



MUSIC SPECIALIST PANEL CITATION

Syafiqah 'Adha Sallehin represents a new and exciting generation of practitioners who are shaping Singapore's artistic identity by embracing multiple cultures and traditions. She has distinguished herself by bridging Malay traditional music with Western and contemporary practices, while expanding possibilities for the accordion with her innovative two-handed technique.

In a field where systems of notation for traditional music remain limited, Syafiqah's efforts to develop such notation have deepened an understanding of Malay music through her academic and artistic practice. Through cross-cultural collaborations, she has also expanded its range and strengthened its relevance within Singapore's cultural landscape.

YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2025

SYAFIQAH 'ADHA SALLEHIN



Syafiqah conducting as the music director of 'Strings and Redds: A Meadow in Melody' at UCC Concert Hall by NUS, 2025.

Photo courtesy of AJOCOT.

SYAFIQAH 'ADHA SALLEHIN (b. 1990) is a composer, performer, arts educator, and traditional Malay music practitioner. She holds a Bachelor of Music (Hons) and a Master of Music in Composition from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YST), graduating in 2013 and 2016 respectively.

Syafiqah's works have been presented in Singapore and abroad. Her music reflects a distinctive voice shaped by a dual grounding in Western classical training and traditional Malay music practice. She explores diverse themes across varied mediums, using her compositions as a platform to encourage intra- and intercultural dialogue.

Her recent projects include 'Reminiscing Geylang Serai' (2024), a mixed-ethnic symphony in which she also performed on the Malayanised accordion with the Asian Cultural Symphony Orchestra. She has received multiple commissions from the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, notably for its National Day Concerts (2018, 2021) and another concert in 2023 conducted by Wong Kah Chun. She was also one of the contributing composers for the 'Southeast Asian Golden Age Symphony', premiered by the YST Orchestral Institute in 2023.

Beyond composition, Syafiqah is a passionate advocate for traditional Malay music and a self-taught Malayanised accordionist. Since 2009, she has led Gendang Akustika, a traditional-contemporary ensemble. Its landmark production, 'Dendang Warisan: Kota Singa' (Songs of Our Heritage: Lion City) (2023), showcased her original works themed around home and nation-building.

As an educator, she serves on the YST artist faculty, coordinating the World Music Ensemble and teaching kompang music. She also instructs the Malay Fusion Ensemble at School of the Arts (SOTA) and conducts angklung music in schools, fostering appreciation for traditional arts among youth.

Syafiqah's contributions have been recognised with accolades including the Goh Chok Tong Youth Promise Award (Mendaki), Young Composers' Award (2nd Prize, 31st Asian Composers' League Festival), Young Inspiring Achiever Award (Berita Harian), and the Tunas Warisan Award (Malay Heritage Foundation).



A CONVERSATION WITH SYAFIQAH 'ADHA SALLEHIN

Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts. Who or what were your key influences in music?

When I was four, I surprised my parents by playing tunes by ear on my siblings' toy piano. They made sacrifices to send me to Yamaha Music School, where I studied piano and composition. At eight, I composed my first song – lyrics by my father – and performed it at my Junior Special Advanced Course graduation concert, a memory that still empowers me.

At 14, hearing Sri Mahligai at my sister's wedding sparked my love for traditional Malay music and the accordion. Two years later, my dad gifted me my first accordion, which I still play today.

Please share what a typical day in your life as a composer/music director/educator is like.

I start off the day preparing my son for daycare. My workdays involve teaching and preparing lesson plans at several institutions. Non-teaching



Syafiqah presenting the opening performance by Gendang Akustika and collaborators at TEDxSingapore's Telling Time, 2024.

Photo courtesy of TEDxSingapore.

days are more time for working on composition commissions or accordion practice. I would typically pick up my son by 5pm and spend the evenings with family. When my son's asleep, I would take one to three hours to do composition work.

Weekends are usually spent with Gendang Akustika for performances or rehearsals. I would also make time to spend the day outside with my husband and son.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in your artistic journey and what motivated you to continue in spite of these challenges?

The biggest challenge for me would be time management and maintaining a work-life balance, especially with wearing multiple hats as a composer, performer and educator. Before starting a family, I was happily exploring artistic endeavours, and doors after doors would open for me.

