

HITTING HIGH NOTES

Alumni of the 15-year-old Yong Siew Toh Conservatory are doing well as performers, educators and entrepreneurs



Akshita Nanda
Arts Correspondent

Over the past 15 years, the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music has seen about 500 students graduate from its four-year bachelor of music programme, the first such to be established in Singapore.

One of its most famous alumni is conductor Wong Kah Chun, who became the first Asian to win the Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition in 2016 and now leads the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra in Germany.

But there are other performers, educators and entrepreneurs from the conservatory at the National University of Singapore who have been transforming the music scene here and making waves beyond.

At home, conservatory alumni play in the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) or have started their own critically acclaimed musical ensembles, such as the Metropolitan Festival Orchestra, the multicultural Open Score Project and the multi-instrument ensemble Lorong Boys. There is also the newly formed Red Dot Baroque, which plays its debut concert on period instruments today.

Some teach at the conservatory or other music schools around the island or are plugging gaps in the arts scene here.

Conductor Alvin Seville Arumugam, who just completed his master's in conducting at the conservatory, leads The Young Musicians' Foundation Orchestra (Tymfo), a pre-professional ensemble where music students and graduates can practise repertoire.

"People need to hear more and people need to play more," says the 38-year-old. The orchestra has already played five concerts this year.

SSO chief executive officer Chng Hak-Peng says: "We're convinced that having the conservatory has helped attract regular guest artists, which, in turn, lends itself to creating a hub here in Singapore, perhaps even akin to global city Vienna at the turn of the century."

"Yong Siew Toh has also added to the audience for classical music here, which benefits not only us, but also other groups. With the formation of many small chamber groups, the range of performances here has also become more diverse, creating a vibrant music calendar for the city and music lovers."

Professor Bernard Lanskey, the conservatory's dean, says: "The original ambition was a school that would be a beacon of musical excellence in South-east Asia."

Considering the lighthouse metaphor, he adds, students "have to think that they are here for the



Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music alumni include conductor Alvin Seville Arumugam (above), who leads The Young Musicians' Foundation Orchestra, and American entrepreneur Lawrence Holmefjord-Sarabi (left), who runs a music school, Aureus Academy. PHOTOS: JOYCE FANG, ZHANG XUAN FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

community. There are here for music and not for themselves. The arts should be about changing the community's awareness of itself."

Some alumni enhance appreciation of Singapore's multicultural nature. The most recent work of alumnus and composer Syafiqah 'Adha Sallehin, *Ebullience*, performed on Sunday during the conservatory's anniversary festival, was written for instruments ranging from the Chinese erhu to the Indian bansuri flute to the Western cello, alongside Syafiqah's own accordion.

Other alumni are trying out new concert formats, such as the More Than Music series by pianist Abigail Sin and violinist Loh Jun Hong. It demystifies classical music and makes it accessible by adding, say, a wine reception, or by letting the audience vote on the repertoire, with songs identified by "feel"

rather than an official title.

Conservatory alumni also experiment and collaborate with other genres. Chamber opera group L'Arietta Productions, for example, will present three Singapore-themed bite-sized operas in October, written by conservatory alumnus Chen Zhangyi. The group's co-founder, soprano Akiko Otao, says it is a rare privilege to be able to workshop a performance with a living composer.

In addition, she says, the works *Laksa Cantata*, *Window Shopping* and *Kopi For One* "are really personal, something that's relatable to everyone".

Overseas, alumni are gaining fame – as performers, such as Alan Choo on the baroque violin, or composers, like Diana Soh in Europe – and moving into other noted music institutions.

Alumni have taught at Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, which offers a one-of-a-kind joint degree programme with the Singapore conservatory.

Composer-organist Phoon Yu, 28, did his master's in Peabody and is now pursuing his doctor of music degree in the notoriously competitive programme at The Juilliard School in New York.

Phoon is the son of noted composer Phoon Yew Tien but, for all his home advantages, says he would not have been an organist without Yong Siew Toh and its connection to Peabody.

"I studied the organ in Singapore, but it was so hard to find an instrument to practise on," he explains.

Thanks to endowments from major donors such as the Yong Loo Lin Trust, the conservatory's under-

graduate programme is fully funded. It has 220 undergraduates at any time, with 50 to 55 places open to first-year students every year. Between 300 and 400 applications are received for these first-year slots.

Prof Lanskey says the absence of university debt makes the programme attractive, since musicians find it harder to get regular salaried positions after they graduate, compared with, say, doctors.

The conservatory thus gets students from around the world. American alumnus Lawrence Holmefjord-Sarabi, 27, came to study the piano and was making a name for himself as a soloist when he found people offering him "hundreds of dollars" to give their children lessons.

