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COVER STORY

Boy Wonder

Evanna Ramly



From a child prodigy, Tengku Irfan has blossomed into a confident young man

A- **A** **A+**

It all began with an electronic keyboard, a gift from a devoted father.

“At the time, I was about six or seven when I found myself fooling around with it,” recalls Tengku Ahmad Irfan Tengku Dr Ahmad Shahrizal. “There were no expectations of where I might go but then I found myself attached to it; I was very excited by the melodies coming out of it.”

He remembers it was a Chopin waltz that he was most intrigued by at the time. “Once I clicked on that and saw the keys light up, one leading to another and myself following it – that was when I first started to enjoy the piano. My interest in writing music and conducting came after that and they all sort of melded together.”

His first performance took place about a year after he started learning music, under the watchful eye of Estelle Tan. From there, he made headlines with memorable shows such as the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) Gala in 2009. It was a huge learning experience for the charming then-11-year-old, as it was his first time playing a full concerto with an orchestra.

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Since then, Tengku Irfan, 19, has performed across the globe, from the US and Canada to Singapore, Brazil, Germany and Japan. Most days, he is busy honing his craft at New York's prestigious Juilliard School, where he also attended the pre-college programme six years ago.

Born in Kuala Lumpur, he is joined by his family in the Big Apple. While he misses nasi lemak as much as the next Malaysian, his passion for music keeps him motivated – that and watching other young students pursuing music in a similar way. "Seeing people more or less the same age as me working hard is inspiring," he shares.

Constant inspiration is essential for training in Juilliard, which sees him attending weekly lessons and regularly composing his own pieces. "I also had different courses where I had to take music theory and ear training. What's different now is that, since it is a musically focused programme, I also learn music history and liberal arts, a fusion of philosophy, history and psychology all rolled into one."

The hard work and countless hours of practice are paying off. "A highlight of my career thus far was my conducting debut with Maestro Warren Cohen of Musica Nova in Arizona at the age of 16," he smiles. "It was my first time conducting a concert so it was a different experience. What's more, I was conducting my own piece!"

"The music director of the orchestra said it was really weird to see somebody else conducting his orchestra for the first time in 13 years," adds his father, Tengku Dr Ahmad Shahrizal Tengku Omar, who accompanies his son on his tours. "It was a great honour for Irfan, being given the chance to lead. He found it daunting as there were a lot of older musicians but it was a very meaningful experience."

While many young artistes face difficulties growing up in the spotlight, Tengku Irfan has been handling the burden well. He shrugs: "I'm very fortunate in the sense that I don't feel pressured but I usually try not to think about it. The important thing is to work hard and also have moments where you can just really let loose because if one is too bogged down (by all the attention) it can get quite hysterical."

He is fortunate to have friends and family to talk to and relax with, particularly his two younger sisters to whom he is very close. "I think those are moments that everybody needs, especially when one is under pressure."

Having passion outside of music also helps. Tengku Irfan loves watching American sitcoms – his favourites include Friends, New Girl and The Big Bang Theory – and also, interestingly enough, cooking competition shows.

"Not that I'm good at cooking but for some reason, I can relate to the intensity of people when they cook," he says. "Such intensity, especially in a competition, is similar to what the performers experience when they are playing their hearts out on stage as well."



The pianist embraces challenges as they come

How does it feel to be on stage? “When I’m performing or just playing music for leisure, I feel a strong passion inside me. Sometimes there are moments where I feel like I’m unconscious, in a way that I become oblivious to my surroundings. I can get so engrossed in the music that I don’t realise there is someone in the room with me. That said, there is no specific emotion when I play; sometimes I feel excited, sometimes I feel anguish – it varies according to the type of music I’m performing.”

One piece he would never tire of playing is Sergei Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No.2 because it challenges him as a performer. “It’s known as one of the most demanding piano concertos, and this is not only due to the technical demands, but also the myriad expressions, moods and colours that need to be delivered throughout the entire piece,” he explains.

Watching him play the composition is an absolute joy, the hypnotising speed of his fingers flying across the black and white keys for Prokofiev’s lightning movements is riveting. “It feels like one is going through a challenging journey when performing the concerto. I enjoy this challenge as it somehow keeps the daunting concerto fresh and exciting. The whole piece is a continuous adrenaline surge. Even the slower and quieter parts are intense and deep!” he enthuses.

Writing music presents a very different challenge for him as a performer. “Performing is, after all, a recreation of art. You recreate what has already been created. Whereas when you write music, you are going back to the building blocks of sound and how to craft music. So it’s hard in a way. As a composer, I do feel that I have to separate the performing aspect quite a number of times because then it’s all about how one listens to a piece.”

On the subject of listening, he pays close attention to how it is a shared skill in both areas. "As a performer, you have to listen to how you sound and as a composer, you need to know how one phrase leads into another and how the whole structure of a piece works. In a way, they are very different. For a performer, the music is already there but what do you want to convey to the audience? For a composer, the music is not even there so you have to think from zero."

At the time of the interview, Tengku Irfan is set to perform Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 with the MPO, conducted by Naohisa Furusawa. He will return to the same venue in December for a collaboration with the Malaysian Philharmonic Youth Orchestra (MPYO) - this will mark his first time conducting in Malaysia. He will also present his new work that he has been commissioned to compose for the orchestra as well as Samuel Barber's Second Essay.



Signing an autograph for Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali in 2009

"Performing on home ground feels nice; it's always great to come home," he says. "Malaysia and New York are very different environments. Manhattan is hectic but there are strong diverse cultures to learn from. I'm lucky I get to go back and forth as it gives me a different perspective."

He is also happy to note that the Malaysian music industry is truly diverse. "We have many types of music. In fact, the MPO always features a strong repertoire of both classical and contemporary music," he says. "It's nice to see different kinds of music melding together because they influence one another. Pop music and movie soundtracks are influenced by classical music. Even 20th-century classical music is influenced by jazz and folk music."

Asked what music he personally loves, Tengku Irfan replies: "Pretty much anything that's out there. Sometimes I listen to Beethoven, sometimes Boulez, other times Art Tatum. I would say it's a wide range and it varies."

When it comes to role models, there are many he looks up to. "But in terms of pianists, I admire Sir András Schiff and Murray Perahia," he says. "I like their rounded sound and their ability to have a really nice cohesive structure while telling a story at the same time."

One wonders where he sees himself decades from now. "I feel a bit intimidated by the word 'legacy' although it has a very strong pull to it," he laughs. "I don't think of it consciously but my hope is for the younger generation to invest their time on something they really like. Whether it's music, playing games or any hobby, do the best that you can."

And his biggest dream right now? "I'm living it, which I'm grateful for and hope to continue."

This article first appeared in Focus Malaysia Issue 254.

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