

Humble Beginnings but big milestones for T'ang Quartet

The home-grown ensemble, which has made waves internationally, is celebrating its 30th year with a concert

Kooi Xiu Min

Celebrated home-grown ensemble The T'ang Quartet turns 30 this year, but it almost did not make it past its sixth anniversary.

In 1998, violinists and founding members Ng Yu-Ying and Ang Chek Ming were driving in Colorado, the United States, when they got into an accident.

Ng, now 54, recalls: "At the Independent Pass, we stopped to take photos. Then, as we drove down, we lost control of the vehicle."

Had they careened off the road two or three minutes earlier, the drop would have been over 300m. Instead, their car rolled down the slope, flipping 3 1/2 times, and the two violinists ended up hanging upside down, dangling by their seat belts.

The two had been on their way to the Aspen Music Festival, with the other two founding members, Lionel Tan and Leslie Tan, having arrived safely before them.

As Ang suffered a hairline fracture, the quartet could not perform together that year, though the members still participated in concerts and attended lessons. They also went to bars, a favourite pastime of theirs.

Ang, 53, jokes that that was just the first of many times Ng failed to kill him.

Their friendship has survived nonetheless, and the quartet will celebrate its 30th anniversary on April 22 with a concert, *Humble Beginnings*.

The performance at Victoria Concert Hall will feature Ang and Ng, as well as the quartet's two new members, cellist Wang Zihao and violinist Han Oh, who replaced Leslie Tan and Lionel Tan respectively.

The programme includes Joseph Haydn's String Quartet Op. 76 No. 2, also known as the "Fifths", and Alexander Borodin's String Quartet No. 2 in D Major.

The T'ang Quartet was first formed in 1992 while the founding members were in the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and took on teaching roles besides performing together.

Ang says: "We wear many hats in Singapore, as educators and performers. So we always make sure



The Tang Quartet's 30th anniversary concert will feature violinists and founding members Ang Chek Ming (second from far left) and Ng Yu-Ying (third from far left), as well as the quartet's two new members, cellist Wang Zihao (far left) and violinist Han Oh (left). PHOTO: BENJAMIN KING PHOTOGRAPHY

we have a nice mix of classical, romantic and modern music."

Such variety has enabled the quartet to rise to international acclaim as a cutting-edge group whose members see themselves as musical ambassadors of Singapore.

Ang recalls musicians at overseas events expressing surprise that Singapore had such proficient quartets. This strengthened the group's resolve to make a mark in the global music scene as a Singapore ensemble.

The group's milestones include receiving a fellowship from the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University in US in 1998; performing at London's Wigmore Hall in 2005; and, more recently, becoming the quartet-in-residence at the National University of Singapore's Yong Siew

Toh Conservatory of Music.

"We also have mini-successes, like when we see our old students perform or in ensembles," adds Ang. In fact, both the new members of The T'ang Quartet were former students.

Wang, 31, took chamber lessons from the quartet when he was a student at the conservatory in 2011. After playing in small ensembles, he found his way back to the quartet last year.

"It's like that kind of story where a child grows up in this family, goes on an adventure to find himself and finally returns," he says.

Oh was asked to fill in for Lionel Tan in 2009 on a tour. This was a dream come true for the violinist, who remembers watching the quartet walk in and out of re-

hearsals and idolising the group.

Ten years later, when Ang and Ng approached Oh after Lionel Tan's retirement, he immediately agreed to join them.

"It's a full circle after 10 years," says Oh, now a sought-after musician. "It's like reuniting with your first love."

This performance will be the quartet's second live one in the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the past two years, the group has held mostly virtual concerts, including performing in an auditorium that was empty except for two cameramen – an experience Ng likens to "playing for ghosts".

The quartet's first live performance last year, to introduce Wang as a member, had just 80 au-

dience members.

As for the group's future plans, Oh wants to fulfil a promise he made over Beethoven's grave when he visited it in Vienna back in 1993.

"I told him I would finish playing all his string quartets in 1993, then I had to say sorry to him when I went back in 2015, because I still had six or seven left to go," he quips.

The quartet has no plans to slow down and is eager to put itself back on the map with the easing of Covid-19 restrictions.

Most importantly, it wants to foster the next generation of budding musicians. Wang says: "We want to uplift their spirits and grow together."

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HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

WHERE Victoria Concert Hall, 01-02, 11 Empress Place
WHEN April 22, 7.30pm
ADMISSION \$28 to \$40 from beginnings.peatix.com