

CULTURAL MEDALLION 2017

LAW WAI LUN

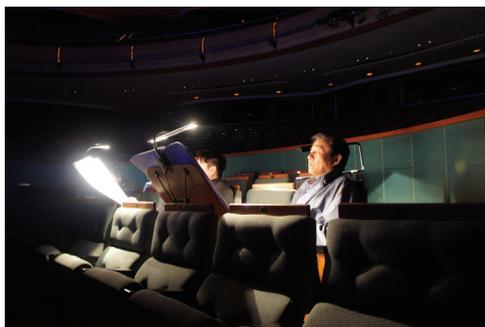


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Law Wai Lun in his university days at the Central Conservatory of Music, China, 1967

Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun



At the rehearsal for 'Ruan Lingyu's The Goddess - A Silent Film Concert', Huayi Festival, 2014

Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun

Law Wai Lun (b. 1944) is a composer who is widely recognised for his contribution to the development of the 'Nanyang Style' in Chinese orchestral music. Born in Shanghai, Law migrated to Hong Kong in 1980 before relocating to Singapore in 1995, where he is now based.

Law draws inspiration from Singapore's multicultural landscape, which has allowed him to create more diverse and exciting compositions in a variety of styles ranging from symphonic to pop and jazz, from the traditional to the contemporary.

As the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's Composer-in-Residence from 2012 to 2014, Law played a significant role in creating an important canon of works representative of Singapore's unique identity. Many of his works premiered at established festivals and prestigious platforms such as the Singapore Arts Festival, Huayi Festival and the National Day Parade. Law's notable works include 'Zheng He: Admiral of the Seven Seas' (2005), 'The Celestial Web' (2003), 'Elegance of Nanyin' (2011) and 'The Goddess' (2014).

Law has received numerous accolades in Singapore and abroad. He was awarded the Honorary Prize at the inaugural Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition held by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) in 2006. He received the Golden Sail Award from The Composers and Authors Society of Hong Kong (CASH) for being the composer with the most widely performed works in 2007 and the prize for Best Composition in 2016. This year, he was honoured with the Artistic Excellence Award 2017 by the Composers and Authors Society Of Singapore (COMPASS).

In recognition of his expertise in music composition, Law has been invited to speak at platforms such as the SCO Composers' Workshop, the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra's Composers' Summit and the Taipei Chinese Orchestra's 10th Chinese Music Composition Symposium. He has also served as adjudicator for music competitions in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. ■

LAW WAI LUN: AN EXQUISITE JOURNEY

BY CHOW YIAN PING



At the rehearsal for 'Wuxia - Theme Songs from Martial Arts Movies and Serials', Huayi Festival, 2017

Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun



Researching on Yunnan folk songs while working at the China Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio, Beijing, 1978

Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun

If out of the opuses of one's soul comes music created, then the creation of China-born Singaporean composer Law Wai Lun is one that traverses the Western, the Chinese, the Southeast Asian and the Silk Road cultures. Law is the magician integrating diverse and seemingly discordant soundscapes into meaningful, cinematic and epic compositions. His music constructs a realm of imaginative spaces that audiences can readily step inside and identify with, to join the composer on his exquisite journeys.

Law's own personal journey brought him from Hong Kong to Singapore in 1995 at the age of 51. It was during his 15 years in Hong Kong that Law, originally trained in Western classical music composition at China's Central Conservatory of Music, first ventured into the new area of composing for Chinese instruments. Yet the composer always credits Singapore as the place where his creative foray into Chinese orchestral music properly took off.

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Singapore's unique geographic position and the island state's rich cultural origins have inspired him greatly. Seven years after his move to Singapore, one of Law's major works, 'The Celestial Web' (天网) had its premiere at the 2003 Singapore Arts Festival. Since that time, it has been widely performed by Chinese orchestras across Asia. Beginning as a conversation between literature and music, the composition embodies Law's creative response to Singaporean artist Tan Swie Hian's poem 'Qian Nian Yi Xun: An Instant in a Millenium' (千年一瞬). It features Western and Chinese instruments, a 200-strong choir, poetry recitations and instrumental solos. A musical and literary tapestry with human and instrumental voices, individual and collective voices, this is a work of poise, grace, and gripping intensity. As its title suggests, the work conveys the complexity and richness of connections between the human and the metaphysical, weaving a veritable 'Celestial Web' that draws the audience in through beauty.

Law's music stands out for its cinematic and romantic qualities. This is evident in two of his other major works 'Prince Sang Nila Utama and Singa' (王子与狮子) (2003) and 'Admiral of the Seven Seas - Zheng He' (海上第一人 - 郑和) (2005).