He started a music school, Aureus Academy, in 2013, when he was a final-year student.

Thanks to a seven-figure investment from investors, Aureus Academy now has nine schools around the island plus an office at Tai Seng, serves 4,500 students and has 200 full-time staff, including Holmefjord-Sarabi's two brothers. Their success was written up in *Forbes* magazine's 30 Under 30 Asia.

The pianist never expected to turn entrepreneur, but recalls that in his first year, Prof Lanskey told students that by the end of their four years in the conservatory, they might not end up where they expected.

"And he didn't mean it in a negative way. A lot of the skills I have in my corporate career come from music, like the ability to communicate," says Holmefjord-Sarabi. "Yong Siew Toh really taught me to look at things differently."

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Conservatory milestones

1998: The idea of a Singapore conservatory of music is mooted.

2001: National University of Singapore and Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University in the United States sign an agreement to establish a Singapore conservatory.

2003: The Singapore Conservatory of Music is renamed the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music following a \$25-million endowment from the family of the late, Singapore-born music teacher Yong Siew Toh. She was the daughter of Hong Kong-trained doctor and businessman Yong Loo Lin. The grant is matched dollar for dollar by the Singapore Government.

The conservatory takes in its first cohort of 70 students for the four-year bachelor of music programme.

2006: The conservatory moves into its current premises near the University Cultural Centre.

2007: The first cohort of students graduates.

2008: The conservatory again receives a \$25-million gift from the Yong Loo Lin Trust. It qualifies for a dollar-for-dollar matching grant from the Government, allowing the music school to fully sponsor all places in the undergraduate programme.

2011: The conservatory offers a joint bachelor of music degree with Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University. It is the first music degree offered by the American music school in Asia.

2014: The conservatory begins offering master's programmes.

2018: New majors are introduced in music and society; and music, collaboration and production, to respond to students' interests and aptitudes.

Students taking this major go beyond specialising in an orchestral instrument, piano or voice. They can take classes such as business for musicians and NUS modules like South-east Asian studies and communications and new media.

FROM D1

Baroque as a gateway to classical music

For violinist Alan Choo (below), his future lies in taking listeners back to the musical past, namely the baroque period. Some of the most dramatic and familiar works from the classical repertoire, including Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and Handel's *Messiah*, date from that period, from 1600 to the mid-1700s.

"To us now, it seems obvious that music is supposed to inspire emotion, but it was a revolution in art at the time," says the 28-year-old alumnus of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music.

He has formed the Singaporean musical ensemble, Red Dot Baroque, which performs on period instruments and makes its sold-out debut today at the Esplanade Recital Studio.

Choo was also recently discovered by a storied American ensemble, Apollo's Fire Baroque Orchestra, and played with it last year to critical acclaim, including at the well-known Tanglewood and Ravinia Music Festivals.

He also joined the ensemble for its Carnegie Hall debut this March and will continue to perform with it in the 2018/2019 season.

He was spotted by Apollo's Fire's director Jeannette Sorrell during a masterclass at Case Western Reserve University, where he is doing his doctor of musical arts degree.

It is a major achievement for a young musician to land a spot with Apollo's Fire, which has had eight best-selling CDs on the classical Billboard music charts. The ensemble has sold out concerts at the BBC Proms in London, as well as other major festivals and venues in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

Choo, who is single, began learning the violin at age six and continued his lessons while at Nan Hua Primary School and Hwa Chong Institution. His parents, a doctor and a housewife, were supportive of his musical studies and he did his bachelor of music degree at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory.

He fell in love with the baroque violin – he plays a Spanish instrument from the 1600s – while at the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He has two master's degrees in violin performance and early music from Peabody.

Members of Choo's Red Dot Baroque include composer Chen Zhangyi on the viola; violinist Gabriel Lee of multi-genre band Lorong Boys; and cellist Leslie Tan of the Tang Quartet.

Choo says there is space for his musical ensemble in Singapore, despite the number of established and upcoming groups.

"Even though the scene may seem to be saturated, I think baroque music is a really good gateway for people to get into classical music," says the violinist.

"The harmonic structure is not as dense or sophisticated. The pieces reach directly into the heart."

Akshita Nanda



• Red Dot Baroque's debut is sold out.



Compositions inspired by laksa and kopitiam

Food and family relationships inspire composer Chen Zhangyi's music, which has been performed by internationally acclaimed orchestras such as the London Philharmonic, Tokyo Philharmonic and Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

In October, local chamber opera group L'Arietta Productions will perform the 34-year-old's Singapore Trilogy, three bite-sized operas with a Singapore theme, directed by Nora Samosir and with librettos by violinist and music writer Jack Lin.

