

Rising Star: Wang Chenwei Scoring Highs in Music

MDA scholar of many talents, Wang Chenwei aspires to score music for local films and video games, and through his compositions develop a musical style that Singapore can call its own.

MDA's Media Education Scheme aims to help boost Singapore's manpower capabilities in the TV, radio, film, publishing, music and digital media sectors. It provides study awards to high-potential students and industry professionals who wish to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate media-related courses at reputable overseas or local tertiary institutions. Learn more here.

ON his sixth birthday, Wang Chenwei received an electronic toy keyboard. Tinkling away on the keyboard, he discovered that he could reproduce melodies by ear and make up short tunes. Still, it did not occur to anyone at the time that he would turn out to be something of a musical prodigy.

Since then, Chenwei has composed piano solos, picked up a grand total of 12 musical instruments, and served as a conductor in his secondary school Chinese orchestra. He also completed a large-scale Chinese orchestral composition, *The Sisters' Islands*, at age 18 while preparing for his A-Level examinations – for which he scored straight 'A's, by the way.

With *The Sisters' Islands*, a symphonic poem inspired by the legend of the Sisters' Islands lying south of Singapore, Chenwei beat 67 competitors from around the world to win the Singapore Composer Award in the 2006 Singapore Chinese Orchestra International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition.

Oh, and did we mention that he can also write 12 languages – and speaks six of them – not including computer programming languages?

Chenwei's impressive achievements and multiple talents made him a highly deserving recipient of the Media Development Authority's (MDA) Media Education Scheme (MES) study award in 2009. Currently in the first year of a five-year Master of Music and Sound Engineering course at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, the 21-year-old shares about his career plans and aspiration to create a unique Singapore music compositional style.

Are there certain themes you like to explore in your compositions?

I am exploring a compositional style that will be recognised worldwide as Singaporean. As a young nation, Singapore does not have rich, ethnic music traditions like China, India or Indonesia. I studied traditional Malay and Indonesian music in junior college, and used their elements in my composition *The Sisters' Islands*. Another one of my Chinese orchestral works, *Confluence*, blends Chinese, Indian, Malay-Indonesian and European musical styles, representing Singapore's confluence of cultures.

How has your knowledge of so many languages impacted your music?

My language abilities have enabled me to get into closer contact with different cultures. For instance, I am able to read texts that are not available in English, such as articles on Indian music by the Paris conservatory professor Patrick Moutal, written in French with score examples in Sanskrit. My encounters with Indian music have greatly influenced my endeavours to develop a Singapore compositional style.

Why did you decide to take up the Master of Music and Sound Engineering course?

My original ambition was to become a scientist, inventor or computer software programmer. I discovered my calling for music when I became the student conductor of the Raffles Institution Chinese orchestra. But I never lost my dual interest in music and science. Audio engineering deals with both the musical and scientific aspects of sound, so it is the best of both worlds for me. This discipline also has more practical applications in the media industry than a course focusing purely on music, considering the rarity of university-trained audio engineers in Singapore.

How are you enjoying the course?

I enjoy the diversity of subjects. For example, my day may begin with a class on ancient Greek music history and end with a class on measuring phase shift in audio circuits using an oscilloscope. The main challenge I face is to maintain a high level of both musical skills like composition and piano performance, and technical skills in, for example, electronics and acoustics. I have to manage my time properly to do well for all subjects.

What are you working on now?

I am composing a piano piece entitled *Algorhythm*, which explores interactions between traditional human composition and musical scores generated through computer algorithms. Here, my long-dormant computer programming skills can reconcile with my composition skills.

Have you always been interested in film scoring?

I have always been interested in the relationship between images and music. Music in films and video games can influence an audience's perception of the images and understanding of the storyline. Take for example, the menacing sounds of horns and trombones accompanying the Orcs' invasion of Helm's Deep or the underlying pastoral theme of scenes featuring the Hobbits in the film *Lord of the Rings*.

How do you think you will apply your talents in the media scene in the future?

I was very inspired by the experiences of Hollywood composers who spoke at the International Film Music Symposium at my university last year. I hope to create quality music for local films and video games, and incorporate a unique Singapore compositional style to highlight the local flavour in such productions. I also aspire to become a professor to train the next generation of Singapore talents in these areas.