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## Music: globalisation: From the Kampung to the Conservatoire

By CH Loh

A few years ago if someone had asked if there were any composers in Malaysia, we would scratch our heads, and a few predictable names like P Ramlee would have come up. In the meantime, a quiet figure from Kluang was making waves in the art music scene in Belgium, winning his first compositional award for his String Quartet No 2 "Scar". Since then he has received various awards for his works, from first prize in the Poland (2002) to the Grand prix in South Korea (2003), first prize (Germany, 2003), the "Prix Special" (France, 2003) and most recently, finishing top at our own MPO International Composers Award 2004 (MPOICA) for his The Starry Night's Ripples for full orchestra.

His career is more than mercurial, a fairy tale story that is as endearing to the reader as his quiet, modest demeanour. Chong was not your typical Malaysian rich kid who had the fortune to get piano lessons as a kid, and who had the financial freedom to pursue his art in universities abroad. Malaysia's first recognised composer of international repute hails from the town of Kluang, in a pastoral setting that may or may not have inspired Beethoven (or Villa Lobos), but which has certainly left an indelible mark on the musical outlook of this young composer.



Leaving the farm life, Chong headed north to the Malaysian Institute of Performing Arts, then to Xi'an Conservatory in China, eventually settling at the Royal Flemish Conservatory in Brussels, a city that has nurtured his art with loving care and where he has since taken root.

We have the Malaysian Philharmonic to thank for bringing Chong home and introducing him to us, and in the inaugural series of Composers Forums from 2002 to 2004, Chong has shown us what we were missing. As the judge of the recent MPOICA says, "[Chong's] work impressed me most through the originality, fantasy and mysterious sovereignty of its sound world and its unusual yet organic formal shape. The distinctive solo writing and insightful orchestration... the sensuous colour of the percussion writing, the terrifying moment of climax with the police whistles and so on) all made it a real discovery, the statement of a genuine and inquisitive musical personality."

As Chong is finally home (for now), I managed to revisit him for that long-awaited chat on the past, and the future.

### How did it feel to win the MPOICA, not just in terms of winning the competition but winning recognition at home for the work that you have done for so many years abroad?

It was an amazing journey with four other great competitors and companions in this MPOICA. I'd like to share this happiness with my wife Ka-Ling, who not only gave me unconditional support at every moment but also for being so inspiring. Many thanks to my family members and friends who supported me wholeheartedly!

This prize is a great encouragement, not only for me but also for all the composers in Malaysia, to pursue their musical journey. For me, I deeply believe that dreams will always come true as long as you believe! This is also a great moment to introduce myself to the audience of my dear homeland, after spending so many years abroad. I can't wait to share my music with them!

### Your parents must be thrilled! What were their reactions and comments to your success? And what did they think of your music, how do they react to it?

After the results had been announced, I called my parents straight away; my mum thought that I was kidding! My parents are proud of my achievement at the MPOICA and encourage me to continue my music writing. Actually, only my father heard my The Starry Night's Ripples [first version] during MPO's Phase II concert, my mum never heard my music before. My parents are both farmers and they never listen to Western classical music, so my music is quite difficult for them to comprehend. They enjoy more traditional Chinese music rather than what I write.

In general, what do your parents think of you pursuing a career as a Composer? Wouldn't they, like

**all Chinese parents, have preferred that you be a doctor, or an engineer?**

Indeed, my parents are really traditional Chinese parents! For them, the man of the family should support the family with a good profession and a stable income. When I first told them that I would have liked to pursue my music studies at the Malaysian Institute of Arts [MIA], they felt reluctant to approve my decision. But after all these years of achievement, I've proven that not only am I serious about this career, but that it can have a positive outcome as well. [As a result] they don't worry as much now.

**When did you first realise that you wanted to write music as a career?**

I had wanted to write music since I was at MIA, but during that period, I learnt only general music theory. I wrote 'simple' music until I went to Xi'an Conservatory and met Professor Rao Yu-Yan. He gave me a lot of advice and also introduced me to the Royal Brussels Conservatory of Music. He inspired me to seek my own musical language that had creativity and personality. It was then that I decided to choose composing as my profession, although I knew I would meet many obstacles along the way.

