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## **Tune Smiths / Music to Call Our Own**

It's hard to make a living writing classical music in Singapore, but a small group of composers here scores in terms of passion

You might not know it, but two music compositions in the recent Singapore Arts Festival caused a small ripple of excitement within the classical music community here.

Two works commissioned by festival director Goh Ching Lee – Shades Of Oil Lamps by Dr Ho Chee Kong and Cherish by Tan Chan Boon – were premiered by the London Sinfonietta and the Singapore Festival Orchestra respectively.

Ho, who is head of composition at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, says: "It was an honour to have my work premiered by a world-class orchestra."

Tan says the last time his work was performed at the Singapore Arts Festival was nine years ago when his work, Grand Caprice, was performed by viola player Jensen Lam.

The performances at the festival have shone a spotlight on the small but thriving group of 20 to 30 classical composers in Singapore.

Concertgoers can expect to hear local works played on a fairly regular basis. At least one Singapore work is performed every two to three months, alongside the works of the masters or international contemporary composers.

Singapore composers range from pioneers Leong Yoon Pin, 76, and Phoon Yew Tian, 55, to Dr Ho, 44, and Tan, 42, who are fairly well-known. Heating up the scene are newer composers such as Zechariah Goh Toh Chai, 38, and Joyce Koh, 40.

Some of the more famous tunes that Singaporeans have written include Leong's Dayung Sampan, Symphonic Suite by the late Tsao Chieh and the overture Move On Singapore by Phoon.

Most of the composers have degrees in composing, mostly from European universities or music institutions. As commissions are few and far between, composers here teach music on the side to survive.

Yet, the scene is growing. The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, for instance, produces two composition students a year, and each year, new faces come onto the scene.

Professor Bernard Tan, 65, a physics lecturer at the National University of Singapore who has composed more than 60 pieces, says: "We of the older generation were once concerned that there wouldn't be composers after us. However, the next generation of composers have emerged strongly."

The future of composing in Singapore lies in people like Emily Koh, 22, who is in her final year of composition studies at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music.

Koh, who also plays the double bass, says: "I've heard it's not easy, but I want to give it a go. Composing lets me express myself, rather than being a musician who plays someone else's music."

While the composers do get their works performed, some say more can be done to put Singapore music front and centre.

As Prof Tan puts it: "Our score has life only when it is performed. Composing does not give you any monetary rewards, but there is an unknown force that drives us."

But commissions can be highly irregular, says local music stalwart Phoon, one of the few composers who survives on income purely from commissioned work. He composes music for groups like the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and also gets commissions from orchestras in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

"I think I'm the only full-time composer here," he says. "It's a catch-22 situation. Because commissions are highly unpredictable, you have to be readily available to meet the deadlines, which you may not be able to if you have another job."

He has been composing since the 1970s. His works include Variants On An Ancient Tune (2000) performed by the SSO and the large-scale work, Confucius – A Secular Cantata, commissioned by the Singapore Arts Festival in 2001.

The composers Life! spoke to say commissioned work, negotiated on a per project basis, can range from \$800 to \$1,000 for each minute.

Irregular commissions aside, the 40 classical music groups also have to please their audiences.

Dr Chang Tou Liang, 42, a classical music reviewer for Life!, says: "Local audiences are still rather close-minded, they tend to go for familiar names in music, such as Chopin and Beethoven."

This, he says, hampers organisations which think twice before they perform 20th-century music. He adds: "The SSO is known for being the best orchestra in the world to record music for contemporary China composers like Chen Yi, Bright Sheng and Zhou Long.

"I hope to see the SSO do this for more local composers. To be fair, they have recorded works of Professor Bernard Tan and Tsao Chieh, but I hope to see more."

The SSO used to have a Composer-In-Residence scheme, where a local composer would be attached for a year and produce a major composition to be performed. It ran between 2000 and 2004.

SSO general manager Chng Kai Jin, 52, says: "The SSO had to focus on commissioning a work from one composer each year, which was not the most effective way to promote local compositions. When the scheme ended, the SSO was able to feature other local composers."

Some composers say that being a member of a small fraternity has its privileges: most works do get performed in some way or other.

Dr Ho says that while opportunities can be limited because of the small number of ensembles here, more platforms have emerged. These, he says, include the Singapore Festival Orchestra and the Esplanade Spectrum New Music Series.

Dr Kelly Tang, 47, a composer who is an associate professor of music at the National Institute of Education, says: "Local performers and ensembles are always looking for new, high-calibre Singapore compositions.

"They want works which articulate a unique Singaporean identity, compositions they can be proud to call their own and music which sets them apart from musicians from elsewhere."

Dr Tang is best known for his symphonic poem *Apocalypso*, which was performed by the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra at the Singapore Arts Festival in 2000.

Composer Joyce Koh, 40, who was based in Paris for the last 20 years, says: "There are certain comforts in being a composer here compared to overseas. The competition is a lot tougher elsewhere – to get my pieces performed was a hard fight, whereas here, the National Arts Council gives out commissions."

One of the pioneers of the local classical scene, 1982 Cultural Medallion Award recipient Leong Yoon Pin, 76, says: "It is so much easier now for young composers because of the number of local institutions offering composition and music.

"Of course there are going to be problems and difficulties, but the only way to go is forward."

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