



RIT XU



Rit Xu performing at 'The Rising Duo' Concert organised by Singapore Chinese Orchestra, 2021.

Photo courtesy of Singapore Chinese Orchestra

RIT XU (b. 1989) is an internationally recognised flautist, music educator, and one of Singapore's most versatile talents who has distinguished himself through his lyrical, thoughtful and emotionally driven performances on the flute. Widely known for his dexterity, he excels in both jazz and contemporary classical music with elegance and breath-taking virtuosity. As a bandleader and composer, Rit is a leading global voice on the flute in jazz and whose musical vision reflects his improvisational and compositional mastery, melded with a deep commitment to his Singaporean heritage.

Rit was exposed at an early age to a variety of music through his musical parents. Rit had fond memories of his eclectic musical upbringing and was quick to absorb the different sounds and musical feelings that it ignited in him. In 2015, Rit graduated with an honours degree in flute performance from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YSTCM) of the National University of Singapore. After winning the Jazz Association (Singapore) (JASS) overseas scholarship, he attained a postgraduate degree in jazz studies at the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College, New York.

In 2014, Rit won the USA National Flute Association (NFA) Jazz Artist Competition, making him the first Singaporean (and Asian) to win a prominent solo jazz competition in the United States. Rit and his band (Rit Xu Group) have also represented Singapore at major international music festivals since 2019, such as the Vientiane International Jazz Festival, Singapore International Festival of Arts, Taiwan International Flute Festival and the Papandayan Jazz Festival (Indonesia). The band independently released their first EP 'This Too Shall Pass' in 2019, followed by a full-length album 'Scenes and Stories' in 2021.

As a concerto soloist, Rit has performed with the Evergreen Symphony Orchestra (Taiwan), Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Singapore Symphony Orchestra as well as the Busan Maru Festival Orchestra (South Korea). Rit has also collaborated and performed with international artists such as Gil Goldstein, Alex Sipiagin, Billy Cobham, Randy Brecker, Hubert Laws, Antonio Hart, Jeremy Monteiro and Chok Kerong.

Rit serves on the faculty at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore Raffles Music College as well as ensemble-in-residence at YSTCM. Rit is also active in mentoring numerous young and aspiring musicians in the community through several music programmes such as the Lion City Youth Jazz Festival and the Singapore Street Festival. He is currently Assistant Music Director of JASS.



A CONVERSATION WITH RIT XU

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

My late father was a professional musician. He gave me a head start by exposing me to all types of Western-based music. My mother is an amateur but a really serious Cantonese opera singer, so traditional music is no stranger to me too. Because of my early exposure and eclectic musical background, I developed quite an elevated sense of musical understanding and a deep appreciation from a young age.

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

I was fortunate that I spent my formative years being focused on the craft of music itself, although for a long period of time, the inner workings of making music a career were quite elusive to me. In this aspect, I feel very blessed to be mentored by some of Singapore's most



Rit Xu Organ Trio live at Maduro, 2022.
Photo courtesy of Kishern Durai Rajah

prominent and revered veteran musicians. I would not be where I am today without the kindness and generosity from those who came before.

During the pandemic I was using the downtime to build deeper connections with colleagues as well as my social media followers, be it through teaching or just pure conversations. I used to think that I was an introvert, but living through the pandemic taught me that we needed a mixture of both (introversion and extroversion) in order to function as normal human beings. No man is an island, entire of itself.

Please share what a typical day in your life as a flautist/composer is like.

Practising the flute is my daily ritual, but there is always inertia in the beginning. It is what Steven Pressfield in 'The War of Art' called the resistance, our inner adversary. I enjoy practising, although getting into it sometimes takes a bit of time, but once I gain momentum, I am totally absorbed. I read a lot of music-related pedagogy books, for self-improvement as well as offering more ideas and solutions for my flute students. Some days I will be spending most of my time at the piano, either working on some harmonic ideas or refining potential material into complete pieces. In between all those activities, I make time for family, loved ones and relationships that are important.

What is your personal philosophy in life, and how does it translate into your artistic practice?

Curiosity. It's important to know what came before; to be well-informed — as best as we can — and grounded in the tradition of the music as well as that of the instrument that one is playing.

Imagination. I have always enjoyed playing music written by great composers past and present, but I also feel the need to create an alternative musical environment that is meaningful to me. Over time it began to take shape in the form of creating original compositions which have certain recurring elements: rhythmically flexible, harmonically inventive but, more importantly, a sense of melodic direction.

Daringness. At the highest level of improvisational excellence this is the crux of the matter: to be absorbed in the moment, listening and reacting to musical impulses coming from within you or from other musicians, and daring to take some risks.

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

My music is a mixture of contemporary sounds steeped in a lifelong pursuit of music from my heritage and around the globe, with jazz



Rit Xu delivering a masterclass at National Taiwan University, 2021.

Photo courtesy of Taiwan International Flute Festival 2021

as the binding ethos. I want my love for improvisation and focus on melody, groove, propulsion and group dynamics to take centre stage, and to redefine what the flute can achieve in a contemporary music setting. In the grander scheme of things I hope to “sing” stories about life and our shared humanity to my audience – through the flute.

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

Devote yourself to your chosen instrument. Spend as much time as you can practising, and practise smart. Work closely with an experienced teacher on that, and actively seek feedback on your playing from your teacher and from other experienced musicians. Find every opportunity you can to perform for friends and family, and at social events.

Get more in touch with chamber music. Put together your woodwind group, string quartet or brass ensemble, and play some music together. I cannot emphasise enough how important it is to develop ensemble-listening skills especially from an early stage. Attend masterclasses and observe how these masters approach the same pieces.

My approach to music has always been to study, study, study. When it’s time to play, be true to yourself and listen to what every musical situation really needs, and how best you can contribute. For me, nothing begins until one starts to listen.

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

I look forward to the day where the sound and spirit of jazz in Singapore takes on a unique identity of its own, one which every discerning Singaporean will be proud of, and that it becomes a cultural phenomenon which overseas visitors will want to experience while here.

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

I feel very blessed and honoured to be given national recognition for the work I do. I hope to continue my work as a performer, composer and pedagogue, and to create projects for the betterment of music and our community. I am also interested to explore and engage in cross-pollination with other artistic disciplines, such as when the spontaneous spirit of jazz meets multiculturalism in cosmopolitan Singapore.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

Thank you National Arts Council, Singapore for believing in what I do. I am deeply heartened by your recognition of my work in raising the profile of jazz music from Singapore and bringing it into the community - and to the world.

Thank you so much to my family and loved ones for your never-ending support in my creative endeavours. Dad, this award is for you.

Thank you Ms Annie Pek, Uncle Louis Soliano, Mr Tama Goh, Mr Joshua Wan and Mr Benedict Tan for your generous and kind words of support.

Thank you Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts for providing my artistic foundation.

Thank you Jazz Association (Singapore) for giving me an opportunity to widen my artistic development overseas.

Thank you Prof Jeremy Monteiro for all these years of guidance and mentorship.

Thank you to my friends and colleagues, my bandmates in Rit Xu Group and Lorong Boys. I am grateful for all these years of making music together and I look forward to more.

My heartfelt gratitude to the late Mr Iskandar Ismail. Thank you for teaching me not only to be a good musician, but also a human being.