

Making music remotely for a Hollywood movie

Two Singapore musicians play traditional Chinese string instruments for the soundtrack of Michael Bay's thriller *Songbird*

Toh Wen Li

Michael Bay's pandemic thriller, *Songbird*, has a soundscape featuring musicians from about 15 countries, including Singapore.

Jonathan Ngeow, 31, and Calista Liaw, 20, are among 25 international musicians who recorded themselves remotely and worked with acclaimed composer Lorne Balfe to create a pandemic soundscape.

Songbird, the first feature film to be shot in Los Angeles since the Covid-19 lockdown in the United States, is a romantic thriller set four years in the future as Covid-23, a mutated version of the virus, continues to ravage the world. It is produced by Bay and directed by Adam Mason.

Ngeow plays the ruan and Liaw the erhu, both traditional Chinese string instruments.

They were invited to be part of the soundtrack after an American music production company spotted them on Instagram.

Ngeow is a member of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, while Liaw is a first-year bachelor of music student at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, studying music and society.

They were given the film score and a backing track and recorded themselves remotely – Ngeow at home and Liaw at her university with the help of a professor. Their recordings, along with those by

musicians elsewhere in the world, were later woven into the film.

Ngeow says they found out the project was a film only during a Skype meeting with Mission: Impossible composer Balfe.

"When they told me it was for a movie, I was even more excited... I grew up watching Michael Bay movies – the action movies, *Transformers* and so on," says Ngeow, who is also one of 16 musicians from Singapore's Ding Yi Music Company who recorded music used in Disney's *Mulan* earlier this year.

Liaw adds: "I was stunned. I would never have thought I would one day get to be part of the recording for a Hollywood film without being actually there."

Bay is known for big-budget action films such as *Armageddon* (1998) and the *Transformers* series (2007 to present).

Songbird, which stars KJ Apa, Sofia Carson, Craig Robinson and Bradley Whitford, has drawn controversy.

In July, the Screen Actors Guild – American Federation of Television and Radio Artists told its members not to work on *Songbird*, with a spokesman saying the film's producers had not been transparent about their safety protocols. The labour union, however, rescinded its "do not work" order shortly after.

The film was released on premium video-on-demand platforms this month to mixed reviews.



Some accused it of being insensitive and of capitalising on the ongoing pandemic.

But Liaw hopes people will watch the film with an open mind.

Addressing the practice of recording music remotely, she says: "In the past, for film music, musicians would go down to the studio to do the recording."

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CALISTA LIAW, on how the practice of recording music remotely has been gaining traction as a result of the pandemic and safety measures