In the latter work, the piece opens with a full display of the most colourful expression using percussion and wind instruments. This introduction transports the audience onto the ship of Zheng He, the Ming dynasty Admiral, as it were, as he embarks on his historic voyage to Southeast Asia and beyond. From the sea the audience is borne along by the dynamic quality of the work to the past, to strange lands and strange sights, for instance, the world of snake charmers, dancers and street festivals. Here, Law's strength lies in his masterly understanding of the sound qualities of the instruments at his disposal, and their exact combination to produce the sonic imagery that he wants, bringing to fruition and eliciting the imaginative response in us. Law is also able to capture and command the audience's attention throughout the 80-minute composition by organising the musical spaces much like how a master architect would structure one's experience of walking through a building, in the most logical, satisfying and delightful manner.



Law Wai Lun in his university days at the Central Conservatory of Music, China, 1965

Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun



Yet Law's music is never just about picturesque musical moments or technical perfection in orchestration. Underlying his oeuvre is a preoccupation with the trials and tribulations of life's journeys. According to English philosopher Roger Scruton, music's value is quasi-moral, in that the kinds of music one responds to, or those valued in a particular culture, reflect the state of that individual's or culture's soul. Chinese poet and artist Mu Xin (木心) concurs with these sentiments in his observation that the pinnacle of the arts is tied to their ethical and moral functions.



At the Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition, Concert for Award-winning Compositions organised by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, 2006

Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun



'A Law Wai Lun's Concert - The Glorious Lion City' with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, 2012

Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun

Hence when we as the audience respond to Law's music, our hearts are resonating with that part of us that aspires to reach a transcendental state of human existence, as a cathartic release of one's life experiences and emotions - in a communication with the composer and a communion with members of our shared music culture.

It is difficult to pinpoint the music genres that have influenced Law's composition style. He was born into a music-loving family in Shanghai. His late mother's wish for Law as a child was to write music that shows the influence of the great Russian composer Tchaikovsky. Law's mentors in school and university include Professor Su Xia (苏夏) and Professor Du Mingxin (杜鸣心) who introduced him to Romantic, French Impressionist and Russian twentieth-century music. Later, as resident composer for the Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, Law had to travel to remote and impoverished parts of China to gather ideas for compositions. Although the Cultural Revolution remains a painful part of his memories, Law relishes the experience of having made those journeys as a young man, for they have left an indelible impression on him, which is clear from the prevalence of the themes of journey and movement in his compositions. Till this day, Law still creates on the move, not just during travel to other countries but also while he is taking the bus, or cycling home, or taking a stroll through a park. This abiding sense of journey and movement is obvious when listening to Law's works.

Having spent 22 years living and composing in Singapore, Law is thankful to the many individuals and institutions that have helped him carve out a life of music in Singapore. Tsung Yeh and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, composer Phoon Yew Tien, are a few of the names that he mentions often. Although the Singapore Chinese Orchestra has been discussing and promoting music compositions with a Nanyang flavour since the beginning of this millennium, and Law is lauded as a forerunner in composing Nanyang music, he prefers to see himself more as an artist who follows his inspiration and imagination, while continuing to reflect on the qualities that bring local or regional tones into a composition.

Before settling down to transpose thoughts and feelings into music, Law spends a vast amount of time on preparatory work. This will typically include gathering information on the subject matter of the piece, visiting physical spaces that are of relevance, and undertaking pertinent music studies. For example, to compose 'Prince Sang Nila Utama and Singa', Law made trips to Sentosa, visited Malaysia to conduct research on gamelan music and read various versions of myths and legends about Sang Nila Utama. To compose 'Admiral of the Seven Seas - Zheng He', he studied excerpts from the 'Sejarah Melayu' (Malay Annals) and other related texts, visited the Chinese city Zhang Jia Gang (张家港) where Zheng He started his southbound journey six centuries ago. Law also studied Peking Opera



While trudging through the uncharted territory of Nanyang music, Law has also pushed the boundaries of traditional Chinese orchestra music.

