

YOUNG ARTIST  
AWARD  
2014

CHEN ZHANGYI

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**B**orn in 1984 in Singapore, Chen Zhangyi is considered one of the most significant composition voices emerging in Asia and amongst his generation. Zhangyi has created a corpus of musical works that span from chamber opera and musical theatre, to symphonic works. He attained his Bachelor of Music in Composition from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2009, followed by a double degree Master of Music in Composition, and Music Theory Pedagogy from the Peabody Conservatory (2011), where he is currently completing his doctoral degree in composition, and serving as an adjunct lecturer.

As a prolific composer, Zhangyi's works display a highly original personal voice that exhibits strong instincts and craftsmanship. His vocal work appeals to both musical theatre fans and opera connoisseurs as demonstrated in the production of *Pursuant* (2013) for the Singapore Lyric Opera (SLO) – a two-hour staged opera/musical theatre work for lead roles as well as the SLO Children's Choir, and Chamber Orchestra. Zhangyi's versatility and vision challenged the orchestra to cover genres as diverse as jazz, rock and anime music. Zhangyi also weaves local references into his creations. He was commissioned to write *Laksa Cantata*, a chamber opera that debuted at the Arts House's Food-O-Philia Festival (2013), featuring themes and the colourful Singapore vernacular in the rhyming, syntax, and intonation in the vocal writing.

Internationally, Zhangyi has collaborated with orchestras such as the London Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra (TPO). In 2011, Zhangyi's composition *Ariadne's Love* (2011) was broadcasted on BBC Radio 3 and was dubbed 'music for a choral voice of the future'. The following year, *Sand Sketches* (2012) also had three performances at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music (2012) by conductors Matthew Brown, Ankush Bahl and Juga Cohler in Santa Cruz, California.

An active conductor and performer locally and abroad, Zhangyi has conducted his award-winning *Rain Tree* (2011) with the TPO, and SLO in the premiere run of *Pursuant* (2013). His compositions have won him accolades including the Abbey Road Studios 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Anthem Competition in London for *Ariadne's Love* (2011); the Asian Composers' League Competition in Taiwan for his string quartet *Echoes* (2011); the Macht orchestral composition competition at Peabody Institute; and the Paul Abisheganaden Grant for Artistic Excellence awarded by his alma mater, NUS.





## A CONVERSATION WITH CHEN ZHANGYI

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

In my early youth, I first encountered the arts through the study of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy, where attention to detail, form and line is important. At about age nine, I began studying with my first violin teacher Mr Wu Ee Lung (who also happens to be a leading artist of the finger painting school), and gradually turned my focus towards music. Eventually I went to the then-concert master of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Mr Alexander Souptel. I studied with him from my later teenage years through to my early twenties. In retrospect, exposure to the visual arts through painting and calligraphy was of paramount significance to my growth musically, and I owe it to all my mentors along the way.

*What are some of the biggest challenges you face as an artist?*

The instability of art funding and philanthropy poses a threat to our existence as creators of art, which I believe could be bettered within our lifetime. Other real challenges include being treated unprofessionally by collaborators who think I am too young; and finding the right artists to work with – so that the music that I envision can be realised to as close to perfection as possible.

*What motivates you to continue creating and inspiring, in spite of facing these challenges?*

The pursuit of beauty through making music, or in combination with other mediums often fuels my motivation to compose. The excitement of working with performers, and the close interaction and collaboration with these musicians often inspire me.

Witnessing the artistry of these artists is quite sufficient to set me in motion. Mostly, I cherish the human connection between composer and musicians like friends writing letters to each other, or simply hanging out with each other.

*Where do you look for inspiration, whenever you set about creating a new piece of work?*

Beyond the inspiration from the musicians themselves, I also look to other forms of art such as literature, painting, and sculpture. Of course, nature provides me with a boundless supply of ideas. Through my work as a musician, travelling to different places, experiencing other cultures, and meeting new friends also expand my palette of imagination.

