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Composing winners

Freelance composer Chong Kee Yong has been slowly making a name for himself in the smaller classical music circles in Western Europe, writes JASON CHEAH.

LIVING in Belgium for the past seven years has been rewarding for 33-year-old Chong Kee Yong's musical career.

In his field of contemporary classical music, it has been in Belgium that he has been slowly carving a niche for himself as a composer.

For one thing, being in Brussels means he has access to resources extremely difficult to find in Malaysia.

"Every March, there is a festival for new music for a whole month and they invite many European contemporary ensembles, focusing on young German and Belgian composers," Johor-born Chong said in a recent interview.

Chong was in Malaysia for the finals of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra Forum for Malaysian Composers, in which his orchestral work *Starry Night Ripples* was one of the four selected commissioned works to be premiered at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas.

The composition, which was based on a Vincent Van Gogh's painting, won the forum and will represent Malaysia at the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra International Composers Awards in Kuala Lumpur this November.

"In Europe, I can join master classes, which are very helpful for composers, because they encourage you to go for the kind of music you like. Every year I send my works to try and get into a master class."

Arriving in Belgium in 1997 to enrol at the Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music of Brussels (Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel), his eyes were opened to the possibilities and archival resources.

Reading musical scores is one thing, apparently, but hearing the pieces opens his mind, according to Chong.

"For instance, in Malaysia you can't find any contemporary scores," he said. Chong was referring to the period when he was studying at the Malaysian Institute of Arts (MIA) in Kuala Lumpur from 1990 to 1993.

"I had a chance to read some scores in the library of the Xi'an Conservatory in China when I went to study there (from 1993 to 1995) but they weren't very recent contemporary composers either.

"When I came back to Malaysia from 1995 to 1997, I just taught music at MIA, but I didn't compose anything. I felt a bit wasted," he said.

It was through one of his professors in China that he managed to get to Europe.

"He asked me to go there to take a look at the scene. I made a decision to quit my job and went to Brussels because my professor had a friend in the Brussels Conservatory."

At the conservatory, his professors encouraged him to find musicians from outside the conservatory to play his music, rather than limiting himself to getting conservatory students to do it.

Chong then met viola player Paul De Clerck, and by 1999, he got himself his first commissioned work, a solo viola composition for De Clerck entitled *The Thousand Ripples of a Lonely Bell*.

"De Clerck is a pretty famous musician who is a soloist with the La Monet Orchestra, as well as a musician with the Ictus and Prometheus Ensembles," he said.

"He actually told me not to stay in the conservatory but I had to due to financial constraints," Chong continued. "Through him I met a lot of specialists in contemporary music.

"I started to write for solo instruments and learnt the technique of contemporary writing. Flute was the first solo instrument I composed for, although my first commission was for viola."

Living in Belgium from 1997 to 1999 was difficult for Chong. "I worked in a restaurant to make ends meet because I had to focus only on my conservatory work.

"Being in music school was tough, as the standards are high. Every year there is a cut off, reducing the number of students," he said.

"If you fail one subject you redo the whole year, the second time you fail, you're out. But if you love music, you will do it 200%. You automatically go for the best.

"Since 1999 and my first commissioned work for De Clerck and another friend of mine who ran a string orchestra, I have written almost 50 works. Last year alone I composed 10 works, all commissioned. So I can live with that.

"I also won prizes in competitions and that was very helpful. I finally quit my restaurant job and concentrated on composing."

Chong has won numerous prizes and some of the more prominent ones include the *Prix Marcel Hastir* from the Belgium Royal Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts; first prize at the 18th International composition competition ICOMS 2000, Torino, Italy; second prize and special prize by publishing house Universal at the Eighth International Mozart Competition for composers, 2001, Salzburg, Austria; first prize at the Fourth International Andrzej Panufnik Competition for Young Composers, 2002, Krakow, Poland; the Grand Prix at the Second Seoul International Competition for composers, 2003, Korea; and first prize at the *Max-Reger-Tage* International composition competition 2003, Weiden, Germany.

By June 2001, Chong obtained his master of composition with greatest distinction from the Royal Flemish Conservatory and to date his music already been performed in many festivals in Europe and Asia, including the Transit Festival (Belgium), Settembre Musica (Italy); Music Today, Seoul 2003 (South Korea), Contemporanea 02 (Italy), Opera Prima Europa Festival (Italy) and the Kuhmo Festival (Finland).

His works have been commissioned and performed by the Het Collectief Ensemble (Belgium), Kamerorkest Brussel, KCB Contemporary Ensemble (Belgium); Ictus Ensemble (Belgium), Ensemble Europeo Antidogma Musica (Italy), Nieuw Amsterdam Sinfonietta (Holland), Danel Quartet (France/ Belgium), Interensemble (Italy), Nouvel Ensemble Contemporain (Switzerland), SORI Ensemble (Korea), MPO Ensemble & Orchestra (Malaysia) and Mosaik Ensemble (Germany).

His *Flying Shadow* for guitar solo was commissioned as a compulsory piece for the Belgium National Instrumental competition "Axion Classics 2001".

"Last year was a big year for me," Chong said. "I travelled through Germany, Switzerland, Holland and Denmark. Travel is important because I work with different people. The music ensembles are different, and the audiences are different."

He also feels that nature is important as it is the most important feature in his compositions.

"I always use the sound of nature like the wind or rustle of leaves or noise from nature for my music."

This year looks to be hectic for Chong.

His new piece *Wu Yan* for six percussionists for the Brussels Conservatory percussion group will have its world premiere during their Europe tour this month, his new piano trio *Epitaphe sans mots* will have its world premiere by Trio Jean Paul (Germany) in the *Max-Reger-tage* Festival in September.

His upcoming commissions include a new ensemble piece for the Het Spetra ensemble (Belgium) this October, a percussion solo piece for Taiwanese percussionist Ai-yun Huang for her Europe tour concert this

autumn and a multimedia with ensemble piece for Champ d'Action ensemble (Belgium) next year.

Chong may also be moving to Hong Kong for a while to join his pianist wife and two-year-old daughter.

"I may try to move back to Malaysia as my parents are getting old. I am willing to come back but I don't know whether it's good for me and my music because my professors are asking me to stay in Europe, they don't want me to leave.

"They are afraid I will find difficulty here in my music, but if there are some avenues to make more contemporary music in Malaysia, they might even be willing to come here to perform."

Fact file

Name: Chong Kee Yong

Age: 33

Hometown: Johor Baru

Education: Johor Baru; Malaysian Institute of Arts, Kuala Lumpur; Xi'an Conservatory of Music, China; Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music of Brussels, Belgium

Years spent abroad: Nine

Originally published in The Star on Monday March 29, 2004

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