

Quek Ling Kiong: Bringing Chinese Orchestra to the people

By Stephanie Ho, written on 4 March 2014

A recipient of the Young Artist Award in 2002, Quek Ling Kiong is a top-notch percussionist and resident conductor of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. Quek is committed to spreading his passion and knowledge of music to the masses through outreach and educational activities.

Quek Ling Kiong (郭勇德) was born in 1967, the oldest of four children. Although he did not come from a musical family, he recalled himself “performing” solos on a toy drum at 5 years old.¹

Musical training

Quek’s first formal training in music came when he joined the Chinese Orchestra in Dunman High School. The orchestra was led by Chinese Orchestra pioneer Dr Tay Teow Kiat, who would become one of Quek’s mentors. Quek had said, “He (Dr Tan) is one of the most important mentors in my music career. He has a very disciplined attitude towards music and he taught me that music should be taken seriously”.²

In the orchestra, Quek started with the *liuqin* (柳琴)– a four-stringed Chinese mandolin – but soon gave up because he disliked the instrument. After a stint as storekeeper of the orchestra, Quek took up the drums and through furious practice, became quite adept at playing percussion instruments. Quek recalled that he used to practice at home by hitting his blanket with his sticks “to build up stamina”. In the process, he broke five or six pairs of sticks.³

After graduation, Quek went on to pursue a diploma in business studies at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, but continued to be part of the Dunman High Chinese Orchestra. He helped train the students and performed in concerts. At the time he also became a member of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) Chinese Orchestra which was conducted by Dr Tay.⁴ Subsequently, Quek worked as an administrator in a music centre and as a freelance music instructor.

It was only in 1994 that Quek, then 27 years old, decided to further his studies and pursue music professionally. It was not an easy decision as there was pressure on him to find a stable job, and there was no professional Chinese orchestra at the time. Quek recalled, “No one encouraged me to be a full-time musician. Even my best friends said I was crazy”.⁵

Nevertheless, with help from the National Arts Council (NAC), Lee Foundation and Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, Quek left for the Shanghai Conservatory of Music to

¹ Nanda, A. (2013, June 24). The life interview with Quek Ling Kiong: Making musical dreams come true. *The Straits Times*.

² I want to die on stage. (2003, July 19). *The Straits Times*.

³ Tan, B. H. (1986, July 24). Dunman drums to another beat. *The Straits Times*.

⁴ Tan, B. H. (1986, July 24). Dunman drums to another beat. *The Straits Times*.

⁵ Nanda, A. (2013, June 24). The life interview with Quek Ling Kiong: Making musical dreams come true. *The Straits Times*.

pursue a Bachelor of Music degree.⁶ At the conservatory, Quek studied Chinese percussion under renowned master Li Min Xiong and Western classical percussion from Xue Bao Lun, and explored other forms of percussion with masters such as Li Zhen Gui, An Zhi Shun and Zhu Xiao Lin.⁷

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) was formed in 1996 and even though he had not yet graduated, Quek auditioned for a place in the orchestra. Quek secured the position of Percussion Principal which he took up the following year, after graduation.

Singapore Chinese Orchestra

In the SCO, Quek was given many opportunities to shine. His percussion solos often received positive reviews. A 1999 *Straits Times* review described his performance of the piece, *A well-matched fight*, as being “extremely vivid and fiery, if flashy”.⁸ Another performance of a piece known as *Night Thoughts* was described as “spectacular”.⁹ Quek had said, “Percussion is my means of communication for I express myself through my music”.¹⁰

After a few years, Quek began thinking about conducting and started attending conducting workshops in Australia and Europe. The orchestra also believed that Quek had the potential to be more than a star performer. In 2003, Quek was appointed to the position of the orchestra’s first-ever conducting assistant.¹¹ The next year, he was promoted to assistant conductor and made conductor for the newly formed Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra (SYCO).^{12 13} Targeted at talented young musicians aged 11 to 26 years, the aim of the SYCO is to nurture and groom these talents to become the pillars of Singapore’s Chinese orchestra music scene.¹⁴

In 2006, Quek left for Zurich, Switzerland to pursue a Diploma in Advanced Studies from Zürcher Hochschule der Künste. Upon his return in 2008, Quek was appointed Resident Conductor of the SYCO. In 2013, Quek was appointed the Resident Conductor of the SCO.

