

An article on the 4th Singapore Performers' Festival 2012 by Chang Tou Liang that was featured in *Music Education* magazine (2012 edition)

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WHY I BELIEVE IN THE PERFORMERS' FESTIVAL

By Chang Tou Liang

I received my first piano lesson at the age of four. Why, you might ask, should anyone begin to learn a musical instrument at such an insanely young age? Is it because Mozart did it, and thus every parent has an innate wish that his or her child should not be deprived of that privilege?

In Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers*, the author posits that geniuses in any field of expertise have had the advantage of lots and lots of practice, to the tune of ten thousand hours. Given that some children are subject to five hours of piano a day, that works out to be two thousand days or somewhere between five and six years. So if you start lessons at four, you should finally get your ABRSM Grade Eight by the age of ten, and hopefully LRSM diploma at twelve. This is already a reality in Singapore, and by the time a child leaves primary school, he or she may be deemed a "bona fide pianistic genius". Isn't that just great?

My history was, of course, less stellar. To begin with, I was too easily distracted. My first teacher, the infinitely patient Mrs Chia, would admonish me for paying more attention to what was happening outside her window. I hated practising, and my mother would sit with me at the piano to hammer out the pieces I had learnt the week before, just the day before the next lesson in order to provide a semblance of industry. It did not work, as Mrs Chia would immediately sniff that out.

I was, however, attracted to nice tunes, and when there was one to be had, I would play the melody over and over and louder each time because that was what happened in the records I had heard. Equating loud and fast with good (Lang Lang does too, but that's another story) and had to be restrained on many an occasion. "Do not bang, bang, Liang Liang," I had to be reminded.

My last teacher, who ran a musical sweatshop in her mansion, was the least inspiring. Knowing that I was not going to be among her ABRSM distinction or merit candidates (in fact I never took a single music or piano exam in my life and have yet to do so), she left me on my own to pick whatever melodies I liked. I played these with no musicality whatsoever, to which her reply was, "No good..., come back next week." The last piece I played for her was a Chopin *Nocturne*, badly too, and I never did return the following week.

Not having any more piano lessons at 12 was a great relief. I was left in the musical wilderness, and what a wondrous place that was to discover music outside of those tawdry anthologies of prescribed graded pieces. I began to play those piano works which I heard on

the radio, or on cassettes and LP records. Pieces I learnt from scratch (I did gain something from my teachers after all) included Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* (the first and second movements only), Debussy's *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*, Rachmaninov's C sharp minor *Prelude* (that's a tough one!) and Chopin's *Military Polonaise*. You get the drift: no boring Clementi, no cissy Mozart, no fussy Scarlatti and most of all, no didactic Bach. Most of all, I just wanted to play the pieces my heroes (including Cliburn, Graffman, Rubinstein and Horowitz) played, and my appetite for new scores was voracious.

Sometime when I was 16, I did something silly on the encouragement of a classmate (who had the benefit of having passed his Grade Eight and a teacher to boot), that was to take part in my school's piano competition. I memorised Debussy's *La plus que lente* (one of the Frenchman's easier pieces), and after listening to Peter Frankl's LP countless times, and played it in front of an audience in Singapore Conference Hall and a panel of adjudicators. When it came to verdict time, it so transpired that I was unplaced (my classmate got second on account of his polished Schubert *Impromptu*) and the judges had this to say, "The Debussy was poor, full of lapses...*blah, blah blah*," That was the end of my competition career, and I vowed never to play in front of people again. Famous last words indeed!

Which brings me now to the point of this piece: *Why do we at all take music lessons, and why even think of performing?* The ostensible aim of all this is to learn a universal language that is music, one steeped in a rich tradition of history and culture, and to express something of ourselves which cannot be done by words alone, either to ourselves or in communion with our fellow beings, while enriching our lives at the same time. In summary, music is a form of beauty that can be learnt, perfected and shared around with others for mutual benefit. It is what separates us from beasts.

The Singapore Performers' Festival, organised by The Singapore Music Teachers' Association (SMTA) gives a chance to those who wish to put the learning of music (not to mention the thousands of dollars spent by very hopeful parents on music lessons) into actual practice. The learning of a piece of music, the research it entails, the hours spent on fingering, practice and memorising, finds its final fruition in a performance in front of a receptive audience.

Music competitions serve a similar function, however the gladiatorial notion of pitting one performance against another, one artist against another, or Bach against Beethoven, can be abhorrent to many. In competitions, there can only be one winner and the rest losers. How much more constructive it is for a would-be artist to overcome the challenges that are imposed by oneself rather than others. When you perform, you pit yourself against your highest personal aspirations, your inner passion, and your own perceived limitations. The ultimate prize is the self-satisfaction that comes with having accomplished against the odds. The Performers' Festival embodies that almost-Olympian spirit, and there can be no losers.

I have observed the Performers' Festival over the years, and marvelled at the pursuit of musical excellence and the joy it brings. I remember a touching performance of Mozart's *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star Variations* where a 7-year-old boy played the theme and simple variation, while his teacher filled in the more virtuosic ones. Or a 10-year-old Indonesian girl, dressed as if attending a high society ball, astonishing her audience with a totally accomplished performance of Carl Vine's *Bagatelles*, or the sight of a slim catwalk model-

like young lady with high heel shoes making light work of Liszt's *Mazeppa*. Everyone wants to be the next Yuja Wang, but *being the best yourself* is, in my humble opinion, so much better.

About The Singapore Performers' Festival

The 4th Singapore Performers' Festival 2012 in June (18-24) attracted more than 370 local and overseas piano and string participants from 14 nationalities. They were adjudicated by a total of ten internationally renowned adjudicators, namely *Dr. Nopanand Chanorathaikul, Professor Thomas Hecht, Graeme Humphrey, Dr. Kim Bo-Kyung, Dr. Nicholas Ong and Jamorn Supapol (piano); Peter Danis, Joshua Tan Kang Ming, Leslie Tan and Lionel Tan (strings)*.

Inaugurated in 2006, the Festival aims to encourage and promote a life-long love of music while providing musicians of all ages and abilities a friendly and non-competitive atmosphere in which to share their talents.

The Festival helps build bridges from the weekly studio lesson to the concert stage. It allows participants to experience greater self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment. In turn, they can be motivated to achieve future goals at their own pace. It offers teachers a stimulating new way to present their students in performance, fueling their passion for music-making and experiencing the thrill of the concert stage.

Open to piano, piano duet, strings, and chamber groups, participants plan their own programme according to their abilities. Participants receive adjudication reports from internationally renowned musicians. The adjudication is based on their playing standards with respect of the music performed rather than on age, difficulty of the music or by comparison with another performer. Participants qualify for one of five levels of awards: *Platinum, Gold, Silver, Bronze or Certificate of Participation*. Trophies are awarded to Platinum and Gold recipients. Participants also receive a complimentary DVD recording of their performance.

Supporting Promising Students

The Festival has been supporting promising participants through various ways. To date, close to \$40,000 of scholarships have been awarded to outstanding Platinum performers whose teachers are SMTA members. Outstanding string players were awarded hand-crafted bows by Singaporean Archetier, *Paul S.J.Goh* while the most outstanding performer was awarded the "Concerto Experience in Rehearsal" with Singapore's Orchestra of the Music Makers (OMM).

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