wanted," he says.

"It sounds liberating when the guitars come together as one. There's a certain randomness and chance to it all that makes it beautiful."

dinohadi@sph.com.sg

BOOK IT / VIBRATIONAL

WHERE: University Cultural Centre Hall, 50 Kent Ridge Crescent

WHEN: Tomorrow, 8pm

ADMISSION: \$19 for full-time students, \$27 for standard tickets through Apactix (go to www.apactix.com)

The Observatory members and National University of Singapore students and staff at a rehearsal for *Vibrational*.

PHOTO: NUS GUITAR ENSEMBLE