Alumni of the 15-year-old Yong Siew Toh Conservatory are doing well as performers, educators and entrepreneurs.

Akhita Nanda
Arts Correspondent

Over the past 15 years, the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music has seen about 200 students graduate from its four-year bachelor of music programme, the first such to be established in Singapore.

One of its most famous alumni is conductor Wong Kah Chun, who became the first Asian to win the Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition in 2006 and now leads the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra in Germany.

But there are other performers, educators and entrepreneurs who have been transforming the music scene here and making waves beyond.

At home, conservatory alumni play in the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) or have started their own critically acclaimed musical ensembles, such as the Metropolitan Festival Orchestra, the multilingual Opera Singapore and the multi-award winning ensemble Luneq Boys. There is also the newly formed Red Dot Baroque, which plays its debut concert on period instruments today.

Some teach at the conservatory or other music schools around the island, the sign of an ever-growing gap in the arts scene.

Conductor Akira Seville Araujo, who just completed his master’s in conducting at the conservatory, leads The Young Musicians’ Foundation Orchestra (TYMO), a pre-professional ensemble where music students and graduates can practice repertoire.

“People need to hear more and people need to play more,” says the 30-year-old. “The organisation has already played five concerts this year.”

SSO chief executive officer Chng Hoh-Peng says: “We’re convinced that having the conservatory has helped attract audiocentric guest artists, which, in turn, lends itself to creating a buzz here in Singapore, perhaps even global to city Vienna at the turn of the century.

“Yong Siew Toh has also added to the audience for classical music here, which benefits not only us, but other orchestras. With the formation of small music groups, the range of performers here has also become more diverse, creating a vibrant music culture for the city and music lovers.

Harmonising with the conservatory’s dean, says: “The orchestra is an orchestra that would be a beacon of musical excellence in South-east Asia. Considering the Lighthouse metaphor, he adds, students “have to chink that they are here for the community. There are here for music and not for themselves. The arts should be about changing the community’s awareness of itself.”

Some alumni enhance appreciation of Singapore’s multicultural nature. The most recent work of alumni and composer Tengku Abdul Aziz Mohd. Najib, performed on Sunday during the conservatory’s anniversary concert, was written for instruments ranging from the Chinese oboe to the Indian bansuri flute to the Western cornet, along with four-string traditional javanese sarung kontrabass.

Other alumni are trying out new concert formats, such as the More Than Music series by pianist Aziz Ali and Violinist Leong Jun Hong. It demystifies classical music and makes it accessible by adding, for instance, the word instrument on the repertoire, with songs identified by terms rather than an official title.

Conservatory alumni also experiment and collaborate with other genres. Chamber opera group Laetitia Productions, for example, will present three Singapore-themed mini-sized operas in October, written by conservatory alumni Chen Zhangyi. The group’s co-founder, soprano Akiko Uno, says it is a rare privilege to be able to work on a performance with a living composer.

In addition, she says, the works Lakshmi Vaitthi, Window Shopping and Kopi For One “are really personal, something that’s relative to everyone”.

Overseas, alumni are gaining fame – as performers, such as Alan Choo on the baroque violin, or composers, like Diana Soh, in Europe – and moving into other non-classical institutions.

Alumni have taught at Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, which offers a one-of-a-kind joint degree programme with the Singapore conservatory.

Composer-organist Phoon Yew Tien, 28, did his master’s in Peabody and is now pursuing his doctor of music at the historically competitive programme at The Juilliard School in New York.

Phoon is the son of noted composer Phoon Yew Tian but, for all his home advantages, says he would not have been an organist without Yong Siew Toh and its connection to Peabody.

“I studied the organ in Singapore, but it was so hard to find an instrument to practise on,” he explains.

Thanks to endorsements from major donors such as the Yong Loo Lin Trust, the conservatory’s undergraduate programme is fully funded. It has 220 undergraduates at any time, with 40 to 55 places open to first-year students every year. Between 200 and 400 applications are received for these first-year slots.

Prof Lamsyar says the absence of university debt makes the programme attractive, since musicians find it harder to get regular salaried positions after they graduate, compared with, say, doctors.

The conservatory thus gets students from around the world. American alumnus Lawrence Holmes-Heyden-Sarafi, 27, came to study the piano and was making a name for himself as a solist when he found people offering him “hundreds of dollars” to give their children lessons.

He started a music school, Aurora Academy, in 2013, when he was a first-year student.

Thanks to a seven-figure investment from investors, Aurora Academy now has nine schools around the island plus an office at Tai Seng, serves 4,500 students and has 200 full-time staff, including Holmefred-Sarafi’s two brothers.

Their success was written up in Forbes magazine’s 30 Under 30.