Laksa Cantata (2013) is a homage to Bach's Coffee Cantata, but instead of a father and a daughter squabbling over coffee, a bride and a groom quarrel over whether to serve laksa at their wedding. Window Shopping (2014) takes on a favourite Singaporean pastime.

"I was always thinking about how Singaporeans could relate to this music," explains Chen (above).

The third work, his newest, is *Kopi For One*, about a daughter thinking of her father while at a kopitiam (coffee shop). It includes chords struck by the composer's 16-month-old daughter Clara, as she experimented on the piano.

"She has a natural feel for music," says Chen, who is married to fellow composer Wynne Fung.

His father had an electronics servicing business and his mother was a housewife. He studied the violin while at Gongshang Primary School, Anglican High School and Temasek Junior College.

He had hoped to study violin at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, but was taken in for composition instead.

Now, he is glad things worked out the way they did. In 2011, his work for orchestra and chorus, *Ariadne's Love*, was recorded by the London Philharmonic and Eric Whitacre Singers at Abbey Road Studios, which was where The Beatles recorded their albums. *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 Philharmonic in the Japan premiere of his Singapore-inspired melody, *Rain Tree*.

In 2014, he received the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council.

Rain Tree was performed by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) in 2015 and the SSO took another work, *An Ethereal Symphony*, on its 2016 tour of Europe. Acclaimed violinist Kam Ning played Chen's *Vanda Concerto* for the SSO's National Day concert earlier this month.

Chen is an assistant professor at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, where he teaches analysis and composition. He leads the new music ensemble, *Opus Novus*, and plays the viola in period ensemble Red Dot Baroque, set up by fellow alumnus Alan Choo.

Chen credits the conservatory for creating an environment where musicians like him can find their feet.

"The music school is like a dream come true. It provides the environment where I could learn different things, from composing and performing to conducting and research. It's quite special. It's a great honour to be one of the first alumni."

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BOOK IT / SINGAPORE TRILOGY

WHERE: The Blue Room & The Living Room, The Arts House, 1 Old Parliament Lane

WHEN: Oct 12, 8pm; Oct 13, 3 and 8pm; Oct 14, 2pm

ADMISSION: \$40 (standard) and \$32 (student) from singaporetrilogy.peatix.com; includes refreshments

Creating music to surprise the audience

Composer Diana Soh (below) likes to subvert myths, including those about the concert hall.

Last week, she buried speakers in the gardens of the 13th-century Royaumont Abbey in France for wandering a cappella singers in the world premiere of her work, *The Nature Of Things*.

"People think they're going for a walk in the garden for a choir performance, but it's more than that," says the 34-year-old of her outdoor sonic soundscape, which reworks the traditional concert hall format.

In March, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra premiered her work for soprano battling an orchestra, *A Is For Aiyah*, featuring French singer Elise Chauvin.

Also this year, she premiered a string quartet work commissioned for the Festival Aix-en-Provence in France last month; had solo works for piano played in concert venues in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Austria (Vienna); and worked on *BlackBirds*, which has its world premiere on Friday in Essen, Germany.

Soh is the only child of a driving instructor and a secretary. She sang in choral ensembles in Anglican High School and Temasek Junior College before doing her bachelor's degree in music at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music.

She also trained at the University of Buffalo, New York, and with the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (Ircam) in Paris.

She received the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award in 2015. Her works have been broadcasted on Deutschlandfunk (Cologne Radio), ORF (Austrian

TV/Radio) Danish Broadcasting Corporation, BBC Radio 3 and France Musique.

She is married to French composer David Hudry and their three-year-old daughter Emma's acquisition of language inspired Soh's *A Is For Aiyah*.

BlackBirds, which will be premiered by new music group E-Mex-Ensemble, comes from Soh's interest in collaborating with other artists – the work is written for dance, voice and musical instruments. It is also inspired by the poem *Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird*, by Wallace Stevens. Texts, especially historical or mythic works, often lead her to write music.

The Nature Of Things is based on the first-century BC poem by Roman writer Lucretius, meant to offer a scientific explanation of the world and dispel humanity's fear of the gods.

Her 2013 work, *Arboretum: Of Myths And Trees*, started with the legend of Apollo and Daphne. The sun god pursues the nymph, who asks to be turned into a tree rather than succumb to his rape.

"People see that story wrongly as romantic," she says.

Arboretum puts the power back in the hands of the female, literally, as the soprano's hand movements control the electronic treatment of music from the accompanying harp and piano.

"There's a necessity to write a certain type of music in a certain way to say something," the composer says.

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PHOTOS: DANIEL CAMPBELL, JULIANA TAN, WASIN PRASERTLAP