

A shining symbol

Composer Bright Sheng is reviving an old tradition of fine-tuning new works with input from musicians, writes **Sam Olliver**



Photo: Jonathan Wong

Bright Sheng Zongliang is a classical composer, conductor and pianist with a bee in his bonnet about the intertwining of the three roles. The Chinese-American regrets that most musicians nowadays wear only one of those hats; things aren't what they used to be. As a composer, his thoughts on writing new pieces resonate with the world of musicals: they aren't born, it is said, they evolve. That philosophy has buoyed his brainchild, *The Intimacy of Creativity*, into its second year at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST).

For the two-week symposium (a "partnership", as he prefers to call it), which kicks off on April 23, Sheng has gathered two established American composer-performers (violinist Mark O'Connor and pianist Joan Tower), six aspiring young composers from Portugal, Hong Kong, Britain and the US, plus a performers' roster comprising local cellist Trey Lee, mainland-born pianist Zhang Haochen and members of Camerata Pacifica, a US collective of chamber musicians.

The works the composers have brought with them would normally be all wrapped up and ready to go. Here, however, they enter a final phase of being buffed up by the performers through discussion and experimentation; the musicians, after all, are the ones who ultimately have to deliver the goods in two showcase concerts at the City Hall Theatre on May 1 and 6.

To explain what goes on in these collaborative sessions, Sheng looks to history, presenting Beethoven as an example of what he is trying to resurrect: whenever the master wrote a piece for an instrument he didn't know well, or even a symphony, he would seek advice from the players who were going to be on the receiving end of his endeavours.

"The famous example is the *Eroica* symphony," Sheng says. "Everybody knew it was finished and they were waiting for it, but Beethoven held it back for six months without giving a public performance. During that time he invited his friends to try out sections and he kept re-writing until he was happy. That period of six months was a great success, [but] nowadays we look at the score without knowing how many of the ideas actually came from the performers."

Giving his pot of ideas a further stir, Sheng invited young Canto-pop singer-songwriter Jonathan Wong Chee-hynn to take part in this year's event, asking him to make an arrangement of one of his songs for the instruments available: piano, strings, flute and marimba.

Wong, the veteran composer says, "had to learn how to write it all down. Normally, they would hire an arranger who would make it happen but, in this case, I wanted him to write it down and then we'll work on it, so that it's something new for all of us. I think he's a little bit nervous—we all are."

Quite why this innovative activity is taking place on Hong Kong soil may not be immediately apparent; the reasons are both logistical and financial. Higher education institutions in Europe and the US have been around longer, Sheng explains, and faculties are embedded in routines that don't easily accommodate intermingling of disciplines. "Asia in general is more like a blank piece of paper," he says. "Hong Kong, specifically, is more open than most places. In every way, it is the right place."

The financial fuel needed to get things off the ground last year came through the generosity of a single benefactor. Originally from Austria, but now a long-time resident of the city and patron of the arts, Helmut Sohmen's support for the establishment of an arts programme at HKUST coincided with the university's 20th anniversary and Sheng's proposal. The impetus achieved by *The Intimacy of*

Creativity is maintained year-round by one or two of the participating composers staying on as composer-in-residence at the institution's Division of Humanities.

As a teenager during the mainland's decade-long Cultural Revolution, initiated in 1966 by Mao Zedong, the Shanghai-born Sheng was sent away from home for re-education like most, but he at least avoided a farmer's life and benefited from the musical protectionism of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing (often referred to as Madame Mao), ending up as a pianist in a music and dance hall in far-off Qinghai province.

"The Cultural Revolution taught me many things," the 56-year-old reflects. "Most importantly, things like being self-taught, how to learn from what you have."

When mainland universities reopened in 1978, Sheng attended the Shanghai Conservatory of Music before moving to New York in 1982; similar paths were followed by others destined for great careers as composers, among them Tan Dun and Chen Qigang. "Ten years of talent in one year," says Sheng, who now lives in Michigan. "That generation had gone through a lot, so, in a way, we are unbreakable."

Santa Fe Opera staged the premiere of his *Madame Mao* in 2003. Tongue-in-cheek, I ask if it has ever been performed on the mainland. "No!" he exclaims. "It's a touching subject." The adjective may be spot on, but he quickly corrects: "A touchy subject."

Composer, conductor and performer Leonard Bernstein became Sheng's mentor a few years after the young immigrant's arrival in the US. It was then that Sheng realised his study of Western music in Shanghai had lacked a whole dimension, preventing him from making complete sense of it.

"It was like having studied the Chinese flute, but in London," he says. Now, having composed in a Western milieu for many years, his works epitomise the cultural fusion that many aspire to, but never quite achieve.

"You can't just put soy sauce and mayonnaise together and make a fusion," he says. "It has to start from the bottom."

With his life experience, creative innovation and performance talent, Sheng seems a perfect whetstone for the young composers under his care at the campus in Clear Water Bay.

When asked what his final piece of advice for them would be, he suggests that they should first acquire a large store of knowledge, "the more profound the better. But when you write, when you create your stuff, you should be crazy, daring and really do something out of sync. The more you understand, the bolder you can go." thereview@scmp.com

The Intimacy of Creativity 2012 World Premiere Concerts, City Hall Theatre, Central, May 1, 8pm, May 6, 3pm, HK\$200, HK\$300. Inquiries: 2358 8350



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