*What do you aspire for your audience to take away from your work?*

People are oftentimes afraid of, and shy away from modern music. In contrast, I seek to convey the message that music written today can be new, thought-provoking, yet refreshing and beautiful. Here, I quote part of the letter Mozart wrote to his father Leopold, where he was describing his new concerti for the keyboard, “There are passages here and there from which connoisseurs alone can derive satisfaction; but these passages are written in such a way that the less learned cannot fail to be pleased, though without knowing why.” This is almost like a maxim to me, to create something that has multiple different layers, where everyone can enjoy the music, even without fully understanding it. The Tang poet Bai Ju Yi (白居易) has a similar approach where he favoured simplicity, which I respect very much.

*If approached by an up-and-coming artist who wished to learn from your experience, what advice would you give to him/her?*

To this popular question, I always have the same pragmatic advice. Beyond learning crucial composition techniques (such as counterpoint and orchestration), learn an instrument (or two) really well; play in an ensemble, orchestra or sing in a choir; and study conducting. There is nothing like convincing your musicians that you can execute the challenging music that you have written, and putting yourself in the shoes of the performer. It is also a joy to be part of the music making process; there is a precious sense of friendship and camaraderie when they understand that you are part of the team, and one of them – a real musician.

*What is your vision and what are your hopes for the arts scene in Singapore?*

I dream about the day that Singapore advances beyond the excellence of tangible material, and sees that the creation and the appreciation of the arts are what reveal true humanity. Here I have to quote the second president of the United States of America, John Adams, “I must study politics and war, that my sons may have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy, natural history and naval architecture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, tapestry, and porcelain.” I believe as a society, Singapore is at the beginning of this third generation who own the right to pursue the arts.

*How does receiving the Young Artist Award change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute in the arts scene.*

Perhaps this question can be answered more accurately in five or ten years, since fortune-telling is not one of my strengths! In the near future, it will probably take me a step closer towards projects that I have waited to do for a very long time. For example, writing my first symphony, or doing a residency in a great city like Rome. In the long run, I hope to eventually help groom the next generation of young composers and musicians to blossom into artists who have important things to convey through their art.



Chen Zhangyi conducting Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra in 2011  
Photo credit: Simon Tan

## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“It is with great joy and honour to receive the Young Artist Award. Personally, the recognition given to an artist by their home country far surpasses those achieved abroad.

I have to thank Dr Kelly Tang for the nomination. More importantly, I thank him for being an encouraging veteran composer who generously passes on his insights to younger musicians, and shows by example that we Singaporeans can achieve unprecedented artistic heights within our lifetimes.

My appreciation goes to the following institutions for all the wonderful opportunities and support that they have given me – National Arts Council, Trailblazer Foundation, Centre for the Arts (National University of Singapore), Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University; the wonderful local ensembles that I have worked with – Singapore Lyric Opera (and Children’s Choir), Singapore National Youth Orchestra, Philharmonic Winds, Singapore Wind Symphony, re: mix, and many more.

I owe what I can do today to my dearest musical mentors – Mr Wu Ee Lung, Mr Alexander Souptel, Ms Winnie Chew, Mr Sim Keng Siong, Dr Gary Laycock, Ms Wang Ya-Hui, Dr Peter Edwards, Dr Tony Makarome; and at Peabody – Dr Kevin Puts, Prof Michael Hersch, Dr Kip Wile, Dr Harlan Parker, Dr David Smooke, Dr Susan Weiss, John Moran and Risa Browder, and most of all, Dr Thomas Benjamin.

Finally, the unfailing support from my family and close friends has kept me on this path, and I thank them for that. Speaking on behalf of the rising generation of Singapore composers, the wish is to continue creating and performing works that speak to Singaporean audiences and beyond, with a uniquely Singaporean voice that we hope eventually places our music on the global musical map.

Chen Zhangyi