However, I would often face disdain at home because even my loved ones thought I did not have a "proper" job. I keep going because I believe in myself and the good that I was contributing to the arts scene. Now as a mum, I am adapting and becoming more mindful of where to spend my time and energy. I am grateful for my husband who understands and supports me.

What do you want the audience to experience through your works?

My training and practice in both Western classical and traditional Malay music has enabled me to create a portfolio of works that sparks intracultural, intercultural and interdisciplinary discourse. One key interest lies in expressing the intricate melismas of Malay Asli music and its lyrical melodic structures into Western classical forms. In some of my original Malay Asli songs, I expand the tradition by implementing extended Western harmonies.

Writing for mixed ethnic ensembles, I stage conversations between distinct instruments, blending their cultural sensibilities in both harmony and tension. I invite listeners to lean into the unfamiliar in my music, with the hope that it awakens curiosity, speaks to their humanity and deepens their experience of the world.

What advice would you give the younger generation who would like to pursue a career in the arts?

Ask yourself, "Why is pursuing a career in the arts so important to me?" Your reasons must be strong enough to carry you through a journey that is as tough as it is rewarding. Determine how you're going to sustain yourself financially through your art and set clear short- and long-term goals. Develop other kinds of skills and carve out a niche to stand out among your peers.



Syafiqah with her students from Crescent Girls' School angklung and kulintang ensemble at the Singapore Youth Festival Arts Presentation, 2025.

Strive for excellence but be humble and never stop learning. Find your people – those who would stand by you in your highs and lows. When things take a toll, learn to rest and reset, and always revisit your “why.”

What are your hopes and vision for Singapore’s music/traditional Malay music scene?

I hope all Singaporeans will value our arts and take pride in the artists who shape it. I envision a culture where attending concerts and arts events becomes a cherished part of daily life, and where traditional arts across cultures are embraced. I wish to see traditional Malay music thrive, both on stage and embedded in our communities.

How does receiving the Young Artist Award change things for you?

Receiving the Young Artist Award is both an affirmation of my multifaceted journey as a musician and a recognition of the contributions I have made to the arts. It reminds me that my work holds meaning beyond myself. I carry this honour with a deep sense of responsibility to keep creating, sharing, and opening doors for others.

As a Malay-Muslim woman in music, I am more committed to inspire more positive perspectives and to broaden representation within the arts.

Tell us more about how you would like to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

I aspire to grow in the areas of research and pedagogy within academia. I hope to gain the skills, knowledge, and qualifications necessary to address gaps in the formal education of Singapore’s traditional Malay music.

Establishing a more structured training pathway will nurture future practitioners, ensuring the vitality of this art form. In turn, this will stimulate more vibrant and meaningful discourses on intercultural music in Singapore, deepening appreciation for our diverse artistic heritage while positioning traditional Malay music as an integral part of the nation’s cultural narrative.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

My journey in the arts has only been possible through the blessings of the Almighty and the unwavering support of those who have shaped my path.

Thank you National Arts Council for conferring me this prestigious award. I am especially indebted to my nominator, Rilla Melati, and the Malay Heritage Foundation for believing in me and championing my final application.

My deepest gratitude to Prof Chan Tze Law, Kok Tse Wei, Dr Samuel Wong, Adrian Chiang, Dr Kelly Tang, Tien Yang, Riduan Zalani, Zulkifli Amin, Masturah Sha’ari, Rahimah Rahim, and Noor Effendy Ibrahim for their support and endorsement.

To my teachers and mentors – especially Prof Ho Chee Kong, Ty Constant, Dr Thomas Manhart, Faridah Jamal, and Cikgu Abdul Malek – thank you for paving the way and inspiring me to grow.

I’m extremely thankful to Gendang Akustika for journeying with me. A special shout-out to Saiful Amri and Idham Taal for always extending their support. To my friend, A Yagnya, thank you for your light in moments of doubt.

Above all, I thank my husband, Shahrul Fadzly, for his love and unwavering partnership; my parents, for raising me with devotion; and my in-laws, for their prayers and blessings.