



18. 11. 2007

Close Encounter with a Musical Wunderkind by Veronica Shunmugam

The musical phenomenon of the multiple award-winning composer Chong Kee Yong talks to Kakiseni, nearly four years after his first interview with us.

Chong Kee Yong can't be one of us. He must have been accidentally dropped from a spaceship that happened to be hovering over the small Johorean town of Kluang some 36 years ago.

Nothing else can quite explain why he is what he is -- a composer so gifted that the contemporary classical world can't seem to get enough of him while a professor at the Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music in Brussels has described him as "the professional prize winner".

The professional prize winner? Yup, at just 35 years of age, he's won a jaw-dropping number of prizes -- an average of two every year for the past eight years -- in international competitions for compositions of contemporary classical music, or new music. He's also bagged an average of three commissions (some with financial aid) per year since 2003 to pen away new pieces.

Scoring back home

Back home, Kee Yong's genius began to garner wider attention at a time when efforts -- led largely by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) and its associate conductor Kevin Field -- were being made to encourage especially local original compositions of orchestral works, including those which made use of elements of indigenous music.

When the inaugural MPO Forum -- a development programme for local composers -- opened for applications in mid-2002, Kee Yong's entry impressed a panel of three established composers who included him in the shortlist of six participants for the first phase of the programme in 2003. His entry "I hear the wind calling", played by the MPO Ensemble at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas, Kuala Lumpur, also secured him a place in the second shortlist of four candidates for Phase II.

Fielding his composition of "The Starry Night's Ripples" against creations by Adeline Wong, Ahmad Muriz Che Ros and Johan Awang Othman in the programme's second phase, he won automatic entry into the finals of inaugural Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra International Composers Award (MPOICA) in 2004. And pitted against 96 applications from 42 countries, and four other finalists, Kee Yong came out tops.

Today, of course, Kee Yong is what experienced music journalist C.H. Loh describes as "a leading figure in the country -- indeed the region's -- budding art music scene." Indeed, it may not be an exaggeration to say that Kee Yong is on the local (arts) media's wanted list whenever he's in the country to visit his folks, attend concerts or for work. There's also his very accessible manner; no matter where he travels, he maintains links with local journalists as well as fellow composers on his activities and related developments in new music.

Indeed, my first impression of Kee Yong is how, after I had introduced myself after an MPO concert and then left for home, he had practically run after me through Suria KLCC to pass me CD recordings of his works. I doubt I will ever forget the irony of standing outside Cartier, in complete disinterest of the boutique's window displays due to the presence of such a rare home grown genius, who had nonchalantly got down on his knees before a very humbled

me to search in his backpack for his CD recordings.

Son of the soil

Suspect as his earthly origins may be, Kee Yong actually comes from humble beginnings; he is a child of farmers of a palm oil plantation in Kluang and a grandchild of a musician, and storyteller who used to travel from village to village to sing for his supper. And just like many other Malaysians who chose to practice art over more socially-acceptable (and financially gainful) professions, Kee Yong had to overcome family disapproval.

While interviewed by fellow Malaysian composer Saidah Rastam for Kakiseni.com in March 2004, he spoke of the image he retains of his musician maternal grandfather: "I never heard him but I saw him when I was little. I remember an image of him, lonely, with his instrument. In Europe I dedicated a piece to him. My family is ashamed of him. ... You know, it was a bit shameful at that time, music, singing for people, little money."

Kee Yong protests, with a smiley, the common emphasis on materialism in an e-mail reply to my question on the meaning of his name: "My Chinese name of "Kee" and "Yong" in Hakka ("Qi" and "Rong" in Mandarin) means "to be rich in mind" not rich in \$\$\$:)"

Unable to ignore his calling to Art, Kee Yong found his way to the Malaysian Institute of Art, Kuala Lumpur, where he studied mainly music theory (1990-93) and taught (1995-97). Later, he went to Xi'an Conservatory in China where he graduated with a music degree. A childhood spent surrounded by Nature found its way into his music as did his exposure to traditional Chinese calligraphy and the artforms of other Malaysian communities.

Recognising his potential, Xi'an Conservatory professor Rao Yu-yan pointed Kee Yong to Belgium's Royal Brussels Conservatory of Music (Flemish and French section). Arriving in the small western European country in 1997 with his wife Ka-Ling -- a gifted piano performance student who had also come to further her studies at the same conservatory, he would wait tables and wash dishes for two years at a Taiwanese restaurant. He would also learn to find his identity as a composer, pick up techniques, have access to great music libraries, impress his professors and decide to take up the daunting aim of becoming a full-time composer!

At the same time, things began to work out at the restaurant. Owned by a Taiwanese man who had trained in composition at Austria's famous Konservatorium Wien only to go into the restaurant business to support a family, the eatery attracted people from the music circles. Kee Yong recalls how the links he made with clients exposed him to more ideas and opportunities, some of which included having his works recorded for free by an ensemble.

Reaping seeds sown

Although Kee Yong describes his first two years in Brussels as a very tough time financially and socially, he began to reap early on the seeds of his determination in stocking up on composition know-how and pursuing opportunities for exposure to the music world through competitions. Most immigrants, let alone students, take longer to find their feet in a country so far and so different from home, and yet just two years after he arrived in Belgium, Kee Yong's string quartet composition "Scar" (1999) won the Prix Marcel Hastir from the Belgium Royal Academy of Sciences, Letters and Fine Arts. The flurry of European and Asian awards and commissions that soon followed have now become too many to list (please see www.chongkeeyong.com)!