**What sort of music did you grow up with? What did you listen to when you were younger, before you left Malaysia?**

In younger days, I listened to traditional ceremonial Chinese folklore from the Chinese temple in my kampung. When I was in secondary school, I started classical guitar lessons. Then I listened to classical guitar music and also to some Chinese ballads. While I was studying in KL, I started listening to different genres of music: world music, Western classical music and some contemporary music.

**Do you think art music, modern art music rather than the classics, will take root in Malaysia in a significant way?**

Yes, but it will take some time. After spending so many years abroad, I didn't realise that there are already some fine media, music critics and concert organisations and other contemporary theatre and dance companies that promote art music and modern art music in Malaysia. When I came back for the MPO Forum in 2002, I was astonished by these developments. I think that these performances and reviews will build a positive environment for people to get together, and also understand more about what contemporary music is all about.

**From the last we spoke, at Phase 1, about what needed to be done for the future of Malaysian art music, has anything changed since, have there been signs of anything happening to take music to that direction? Doesn't it seem as if after the Forum everyone goes back to their normal lives, and that little has changed in the broad sense?**

Actually, I still keep in touch with the other composer colleagues from the MPO Forum; we are hoping that we can collaborate one day to have our works performed. Last November, I represented Malaysia, courtesy of the Arts, Culture and Heritage Ministry, at the ISCM [International Society of Contemporary Music] in Switzerland, where I met the committee members of ISCM and ACL [Asian Composer League] from other countries.

They were so impressed that I was selected by the International jury as an individual composer [Malaysia doesn't belong to ISCM] to have my music performed at the festival. They encouraged me to propose to our Malaysian composers to form a composer's union and to join the ISCM and ACL. In future, Malaysian composers will have an international platform to perform their works and share musical experiences with composers from other countries.

**I think that initiative will have to come from the ground, from the composers. And the private sector should come in to support this. It seems you are the perfect candidate for the job! Now that you have a Composer in Residence tenure with the MPO as a result of winning the MPOICA, what are you planning to do, what can the audience expect?**

Within two years, I have to compose two works for MPO: one for a mixed ensemble and the other for standard orchestra. I am conceiving a piece that will incorporate Malaysian indigenous instruments in my works and invite some local artists to join the performance.

**Do you have any plans to move back here to do more music? In terms of music, you probably feel more at home in Belgium; how then do you feel when you are back here?**

For the moment, I am staying with my family in Malaysia for a period of time — I will still go back to Brussels when I have projects and performances. It's difficult for me to decide whether to stay in Belgium or move back to Malaysia. I still have some commissioned projects in Europe to work on. And artistic life in Europe is exciting! Museums, theatres, concert halls in every city; virtuoso performances, interesting events happening almost every day! In Malaysia, art life is not popular enough, it's only happening in big cities. As an artist, I need 'nutrition' to inspire me.

Most of the European countries provide systematic aid for artists to complete their projects, regardless of whether there is market value or not. For Malaysian artists, I hope that one day we can have some initiatives from either private foundations or government, not to 'fight' alone by ourselves.

**What sort of music do you listen to these days, who are your favourite composers? Are there any, er, normal composers that you listen to — that is, composers that our readers might know/recognise?**

I love Johann Sebastian Bach! I listen to different artists like Sting, Yu-Chyi, Bjork, Tori Amos... et cetera. Beside all these, contemporary composers like Gyorgy Ligeti, Gyorgy Kurtag, Salvatore Sciarrino and Kaija Saariaho are my idols.

*Bach, Ligeti, Sting, Yu-Chyi. No wonder Chong is such a fascinating composer, one who will grow on you with repeated encounters. Hopefully, Malaysians will have more such opportunities in the near future, but only if there is a concerted effort by the community and the government, in particular, to give their unconditional support. As it stands, Chong has put Malaysia on the international art music map in a span of five years, something that our neighbours take decades to achieve — if at all.*

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