



YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2023

WANG CHENWEI



On stage with conductor Maestro Tsung Yeh and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra after 'For Our Dreams: Wang Chenwei's Composition Showcase', 2023.

Photo courtesy of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra

WANG CHENWEI 王辰威 (b. 1988) is the Composer-in-Residence of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra; an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Education and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts; as well as a council member of the Singapore Chinese Music Federation. As the Head of Research and Education at The TENG Company, he is the main co-author of 'The TENG Guide to the Chinese Orchestra' (2019), a 624-page book on instrumentation and orchestration.

Chenwei obtained his Magister Artium (five-year Master of Arts) with distinction and an Honorary Award (*Würdigungspreis*) from the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, where he studied Composition and Audio Engineering under a scholarship from Singapore's Media Development Authority. His numerous commissions include 38 works for the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO), four Singapore Youth Festival set pieces for Singapore's Ministry of Education, four National Piano and Violin Competition set pieces for the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), and various compositions for professional orchestras in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. The SSO also performed his symphonic compositions at two National Day Concerts. In 2023, the SCO presented 'For Our Dreams: Wang Chenwei's Composition Showcase', a concert dedicated to his works, while the Taipei Chinese Orchestra premiered his transcription of 'The Rite of Spring' by Stravinsky.

At age 17, Chenwei composed 'The Sisters' Islands', a symphonic poem which won the Singapore Composer Award at the 2006 Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition. Chenwei's 'Confluence' was broadcast on 'Chinese Music Banquet' (Guangdong TV, 2019), and SCO's video of this piece was shared by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on his Facebook page and at the National Day Rally 2022.

Chenwei received the Young Outstanding Singaporeans award from Junior Chamber International in 2011 and the Top Local Classical Music award from the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) in 2022 and 2023.



A CONVERSATION WITH WANG CHENWEI

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

My first exposure to music was a toy keyboard I received as a present for my sixth birthday, which I used to play simple tunes by ear. At 10, I began formal piano lessons and found joy in composing piano pieces. Upon enrolling at Raffles Institution, I became a member of the Chinese orchestra as my co-curricular activity. In Secondary Two, I met Mr Tan Chan Boon at a concert and penned a letter to him, expressing my desire to be his student. His rigorous instruction in harmony and counterpoint established a robust foundation for my compositional practice, while my immersion in the Chinese orchestra community inspired me to compose for Chinese instruments.



Receiving the Top Local Classical Music Award from the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore, 2022.
Photo courtesy of Zhang Heyang

Please share what a typical day in your life as a composer, researcher and educator is like.

My work is seasonal, with day-to-day activities varying considerably. During the academic term at NIE or NAFA, I focus on teaching and lesson preparations. On days without classes, I would be working on a compositional or research project. My compositions are deeply influenced by ethnomusicology. Delving into traditional music from the Chinese, Indian, Malay, Indonesian, Arab, and other cultures, I invest up to months of research into each composition. After completing a piece, I also take great care in making user-friendly part scores, and I personally play or read through each instrument's part to ensure optimal idiomacy.

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

As quality art takes ample time to craft and refine, the shortage of time would be my biggest challenge. Spurred by my wide range of interests, I have previously ventured into a variety of projects. However, recognising that only works of the highest standards will stand the test of time, I now channel my energies into a few areas of specialisation and commit my fullest dedication to them.

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

Most of my compositions draw inspiration from the traditional music of various cultures, which is often eclipsed by more cosmopolitan sounds in our globalised era. By reimagining traditional musical styles through more familiar mediums such as the symphony or Chinese orchestra, I endeavour to present the intricacies and distinctiveness of these underappreciated genres in a new light to the world. Additionally, I hope that my works will encourage Singaporean audiences to appreciate and cherish the beauty of their cultural heritage.

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

Firstly, quality art requires not only creativity but also craftsmanship. In every discipline, there are core skills which take years of hard work to hone. Mastery of these will go a long way in advancing your career.

Secondly, you must play an active role within an ecosystem. Understand the needs and wishes of your community and determine how your contributions can be both valuable and valued.

Thirdly, arts communities are closely connected, especially in Singapore. Artistic ability is only half the equation – the other half is personal conduct and reputation. If others trust you and enjoy working with you, they will be more inclined to support you.



Poster of 'For Our Dreams: Wang Chenwei's Composition Showcase'.

Photo courtesy of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra

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

I hope that Singapore will continue to cultivate a distinctive musical identity that draws upon its unique blend of influences, particularly those rooted in its cultural heritage. While titles and lyrics have expressively conveyed Singaporean themes in past works, there is still potential in developing stylistic features representative of Singapore. These could contribute to a Singaporean musical identity that resonates with and instils pride among Singaporeans while also garnering more international recognition.

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

While awards have never been the goal of my artistic pursuits, I am profoundly honoured to receive the Young Artist Award. This national accolade not only affirms my past efforts but also bolsters my ongoing commitment towards Singapore's music scene. The recognition and publicity will empower me to share my dreams with broader audiences and advance meaningful causes. With this award also comes a responsibility to uphold a high level of artistry in composition and impart it to emerging musicians.

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

While the Chinese orchestra enjoys significant popularity, the traditional music of Singapore's five main Chinese dialect groups — the Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese — is seldom represented within its repertoire. I am embarking on a deeper study of these traditions to weave them into my works.

In crafting intercultural compositions, I seek to further examine how music from diverse traditions can be fused to create hybrid works that are culturally appropriate without cultural appropriation. Through this exploration, I aspire to elevate audiences' appreciation for musical traditions beyond their familiar horizons and showcase Singapore's vibrant multicultural tapestry.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

My utmost gratitude extends to the National Arts Council for honouring me with the Young Artist Award and to the Singapore Chinese Orchestra for the nomination – particularly Maestro Tsung Yeh and Mr Terence Ho. I earnestly thank Dr Tay Teow Kiat, Dr Eugene Dairianathan, Mr Chng Hak-Peng, Maestro Liu Sha, and Maestro Kahchun Wong for their kind words of support.

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I am beholden to the Singapore Chinese Orchestra for advancing my career as a composer, The TENG Company for empowering my research, and both the National Institute of Education and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts for granting me the privilege to impart my knowledge to the next generation of musicians.

To all the teachers, colleagues, and friends who have shaped my journey, you have my heartfelt appreciation. Lastly, I am grateful to my parents for their love and devoted upbringing.