

ART &
CULTURE

Both world-renowned and emerging composers and musicians – such as Grammy-winning double bassist Edgar Meyer, far right – will come together in April for *The Intimacy of Creativity*. The music exchange program is the brainchild of conductor and pianist Bright Sheng, right.



KEEPING IN TUNE

Mercy Lo discovers the musical benefits of composers and performers talking it over

IF BEETHOVEN were sitting next to you, would you dare to make comments or even criticize his work to his face? It's a shame we will never find out as the German composer has gone for good.

But when performers get to work with composers on their pieces, the process will be a fruitful one and always generate constructive results.

Now in its third year, *The Intimacy of Creativity*, presented by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, is a two-week program dedicated to encouraging intimate dialogues between composers and performers. From April 22 to May 5, experienced and emerging composers and performers will come together for symposiums to exchange musical ideas for the sake of improving compositions, performance quality and musical interpretations.

Bright Sheng, the 2001 MacArthur Foundation Genius Award winner and a world-renowned conductor and pianist, is the initiator of this music program. "In the old days, even though you were a composer, you had to initially be a very famous performer, a virtuoso, before people would take your compositions seriously," says Sheng, who is artistic director of the program.

"Most well-known composers, including Beethoven, Mozart and Brahms, back then made a living primarily by performing. However, by the second half of the 20th century, this tradition got lost. Instead, you would find a violinist/composer or a mathematician/composer. The sad situation today is that most composers do not perform actively, while most performers do not write music."

As a result, when new works are presented by contemporary composers, Sheng believes there is a lack of communication between composers and performers.

The purpose of the program is to remedy this situation – encouraging

discussion about new compositions by taking ideas from the performers through working closely with the composers. "I believe when music has been composed and printed, only 50 percent of the work is done. The other 50 percent is to be realized and interpreted by the performers, which I think is equally important," Sheng says.

This year the lineup includes Grammy-winning double bassist Edgar Meyer, renowned violinist and artistic director of the Hong Kong International Chamber Music Festival Lin Cho-liang, and first prize-winning violinist at the Concert Artists Guild Victor Elmaleh Competition Katie Hyun.

Six emerging composers, selected out of 144 applicants, have been chosen to join the guests for the two-week program. They include Dai Bo (China), Charles Halka (US), Karlo Margetic (New Zealand), Eli Marshall (US), Steven Snowden (US) and Roger Zare (US).

In the two weeks, there will be two sessions a day, only on weekdays, at the Hong Kong City Hall Theatre, where composers will have a chance to revise their new compositions through working with the performers.

"Creating a perfect musical piece is not the objective of the program," Sheng says. "The main purpose is to provide a platform for constructive dialogues between the two parties, getting input from the performers for the benefit of the compositions.

"In fact, to put it simply, we are taking advantage of the performers' talent to improve the compositions."

When this program was initiated two years ago, performers at first were reluctant to criticize the music.

"If Beethoven is right by your side, you probably wouldn't work up the courage to criticize his works," Sheng says. "You might think, to Beethoven, every note is golden, and you are not supposed to change or

even question his markings on the score. But that is not true. Nothing is set in stone."

Lin, one of the guests invited for this season, has worked with many international composers in premiering violin pieces. The violinist says: "I love working with composers because that is one area that I cannot do. I cannot compose to save my life, but I can play the violin.

"I would love that opportunity to learn about how to interpret old masters by working with modern masters."

He understands that it will be a rigorous process as performers and composers come together and try to make sense out of everything that's written on the page.

"You cannot go back to do a seance with Mozart or Beethoven to find out what they meant by this or that, but with the composer next to me, I can ask him about anything on the page. Not only is this enlightening, stimulating and inspiring, this is also liberating."

Composers also need to learn from performers. As a performer, it is essential to understand what the composer wants in his music.

Lin says sometimes performers may have a completely wrong concept, thinking that the music should be lively and happy, while the composer might want something that is darker or conveys sadness.

On the other hand, composers also need to write music that performers can interpret well.

"It will be a waste of time for the composer to write something that defeats a performer, making the piece so difficult that we have to spend the entire time worrying about it instead of performing it," Lin says. "A composer needs to write music that is user-friendly, just like writing a computer software program that can be used and expanded well later." mercy.lo@singtaonewscorp.com