

Simply complex

Composer Zechariah Goh Toh Chai mines a rich vein of ideas from the East and West for a new concerto

Dawn Lim

COMPOSER Zechariah Goh Toh Chai is an accomplished musician who can play the piano, saxophone, trumpet and recorder.

He can't, however, play the marimba, which is similar to the xylophone but has wooden keys instead.

But by using computer equipment, his imagination and from talking to marimba players, he has written a 15-minute piece called *Concerto For Marimba And Wind Ensemble*.

It will be performed in *Behind Wooden Bars*, a 90-minute concert featuring wind conductor John Boyd and marimba artist Kevin Bobo, at the Esplanade Concert Hall on June 9.

Performing the piece on the marimba is Bobo, who will be backed by the 50-strong semi-professional wind ensemble *The Philharmonic Winds*.

Goh, 37, who has done arrangements for choral groups and composed music for the fireworks segment in 2004's Na-

tional Day Parade, said he wrote the piece with Bobo in mind.

He met the American musician while pursuing a doctorate degree in music composition at the University of Kansas between 2002 and 2003.

Bobo is an assistant professor who teaches percussion at the university. Both discussed music together often and a creative relationship was formed.

"I was very moved by the way he played," Goh said.

The concerto is made up of two parts. He describes the first movement as "contemplative and sounds Eastern", and the second is "exuberant and classical in sound".

"The style is a typically Singaporean collage of the East and West."

But creative abstractions aside, Goh is down-to-earth.

Growing up in a kampung in Changi, his family was too poor to afford a piano or music lessons. His father was a policeman and his mother was a canteen vendor struggling to look after their three children.

But in music classes in school, he learnt to play the trumpet and recorder. He persuaded his parents to allow him

to have music lessons when he was 13.

"But for a year, I had to practise on an imaginary piano on a table top before my parents could finally afford a piano," he recalls.

He enrolled in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) to study music, and later received a scholarship from the University of Kansas to obtain a master's degree in piano performance. He also obtained a doctorate in music composition there in 2005.

In 2003, he was given the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council for his music achievements.

He now teaches music full-time at Nafa and conducts school choirs on the side.

Some of his compositions include *Kucinta* (Singapore Cat), a

four-minute choral piece made up entirely of cat meows, and *Impressions*, another four-minute choral piece which mimics the sound of a gamelan ensemble.

"I try to make my pieces complex and yet simple," he said. "I don't always try to do music that is 'cheem' (Hokkien for deep). I want my music to be able to speak the language of the people."

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Goh

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