

Living with music



PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

I live music, dream it and will die with it, says music teacher, conductor and composer Zechariah Goh

By PHILIP LEE

AS A boy, Mr Zechariah Goh Toh Chai often played an imaginary piano on the family dinner table, running his little fingers on the furniture surface.

His parents noticed this and began setting aside some money to buy a piano for their gifted son.

Mr Goh was then eight years old and already a trumpeter in his primary school band. He also sang in his church choir. His father was a policeman, and his mother a cook. Both are now retired.

"On my 13th birthday, my parents gave me a British-made piano. I can't remember its name but it was not a very good one,

"Nevertheless, I was very happy," recalls Mr Goh, 37, who has since earned a doctorate in music from the University of Kansas in the United States (US).

Music all around

Today, he is a full-time music teacher and conductor at his alma mater, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

He is also a composer and has so far written 50 original works and received more than 20 awards in music, both locally and abroad.

In addition, he runs his own company, Zechariah Music.

He says of his all-consuming passion: "Music has always been in my blood. I live it, dream it and will die with it.

"I have an inner compulsion for it. I just have to be involved in it. Music is my way of expressing myself."

Living in harmony

Indeed, a visit to his HDB executive flat in Bedok Reservoir Road is enough to convince the visitor that this bachelor is married to music.

On the daybed lie books of British folk songs and some score sheets he is working on.

A Yamaha piano stands at an angle to a wall, and one bedroom is lined with shelves

displaying books of his many musical compositions and other works.

When asked if he knows the old British folk song, *An English Country Garden*, he strides to his piano and plays the tune, injecting into it a lively lilt. Such a nice impromptu musical moment.

In the limelight

He says that among his recent works are the five different pieces he composed last year for the Singapore choirs taking part in the World Choir Games in Xiamen, China.

"Some of the Singapore choral groups won first prize but I can't recall which were the ones," he says.

And tomorrow night, his 15-minute composition, *Valor*, designed for the violin, will be played by two virtuoso violinists — Jin Li, former student of the late master Yehudi Menuhin, and Chan Yoong-Han, winner of 2004 Young Artist Award — in a concert at the Young Musicians' Society Auditorium at 54, Waterloo Street.

Mr Goh explains: "This piece is for two violins, and each musician will play solo at the start to showcase their individual styles. They will then play together in a little chase as the music quickens to a climax."

Other than this, the works of other local composers will also be featured at the concert.

Most of Mr Goh's compositions are for choirs and bands, and he has rearranged the music scores for local songs such as *Chan Mali Chan* and *Rasa Sayang*.

A Hainanese, he has also written a piece, *Reminiscences Of Hainan*, which is sung in the dialect. The *Victoria Chorale*, comprising graduands of Victoria School and Victoria Junior College, chose this piece when it performed in the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod in Wales in 1996.

In 2003, he composed a choral piece, *Iramabelia*, for the Singapore Youth Festival. "All schools now use this as a test piece for their choirs," says Mr Goh, a former student of Bedok View Secondary School.

Fine-tuned by experts

Mr Goh says his turning point in his musical career was when he studied piano under internationally acclaimed pianist Ong Lip Tat, who helped him expand his musical horizons.

"Mr Ong changed my concept of music and taught me how to achieve depth and musical sensitivity. He showed me the many ways to interpret music and expanded my repertoire," he says.

Mr Goh also learnt harmony and counterpoint from accomplished composers Phoon Yew Tien and Leong Yoon Pin respectively.

This stood him in good stead when he applied for the Hiebert and Gunda Scholarship and won.

He then went to the University of Kansas to work on his Master of Piano degree. He was awarded the prestigious Anthony Cius Prize for outstanding student composer in 2002. The university engaged him to be a graduate assistant to teach music theory.

For his doctoral degree, he worked on composition with guidance from Professor Emeritus Charles Hoag.

For orchestration and arrangement for band, he worked under American composer James Barnes.

The world is his stage

What are his plans for the future?

"I want to go international — get my music more known abroad," he says.

"Already, many Singapore choirs are well-respected among music circles internationally, having won many competitions.

"In fact, from my wide experience, I can say that our choirs are equal to the best anywhere in the world," he adds.

His ambition to go global has got off to a good start. His works have been performed in at least 10 countries: the US, England, China, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Austria, Australia, Malaysia and Thailand.

"Marketing is my weakness. I must learn how to manage this area better," he says.