In an interview he gave for the publication of the Belgium Vlaanderen Symfonie Orkest 2007 concert programme book, Kee Yong explained how taking part in competitions opened roads for him: "As a young composer today, it is very difficult to get your work performed or commissioned! From my early music career, I took part in quite a few composition competitions because that gave me the chance to get my compositions performed and get to know musicians, and composers from the different music scenes in different countries. It really gained me great experience in my musical writing and taught me a great deal about cultural exchange."

Speaking to me earlier this year, he explained that with the contemporary classical world being "very small", people come to know of composers from live performances and not through recordings, as how it is with other classical genres. He adds: "Someone once put it to me that when it comes to a contemporary classical work, you truly appreciate it when you hear it live."

Kee Yong was also characteristically frank in seeing as separate the phenomena of winning strings of awards and growing as a composer: "If you receive awards for the best so-and-so, and if you don't know in which direction to move after that, it (your win) is of no consequence. I apply this to musicians I chose to work with for a new idea or project -- I don't just look for a musician with the best skill."

His formula for success recently saw him spending six months -- from May to October 2007 -- in New York, courtesy of a prestigious six-month Asian Cultural Council fellowship. There, he was invited to observe the music scene in New York and other US cities, and attend a symposium on Asian composers, and private master classes with a few composers, musicians, and ensembles.

Among the music academics he had the chance to learn from were Fritz Reiner Professor Emeritus of Musical Composition at Columbia University and prolific US (China-born) contemporary classical composer Chou Wen Chung, a former teacher of the well-known composer Tan Dun. Kee Yong also worked with University of California professor and (Cambodia-born) US composer Chinary Ung.

To be a part of it

Our Kluang lad's adventure to the Big Apple may go down as a seminal experience seeing as he had rather strong views on the US contemporary classical music scene. In early April, he had mused: "I've not taken to American compositions yet because I've found that these are "done" only if the piece can make money and are thus very commercial-based. In Europe, they think of composition differently; everyone -- an old man or a young boy -- can think, do and create something different, and he will be encouraged for his artistry."

When he was younger, Kee Yong had met with US teachers and students, and had found that their approach to composition tended to be the same but then were well-received by US audiences. This image had put him off.

"I'm not saying commercial is bad. What I'm saying is that I've found that I don't take to compositions done in a formulaic way in order to gain audiences because this, for me, is not the way to develop as an artist. Maybe composers who use this way will be successful in gaining popularity but when the market for your music is gone -- seeing how audiences' tastes change faster than before -- where and for how long will your work stand?" asks Kee Yong, who shrugs off mass accolades for Tan Dun whose works he finds "superficial".

Nevertheless, Kee Yong's aim to visit the US had been fuelled by advice from his European counterparts to go see the world to find out who you are and what you want as an artist. It also marked his US debut of "Thousand Ripples of a Lonely Bell" for solo viola, "Metamorphosis IV" for two musicians and CD, and "Lost Psalm of the Abyss" for solo alto saxophone. The works were presented in a concert called "A Musical Offering from Southeast Asia" at Gallerie Icosahedron as part of the TriBeCa concert series and the Argento New Music Project.

New sounds

Having garnered yet another valuable arts exchange experience while in New York, Kee Yong must be further lamenting the lack of a cross trade of ideas among musicians in Malaysia. The now discontinued MPO Forum, he says, had been good in this respect.

"Last year, Saidah, Adeline, Tazul (Tajuddin), a few others and me, met to exchange ideas and try to create a channel for Malaysian composers to share their ideas in order to develop. For this kind of thing, we can't depend on art schools because these offer very short term training and not enough time to identify fellow artists, even within your genre, who would understand your ideas as well as language," he says,

With a now wider confluence (Kee Yong prefers the use of this word to "influence") of musical ideas, how will he describe himself?

"Coming home more and more, I see that we have such a rich heritage. I don't want to exploit this to identify myself as a Malaysian composer because then, people outside (the context) will first view me as a Malaysian composer and will expect from me something they feel to be "exotic". Furthermore, I feel I have no right to expect (Malaysian) traditional musicians or artists to change or innovate (just) to suit my ideas," he reasons.

With the MPO Forum having come to a halt and general local attitudes Kee Yong finds to be discouraging of anyone trying to do things differently, he admits preferring to spend most of his time in Europe (as do quite a few of his fellow Malaysian composers).

At press time, the musical wunderkind was busy finishing the creation of another new score, a concerto. He's has also bagged another award; that of South Korea's 1st Isang Yun Music Award competition. There have been four separate performances of four of his works. And the year 2008 has already opened up with four concerts in January alone.

He remains down-to-earth, however, and focused on an aim to constantly create "A song which can circle the hall three times", a Chinese description of a composition well-written and performed, and thereby with the ability to stay in one's head long after.

Hopefully, more Malaysians will get a chance to first hear Kee Yong's works and partake of some of his out-of-this-world musical adventures.

The Brussel-based Chong Kee Yong was, at press time, scribbling out another new score in his hometown of Kluang and proving himself yet again as a something of a musical angkasawan.

Cover photo is courtesy of Chong Kee Yong.

Veronica Shunmugam edits Kakiseni.

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