

Headlines

A Score By Chong

Nov 22, 01:07 AM

COMPOSER Chong Kee Yong had just returned home from a two-month trip to Europe* and now he will be travelling again, this time to Kuala Lumpur where he will present one of his orchestral pieces at the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra International Composers Award this Saturday. VONG YOKE MAY caught up with the very talented Chong at his family home in Kluang for this delightful interview.

CHONG Kee Yong, the fourth of six children, was 14 when he first heard Western classical music.

"I think it was orchestral music by Dvorak. It stirred deep and powerful feelings within me. Then and there I decided to learn to play classical guitar. That time my parents only could afford to buy me a guitar, and my older sister convinced my parents to buy it for me."

* Any other musical influence?

Chong: No. However, my maternal grandfather was a minstrel, singing ballads and accompanying himself on the erhu. He was known as maestro Sak Chin, the minstrel of Kampung Paya.

Chong, who attended Chinese schools in Kluang, says his music is very influenced by nature.

"Growing up in Kluang, I used to follow my father to his oil palm plantation. The jungle was just nearby. I heard the monkeys chattering, the stream babbling, the birds chirping and the wind blowing among the leaves.

"My music reflects the harmony of nature. In Europe, I was very inspired by the transitions between the four seasons."

(At this point Chong brought out a photo of a beautiful autumn scene in Switzerland.)

* What is the difference between the musical climate of Europe and Malaysia?

Chong: Here private music lessons are very expensive. In Europe the state is very supportive.

In Belgium, every commune has a music school where general musicianship is taught by really good professors from the conservatory. You pay only 50 euros a year. This is also for adults.

(The interview was a family affair with wife Ka Ling and two- year-old daughter Chuan Yi adding the homely touch.)

He reveals he will take care of Chuan Yi while Ka Ling teaches piano in Singapore.

Ka Ling has a Master of Music in Performing Arts from Brussels Conservatory of Music.

* What instrument would you want your daughter to learn?

Chong: Percussion. Any striking instrument.

Marimba, glockenspiel, snare drums, a child's drum-set or other such instruments.

* Why percussion?

Chong: Rhythm is a natural instinct.

Children must love music first. They should not be forced to learn an instrument they are not really interested in.

Quite a few good conductors are percussionists too!

* Any advice for aspiring musicians or composers?

Chong: Listen to live concerts if possible, not CDs. When you see the musicians playing, you will be inspired. Travel to Europe, not only to listen to orchestras, but to appreciate and see the baroque and rococo architecture which is reflected in the music of Bach and his contemporaries and vice versa.

Join master classes, learn from expatriate musicians in the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra or other good local musicians.

Apply to attend international seminars which you can access from the Internet.

Send a demo tape to whichever seminar you want to attend.

If they think you deserve it, you may apply for a grant or a partial scholarship or a home-stay programme.

Learn a foreign language like French, German, Italian or Spanish. I learnt French while washing dishes in a restaurant. I had to support myself when studying music in Belgium.

* What is a recent achievement?

Chong: A piano solo commissioned by the Max Reger Festival for the Max Reger International Piano Competition in 2005 for semi-finalists.

* To what do you attribute your success?

Chong: I owe it all to my parents. They supported me even though they did not understand or agree with my choice of study at the Malaysian Institute of Performing Arts) where I majored in theory and composition and later at the Xi'an Conservatory of Music where I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Composition.

My lecturer in Xian recommended that I go to Belgium to obtain a Master in Composition.

I am also fortunate to have a very supportive wife.

* Tell us about the Belgium trip.

Chong: In Belgium, I was very focused on composition. I wrote original and challenging compositions; challenging because they are very difficult to play. I use Western musical instruments to convey aesthetic Eastern feelings and culture.

My composition Space of Loneliness integrates Western classical instruments with Chinese instruments like the bamboo flute and the san shuen. My training in China also influenced my use of pentatonic sounds.

When people listened to my compositions in Europe, they were interested enough to commission me to write more compositions.

Malaysians can listen to Chong's musical talent on Nov 27 at 8.30pm when The Starry Night's Ripples (revised version) is world premiered in the "MPO International Composers Award" final round concert at the Petronas Twin Tower concert hall.

"This work is dedicated to my wife Ka Ling," he added. - nsunt@nst.com.my

* Chong, winner of numerous prestigious international awards for his compositions was in Europe, courtesy of the Arts, Culture and Heritage Ministry, where four of his compositions were performed.

In Germany, his trio for piano, violin and cello Epitaphe Sans Mots (Epitaph Without Words) was first performed.

Two compositions were performed in Belgium, Wu Yan (Black Flame - Red Sun) for six percussionists, and Monodrama for oboe solo and ensemble with electronics.

In Switzerland, it was a sextet for flute, clarinet, piano, violin, cello and percussion entitled Mourning the Murder of an Old Banyan Tree.

That piece was inspired by the late Usman Awang's poem, Ballads of Mourning the Murder of An Old Banyan Tree in a City.

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