

YOUNG ARTIST
AWARD
— 2013 —

CHUA YEW KOK



Born in Singapore in 1978, Chua Yew Kok began his musical pursuits with the *pipa* at the age of 14. Since graduating with a BA (Honours) in Music from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), Yew Kok has forged an impressive career as a *pipa* instrumentalist, and served as mentor to aspiring *pipa* students. In 2013, he received the NAC Arts Scholarship to pursue a Master of Music at the China Conservatory of Music, Beijing.

Yew Kok has received several notable awards in recognition of his role as a *pipa* concert soloist. This includes the Outstanding Performance Award, which he won at the First Youth Artistry Chinese Traditional Instrumental Solo Competition (Beijing, 2002) and the 2nd Prize at the Dun Huang (Yun) Cup Pipa Competition (Hong Kong, 2005). Yew Kok has also been selected as a soloist for various works and premieres, including the Ong Teng Cheong Concert (2004) and Spotlight Singapore in Tokyo (2006).

Performing with a diverse repertoire, Yew Kok has presented works by world-renowned contemporary composers such as Chen Yi, Tan Dun and Law Wing Fai. With a vision to promote the art of *pipa* playing among youths, Yew Kok is passionate about engaging young local composers in innovating and expanding his repertoire. Yew Kok has performed in many international arts festivals in Australia, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and the UK. He has also worked under renowned conductors such as Cao Wen Gong, Tay Teow Kiat, Quek Ling Kiong and Maestro Lim Yau.

In 2007, Yew Kok co-founded Ding Yi Music Company that has since become an acclaimed Chinese chamber music ensemble, winning competitions both locally and internationally. Most notably, the ensemble received first prize in the prestigious Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod (Wales, UK, 2009)

In his continued commitment to Singapore's Chinese Orchestral scene, Yew Kok serves as the Soloist Musician of the Ding Yi Music Company and on the Secretariat of Singapore Pipa Society. He also engages youths as an educator, instructing *pipa* students at the NAFA School of Young Talents, as well as six youth orchestras ranging from primary schools to tertiary institutions.



A CONVERSATION WITH CHUA YEW KOK



How did you first get into the arts?

I was first exposed to my craft in secondary school when I joined the school's Chinese orchestra as part of my Co-Curricular Activities (CCA). There was a television series running then that had an amazing soundtrack featuring Chinese orchestral music which fuelled my interest further.

In the orchestra, I was assigned to play the cello but was particularly curious about and interested in the *pipa* to the extent that I would use my breaks or stay back after rehearsals to try my hand at the *pipa* by imitating what was taught during *pipa* class. For some reason, I felt guilty about my interest in the *pipa* over the cello and always resorted to practicing the *pipa* secretly almost as if I had committed a crime!

Pipa was not popular at that time with few formal platforms to learn. Instead, the encyclopaedia and books on the instrument became my "teachers". Cassette recordings by He Shu Feng, a world-renowned *pipa* instrumentalist, were key sources of inspiration. I saw in her work an aesthetic that really spoke to me especially in my early years of practice.

Describe how you knew you would become an artist, how you chose your ultimate medium of practice.

Actually after I won the 1st prize in the National Chinese Music Competition in 1998, I had no intention of making music my career. It all started when I enlisted in National Service and was posted to the Singapore Armed Forces Music and Drama Company (SAF MDC). There, I was exposed to a great variety of music—band, choir, strings, for the first time.

As a member of the SAF MDC, my duty was to be an "artiste" and I had the luxury of practicing and perfecting my skills. After two years in the unit, I decided to enrol in Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

What are the biggest challenges you face as an artist?

My top challenge is to maintain the simplicity and genuineness of my music and its form. I have observed instances where music has played along certain agendas under the influence of the politics of its community. My personal belief however remains that simplicity touches the heart.

While I recognise it is human nature to be critical, it has been a challenge finding audiences who are not overtly critical and who truly appreciate music for its form.

What motivates you to continue despite these challenges?

To be honest, it is inevitable to experience lows in one's creative journey. Clichéd as it sounds, as a performer, the applause of the audience offers me the most satisfaction and motivation as much as the performance that my students give to me. Especially



As in *Dreams* (2012)
Photo Credit: Ding Yi Music Company

with the knowledge that I've put my heart and soul into these endeavours and achieved such results.

When you set about creating a new work, what inspires you?

In anticipating the possible audience responses to the work, I am inspired.

Describe a work you have produced that you love. How did you know it was ready to meet its audience?

Prior to my performance at the Ong Teng Cheong Concert at Esplanade Concert Hall in 2004, doubts were high amongst fellow performers as to whether Chinese music could make a mark on such a public platform. However, the resounding response from the audience after that concert reaffirmed the place of Chinese music amongst the people.

What do you hope your audience gets out of your work?

Music is ephemeral and does not manifest itself visibly. Instead, it demands that the audience take the time to listen and become acquainted with its form. My hope is for an audience to put down all bias and lend my music the time to speak for itself.

What advice would you give if approached by an up and coming artist who wanted to learn from your experience?

There are many varied encounters in life. Sometimes, the person you dislike may very well be the key to your growth. At the same time, it may be that a person you work well with makes you oblivious to your weaknesses. Maintain a sincere, honest heart, no matter what.

What are your hopes for the arts scene in Singapore?

Singapore today is a vibrant city that supports many art collectives and organisations. I do however recognise a change in present society and its values. The key may be to strike a balance between running a business and developing an art group. Education for continual improvement is also essential for the inheritance of traditional art forms.

What does the Young Artist Award mean to you?

I was caught a little off guard when I received news of the award. However I also realise that this award represents national recognition as well as a certain social responsibility. With this award, I hope to reaffirm the value and place of traditional Chinese music in our society. The award will serve to embolden my creative explorations and experimentations in the future.

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“ I would like to thank my parents Chua Soon Hock, Tan Ah Soon, family members—Meiting, Meifen and Jorden for their support and love.

I would like to thank NAC for supporting the arts scene and having various awards like this to fuel our passion.

Mr Dedic Wong for nominating.

Mr Tay Teow Kiat and Mr Quek Ling Kiong for their trust in me.

Liu Yan and Liu Lu who taught me *pipa* playing.

Friends, colleagues, students and audiences for their comments and feedback.”

Chua Yew Kok