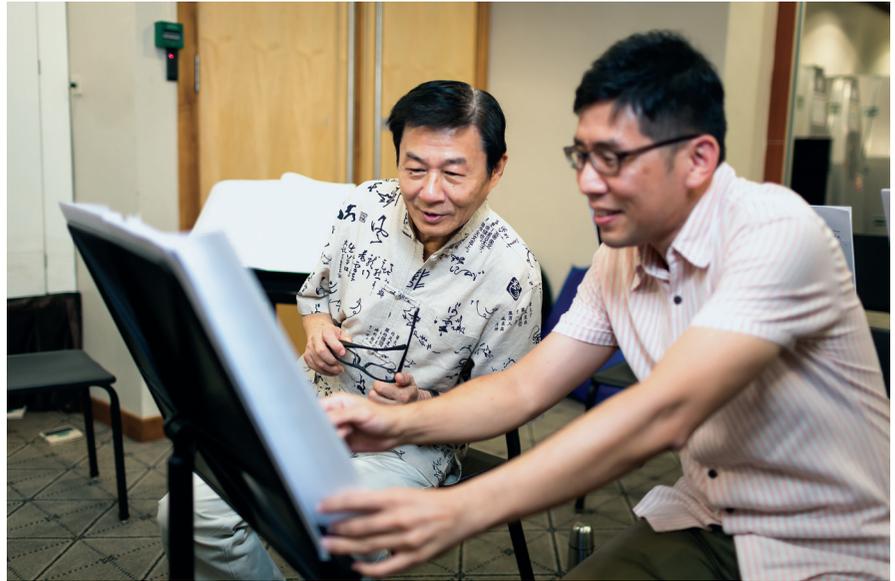
and Southeast Asian music. Unlike composers who allow their music to freely flow as they compose, Law prefers a more structured approach where the foundation and principle elements of each musical space is pre-determined, and in this way, he seldom needs to rewrite or amend his composition once the notes are penned down on paper.

While trudging through the uncharted territory of Nanyang music, Law has also pushed the boundaries of traditional Chinese orchestra music. Unlike Western orchestras with their tradition and history of more than 400 years, the Chinese orchestra is a relatively new invention of the twentieth century, with its formalisation beginning in the early part of the century and instrumental arrangements for the Chinese orchestra standardised as recently as in the 1950s. Composers of Chinese orchestra music continue to face the immense challenge of creating the ideal soundscape from these relatively new combinations of ancient instruments, while experiencing great excitement in exploring the myriad possibilities presented. Law has never been faint-hearted in his experiments. He ventures into many genres of musical composition and arrangements including jazz, Chinese pop, Chinese and Scottish music blend, and film scores. He is also interested in different forms of musical composition such as quartets, concertos, percussion music and compositions that feature new combinations of Western and Chinese instruments.

Many of his compositions have won critical acclaim and prizes in Singapore and overseas. Most notably, 'Admiral of the Seven Seas – Zheng He' was awarded the Honourable Prize at the inaugural 2006 Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition organised by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. 'Ruan Lingyu's The Goddess – A Silent Film Concert', a collaboration with Lincoln Lo in 2014, was awarded the Golden Sail Award in 2016 by the Composers and Authors Society of Hong Kong for 'Best Composition'.



Receiving a commendation from the Hong Kong Music Office, Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 1982
Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun



...Chinese orchestra music composed in Singapore, with a Singapore vision, will be able to reach a bigger and wider audience, and leave its mark in the world.

Law is also known for his dedication to teaching. Many of his students have become established musicians in their own right, and others are up-and-coming artists who have won awards in composition competitions. They include Singaporean composers Tan Kah Yong and Chew Jun An, as well as Hong Kong composers Chan Hing-Yan and Stephen Yip. Chan is a composition Professor at the Hong Kong University.

Sometimes it takes a pair of fresh but experienced eyes to see what locals may miss out, and Law has been that pair of eyes offering new insights and perspectives on what is possible with the local Chinese orchestra music scene. In recognition of his contribution to music in Singapore, Law has been conferred the Cultural Medallion by the National Arts Council and the Artistic Excellence Award by the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore.

Law is not one to rest on his laurels. He has spoken about the present state of researching and composing Nanyang music and Chinese orchestra music as being that of infancy; there is much more to be done. Law believes that with more opportunities given to local musicians to perform within and outside of Singapore, and with more young musicians joining the journey, Chinese orchestra music composed in Singapore, with a Singapore vision, will be able to reach a bigger and wider audience, and leave its mark in the world. ■

About the writer:

