

Tsang's the Man

words rachel read

As far as figures in the field of music go, Hong Kong's very own Richard Tsang has quite simply done it all. Composer, broadcaster, conductor, educator – there's not many things left for him to conquer.

As a result, he describes himself as 'semi-retired' – but don't go thinking he's slipped into a pipes-and-slippers stage of dotage, for this is a state of retirement that still includes being a Visiting Fellow in Composition for the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts and bouts of composing and conducting, like the concert of his own compositions that he'll conduct with the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra on January 10.

Of the upcoming show, he says that he has designed the concert as 'a recollection of my history' and promises that it will

be 'a mixed bag', with some pieces that 'look back to ancient times and try to mimic ancient pathos and feeling through music' whilst others 'combine avant-garde contemporary technique with Chinese instruments and Chinese thinking'.



Asked to pick a favourite, he cannot choose, saying that they're all his favourites (unsurprising given that he compares composing to 'making a baby'), and talks passionately about every single piece. *Sky Bridge* is 'inward and soul-searching... I have tried a number of new things in terms of rhythms and the children [the Hong Kong Children's Choir] and musicians were sometimes given a free hand in choosing their own tempo so that when they mix together, the tempo is varied, which kind of mimics nature – it's very refreshing'.

Other pieces 'reflect my own philosophical thinking... *Ling Kai* stands out from the rest because it is an improvisatory piece and I deliberately put a very strong philosophical background to it. I asked the musicians to imagine themselves as a kind of spirit, like when

one is dead, you have your soul but your being is nothing and is only represented by your sound. The light is dimmed so that they are encouraged to close their eyes and imagine that their instrument is them and they interact with each other only by their sound... you'll hear from the playing how they want to express themselves and each performance will be a completely different experience.'

It is this spiritual nature of classical music that Tsang believes distinguishes it both from other types of culture and other types of music. 'I think music is one of the most abstract of all the arts... you really have to use your imagination to appreciate music and in doing so, you train your mind to really work out all those relationships inherent in music' and your mind becomes 'enlightened'.

He also believes this is why, however busy your life is, you should set some time aside for culture. 'Sometimes you need to just stop... not just classical

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concerts but all kinds of cultural activities will broaden your mind and spiritually enrich you'.

This brings Tsang onto discussing what should be done to encourage the growth of the classical music scene in Hong Kong. Having spent decades in the business, he's seen Hong Kong's classical music scene change radically – but not enough. Despite a 'boom' in the 1970s and 80s where a number of establishments, like the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, were set up to boost development and gave Hong Kong composers a chance to write and premiere their music, Tsang says things have 'faded'. He reckons that the powers-that-be 'are not thinking ahead more to really invest in the development of Hong Kong talent... they should support their career in terms of getting their influence felt, not just in Hong Kong but in the rest of the world. Since the 1990s, there have been no real breakthroughs on the artistic horizon in Hong Kong.'

Since Tsang also lives in England and has worked extensively abroad, he is able to compare Hong Kong's cultural policies against those of other countries. 'There is no development of an identity of Hong Kong's art. What is the art of Hong Kong? It's a little bit sad. Of course, we can see a lot of young people coming up and working to change the performing arts scene but they still find it very difficult to break through the local territory and then when they are abroad, they are on their own... there's no support in terms of archive, data collection, information, not to mention hard cash subsidies! Sometimes we find some really good performer or creative artist and they fizzle out or go abroad to establish on their own and never look back, we are losing talent.'

He says that England has 'a much stronger tradition of music and music-making' and accepts that the cost of learning an instrument or buying tickets for a classical concert can prove prohibitive. Tsang thinks that schemes of subsidising and giving benefits, like those found in the UK, 'could be a good idea for Hong Kong. But that's only one side of the problem; the other side is exposure and education. There is still some

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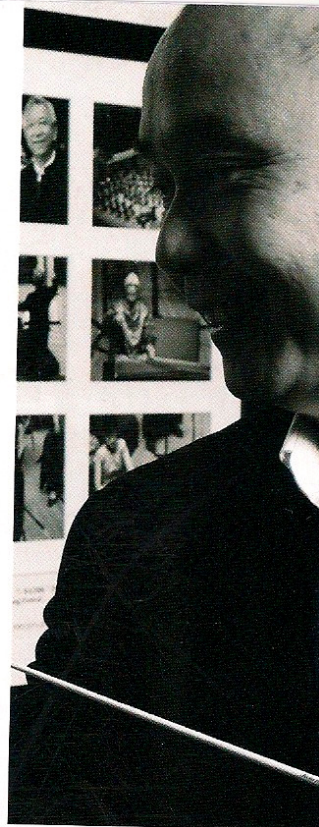
distance to go.' However, he is happy to be considered a 'low-key' ambassador for Hong Kong's classical music scene – 'because I have been active in the international contemporary music scene, so people understand Hong Kong through me but, of course, I can't represent all of it.

In truth, Hong Kong could hardly hope for a better cultural ambassador than Tsang, even if he is 'low-key' about it. His list of accolades reads like a CV that most can only dream about. Winner of an Outstanding Young Person Award in 1988. Composer of the Year in 1990. CASH Golden Sail Award for Best Serious Composition in 2002. The first non-European to hold the position of President of the International Society for Contemporary Music. When asked to pick his proudest moment, he again modestly re-iterates how 'low-key' he is, merely saying that he treasures all of his past career.

It is a career that came naturally because Tsang believes he has always been 'touched by music'. He recounts a moment in primary school when one of his teachers played just one chord and

'all my hairs stood on end'. He was inspired to become a composer when he was 'really moved' by the thought that the Christmas carols he was singing had been 'written and composed by foreigners, Europeans, many hundreds of years ago and they still moved me halfway across the world and across time. I was very impressed and thought that if I could do just the same, to eventually produce music that could move people across time and places, then that would be very rewarding indeed.' Given his illustrious career to date, it looks like Tsang has made good on his childhood ambition.

Richard Tsang & Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra will be at the Hong Kong City Hall Concert Hall on 10 January. The show starts at 8pm and tickets are \$260, \$200 and \$120 available from www.urbtix.hk, 2734 9009. Tsang will also give a talk on Modern Music at the same venue on 9 January, starting at 8pm. Tickets cost \$150.



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