Education and outreach

Since his appointment as Assistant Conductor, Quek has been very active in education and outreach. He introduced and choreographed many programmes such as Mother’s Day concerts, concerts for children and the Caring series that have expanded the SCO’s audience. The reasons for this drive stems from his own experience. Quek had said, “It’s because I was helped in secondary school by my teacher and seniors. Chinese music turned my life around. It taught me what good music can bring and

⁶ Tan, S. E. (1999, July 30). Is it just students supporting their two teachers? *The Straits Times*.

⁷ Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra. (2013). *About us – conductor*. Retrieved from <http://www.syco.com.sg/about-us/conductor/>

⁸ Chua, S. L. (1999, June 21). ‘Star Wars’ entry, but light-speed pace a bit too much. *The Straits Times*.

⁹ Chua, S. L. (1999, December 6). Flight into the next millennium. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁰ I want to die on stage. (2003, July 19). *The Straits Times*.

¹¹ I want to die on stage. (2003, July 19). *The Straits Times*.

¹² Tan, S. E. (2004, January 30). Passing the baton. *The Straits Times*.

¹³ Singapore Chinese Orchestra. (2012). *Resident Conductor*. Retrieved from <http://www.sco.com.sg/sco/resident-conductor/>

¹⁴ Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra. (2013, June 12). *Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra turns 10!* Retrieved from <http://www.syco.com.sg/media/singapore-youth-chinese-orchestra-turns-10/>

from there, I really want to share it with others”.¹⁵

Public response to these concerts has been excellent as they are well crafted to suit their target audiences. Quek has also been willing to include popular music into the SCO’s repertoire. He said, “I hope to introduce traditional Chinese music to an audience who might come primarily for the popular tunes”. Past Mother’s Day concerts have Hong Kong stars Francis Yip and Adam Cheng, and local “Broadway Beng”, Sebastian Tan singing popular tunes accompanied by the SCO.^{16 17 18}

The SCO’s children’s concerts headlined by Quek have also been extremely popular. During these concerts, Quek is more than a conductor. He gamely dresses up in part, acts and sings. After the concert, Quek and the musicians talk and sign autographs for the audience. A reviewer of a 2013 children’s concert complimented Quek’s creativity and energy, recognizing that few conductors are as multi-faceted as him.¹⁹ Quek believes that these concerts are important in planting a seed of interest in children that may motivate them to pick up a Chinese instrument.²⁰

The Caring series of concerts is aimed at bringing the SCO to healthcare institutions to serve as musical therapy for the sick, and to underprivileged groups to give them an opportunity to appreciate the arts.²¹ More than one-off concerts and sharing sessions, Quek embarked on a long-term project with the Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society in 2011. During the project Quek and his assistants worked with a group of mentally-impaired youth to improve their communication skills, hand-eye coordination and basic learning techniques through music. After a year of training, these young drummers eventually performed with the SCO during its 2012 Mother’s Day concert.²²

Other activities

A multi-tasker, the energetic Quek is involved in various musical activities. In addition to his conducting duties at the SCO and SYCO, Quek is also the conductor of Chinese chamber ensemble, Ding Yi Music. He teaches drumming classes in heartland community centres and is an adjunct teacher at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the Singapore School of the Arts.

Quote

“Young people are the future, so I like to work with them, even if they make more mistakes. When you see them learn something from being there, you and they are also seeing the beauty of a traditional art.”²³

¹⁵ Nanda, A. (2013, June 24). Musical dreams come true for conductor Quek Ling Kiong. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁶ Ong, A. (2006, May 15). Well-watched. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁷ Tan, T. (2008, May 5). Suave as ever. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁸ Toh W. L. (2012, May 10). Broadway Beng serenades mums. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁹ 喜看郭勇德“指而优则演”. (2013, December 14). *Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报*.

²⁰ Nanda, A. (2013, June 24). Musical dreams come true for conductor Quek Ling Kiong. *The Straits Times*.

²¹ Music with a healing touch. (2012, 1st Issue). *Hua Yue*, p. 7. Retrieved from <http://www.sco.com.sg/>

²² 特殊的满堂彩. *Hua Yue*. (2012, 2nd issue). p.3. Retrieved from <http://www.sco.com.sg/>

²³ Nanda, A. (2013, June 24). Musical dreams come true for conductor Quek Ling Kiong. *The Straits Times*.

Awards

2002 Young Artist Award

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