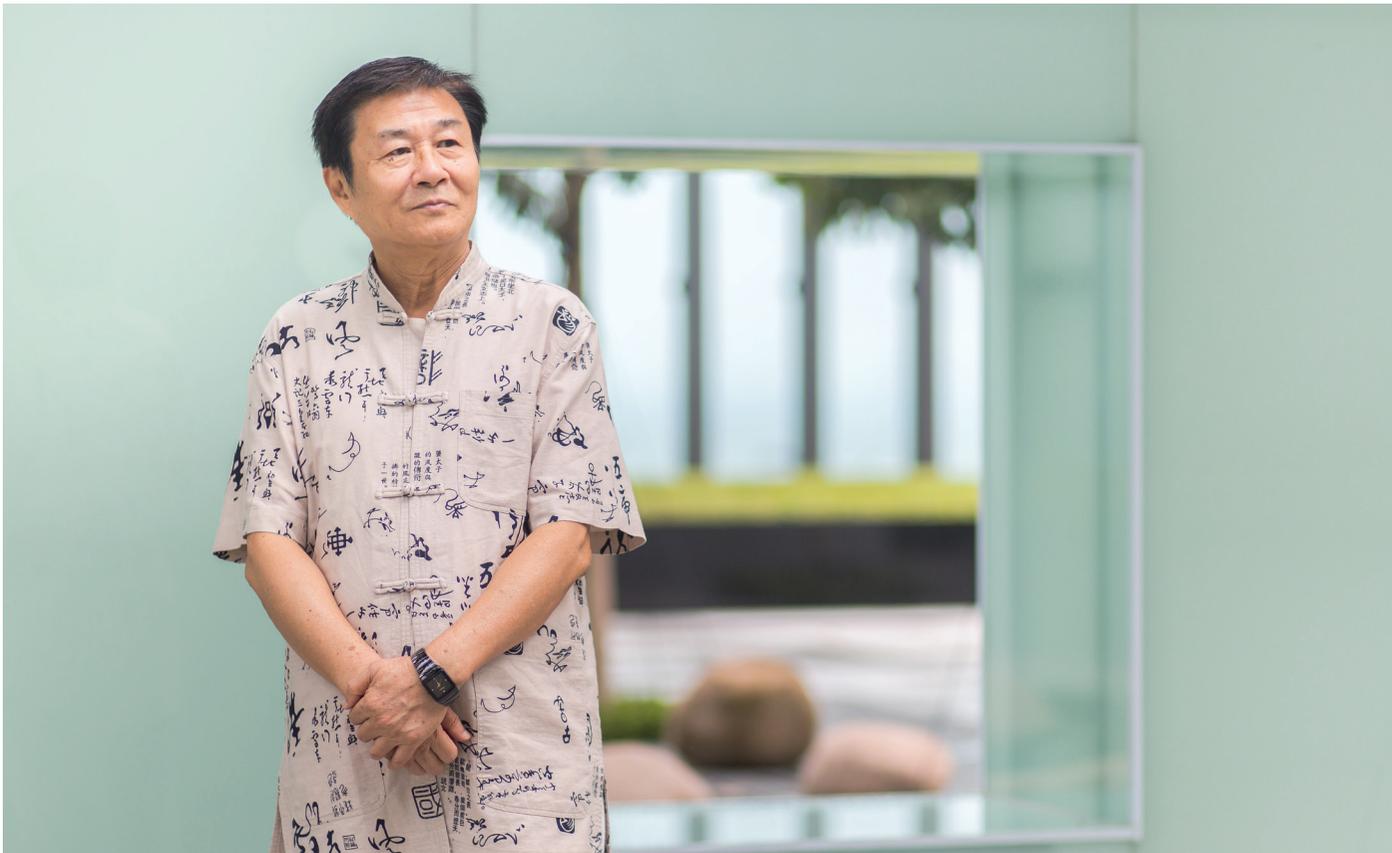
Chow Yian Ping is a writer. She was art editor of Lianhe Zaobao, Singapore Press Holdings, and curator at the Singapore Art Museum.



At the rehearsal for 'Ruan Lingyu's The Goddess - A Silent Film Concert', Huayi Festival, 2014
Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun



With composer Mr Yin Chengzong at the Ravel Piano Concerto rehearsal with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, 2008.
Photo courtesy of Law Wai Lun



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

非常荣幸能够获得文化奖这份殊荣。在这里，我要感谢国家艺术理事会以及提名人叶聪先生、潘耀田先生给予我的肯定与鼓励、感谢新加坡华乐团为我提供了发挥专长的平台、感谢所有支持我的知音、朋友、和我的家人，给予我奋斗的动力。

我出生在一个热爱音乐的家庭，因此，自然而然地走上了音乐的道路。我曾经居住在不同的国家与城市，经历过社会变革，不同的政治与文化，丰富了我的人生。

在新加坡的这片沃土上，多元文化的滋养，激发了我的音乐灵感，提供了走向成功的最佳机遇，引领我登上创作的高峰。

我会继续努力，创作更好的音乐作品，绝不辜负“文化奖”所赋予的荣誉。

I would like to thank the National Arts Council for this acknowledgement and Maestro Tsung Yeh and Mr. Phoon Yew Tien, for nominating me for the Cultural Medallion and for believing in me. I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, my family, friends, and supporters. Your encouragement is my greatest motivation.

Growing up in a music-loving family had naturally led me to pursue music as a career. Over the years, my music has been influenced and enriched by my exposure to a wide spectrum of cultures and environments through living in different countries and cities.

Singapore's cultural diversity inspired me to push the envelope of my artistic practice, to create works reflecting the richness of its cultures. I am honoured to receive the Cultural Medallion and will strive to continue pushing the boundaries of my musical creations.





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