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Music guru, composer extraordinaire

Alumnus Mr Chester Tan (NBS/1999) started composing and selling music to his close friends whilst still an undergraduate. Today, he has sold more than 70,000 copies of his Piano Spa series. He shares more on the special place music holds in his heart.

As a Business undergraduate in NTU, Mr Chester Tan made his first foray into composing and selling music by producing an album titled 'Music Diary'. He designed and printed the cover, burned the album in CD-R, and sold it to some close friends.

Now, the composer of the 'Piano Spa' series – a collection of piano instrumental music – has seven albums under his belt and sold more than 70,000 copies in Asia. The most recent album was released in December last year.

The songwriter has come a long way from his humble beginnings composing music in the haven of his hall room. In 2014, Mr Tan was awarded the 'Top Local Instrumental Contemporary' at the annual COMPASS Awards for the fourth

year running. He was also the recipient of the COMPASS Young Songwriter Of The Year Award in 2011.

Mr Tan credits his NTU days as pivotal to his music career.

"The University was also where I started composing music. Initially for my Hall of Residence's annual musical productions, I began to compose for my own pleasure," he says, adding that there was a fruitful period when he composed one song almost every day, for over a month. He was part of his Hall's choir, musical group and jam band, and even found the time to

join the NTU String Ensemble and NTU Photography Club.

A passion for music

Mr Tan has possessed a passion for music since childhood.

"I have an introvert personality and sometimes I find it hard to communicate how I feel in words," he says, adding that it was 'no surprise' that he grew up to become a music composer instead of songwriter.

"Composing music is my avenue of expressing my feelings. While each song originates from a story

of my own, people can interpret the songs differently based on their own experiences, and this creates a wider purpose, as compared to, say, a song about breakups," he explains.

He also finds instrumental songs 'therapeutic' because of his appreciation for classical Western music.

Mr Tan embarked on piano lessons when he was six years old. He then elected for music as an 'O' Level subject and thereafter chose to study at Temasek Junior College, which offered the Music Elective Programme for 'A' Levels.

"I got myself involved in musical activities as much as possible in school," he says.

However, things have not always been so smooth sailing.

Says Mr Tan: "Initially it was easy, but after a while, the learning curve got steeper. At one point, I felt like giving up, but due to a disciplined upbringing, I felt I had the responsibility to persevere, as my parents had invested time and money on my music education."

His tenacity and love for music allowed him to weather the storm and he started enjoying the process again.

"Music has kept me alive through my growing teens," says Mr Tan.

His inspirations

As a composer and musician, Mr Tan derives his inspiration from a myriad of sources.

According to Mr Tan, he is the 'most effective' when composing with actual instruments, as his inspiration comes from the instrument itself and his emotions at that moment.

"The timbre and tone that resonate provide the fuel for me to write the melody and harmony, which follows instinctively," he says.

Mr Tan is also inspired by the music of others. "I would break them down, understand what makes the music beautiful, and work it into my own compositions," he says.

He considers David Foster and Dick Lee as his role models for music composition, calling Foster the 'greatest music producer who creates song after song of chart-topping hits for hundreds of artists'. To Mr Tan, both possess the same success model – a combination of good songwriting skills and colourful personalities.

Lastly, the encouragement from Mr Tan's friends and fans keeps him going.

"It is a great feeling to know that your composition is enjoyed by other people, and that gives me great purpose to create music," he says.

Mr Tan hopes that more people in Singapore will support instrumental music by local musicians. But for that to happen, there must first be

content. Musicians should create more instrumental music that can be easily enjoyed. Secondly, there should be exposure for this genre. Radios can give local instrumental music more airtime, and businesses that play music in their stores can use local music, so as to allow the songwriters to earn performance royalties.

Mr Tan believes that the Internet is vital for exposure. "There are international YouTube instrumental artists like The Piano Guys, Lindsey Stirling, who create music videos and that make them widely popular," he says. In addition, creating visually attractive content is an important aspect of promoting instrumental music.

Besides producing the Piano Spa albums, Mr Tan writes jingles, school anthems, and arranges music for plays and dance productions. To top it all off, the high achiever juggles his music career with his day job as a business analyst at StarHub. He also engages in blogging, writes gadget reviews and does freelance photography.

"There are so many career opportunities in the music industry besides being a performing artist... you need not go into full time," he shares. This is why he encourages those with a passion for music to go for their dreams. To him, music is not simply a livelihood but something much more.

Says Mr Tan: "Music - listening or composing alike - has become my companion, my solace, during times when I could not find the right people to share my thoughts with."



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