The pianist never expected to turn entrepreneur, but recalls that in his first year, Prof Tan said to students that by the end of their two years in the conservatory, they might not end up where they expected.

“After he didn’t mean it so a negative way. It’s an act of the skills I have in – like the ability to communicate,” says Holmefred-Sarafi. “Yong Siew Toh really taught me to look at things differently.”

Baroque as a gateway to classical music

For violinist Alan Choo (below), his future lies in taking listeners back to the musical past, namely the baroque period. Some of the most dramatic and familiar works from the classical repertoire, including Vivaldi’s Four Seasons and Handel’s Messiah, date from that period, from 1660 to the mid-1700s.

“To us now, it seems obvious that music is supposed to inspire emotion, but it was a revolution in art at the time,” says the 28-year-old alumnus of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music.

He has formed the Singaporean musical ensemble, Red Dot Baroque, which performs on period instruments and makes its sell-out debut today at the Empangale Recital Studio.

Choo was also recently discovered by a stereo-American ensemble, Apollo’s Fire director Jeannette Sorrell during a masterclass at Case Western Reserve University, where he is doing his doctor of musical arts degree.

It is a major achievement for a young musician to land a spot with Apollo’s Fire, which has had eight best-selling CD’s on the classical Billboard music charts. The ensemble has sold out concerts at the BBC Proms in London, as well as other major festivals and venues in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

Choo, who is single, began learning the violin at age six and continued his lessons while at Nan Hua Primary School and Ewa Chong Institution. His parents, a doctor and a housewife, were supportive of his musical studies and he did his bachelor of music degree at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory in Singapore.

He fell in love with the baroque violin – he plays a Spanish instrument from the 1660s – while at the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, which gives degrees in violin performance and early music from Peabody.

Members of Choo’s Red Dot Baroque include composer Chen Zhangyi on the viola, violinist Gabriel Lee of multi-genre band Lowboy, and cellist Leslie Tan of the T’ang Quartet.

Choo says there is space for its musical ensemble in Singapore, despite the number of established and up-and-coming groups.

“Even though the scene may seem to be saturated, I think baroque music is a really good gateway for people to get into classical music,” says the violinist.

“The harmonic structure is not as dense or sophisticated. The pieces react directly into the heart.”

Akhita Nanda

Creating music to surprise the audience

Composer Diana Soh (below) likes to subvert myths, including these about the concert hall.

Last week, she buried speakers in the gardens of the 13th-century Rossenmont Abbey in France for wandering a cappella singers in the world premiere of her work, The Nature Of Things.

“People think they’re going for a walk in the garden for a choir performance, but it’s more than that,” says the 34-year-old of other outdoor sonic soundscapes, which revokes the traditional concert hall format.

In March, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra premiered her work for soprano baritone and orchestra, A Is For Aiah, featuring French singer Elise Chauvin.

Also this year, she premiered a string quartet work commissioned for the Festival Air-en-Powrence in France last month; had solo works for piano played in concert venues in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Austria (Viennese); and worked on BlackHedz, which has its world premiere on Februed in Essen, Germany.

Soh is the only child of a drama instructor and a secretary. She sang in choral ensembles in Anglican High School and Temasek Junior College before obtaining her bachelor’s degree in music at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music.

She also trained at the University of Buffalo, New York, and with the Institut de Recherche et Coordinazione Acoustique Musique. She worked in Paris.

She received the National Arts Council’s Young Artist Award in 2015. Her works have been broadcasted on Deutschlandfunk (Cologne Radio), ORF (Austrian TV/Radio) Danish Broadcasting Corporation, BBC Radio 3 and France Musique.

She is married to French composer David Hadley and their three-year-old daughter Emma’s acquisition of language inspired Soh’s A Is For Aiah.

BlackHedz, which will be premiered by new music group E-Mex Ensemble, comes from Soh’s interest in collaborating with other artists – the work is written for dance, voice and musical instruments. It is also inspired by the poem Thirteen Ways Of Looking At A Blackbird, by Wallace Stevens. Texts, especially historical or mythic works, often lead her to write music.

The Nature Of Things is based on the first-century BC poem by Roman writer Lucan, meant to offer a scientific explanation of the world and Olympian humanity’s fear of the gods.

For 2013 work, Armortum Of Myths And Trees, started with the legend of Apollo and Daphne. The sun god pursues the nymph, who asks to be turned into a tree rather than succumb to his rape.

People see that story wrongly as romantic,” she says.

Armortum puts the power back in the hands of the female, literally, as the squire’s hand movements control the electronic treatment of music from the accompanying harp.

“There’s a necessity to write a different style of music in a certain way to say something,” the composer says.

Akhita Nanda

Compositions inspired by Ialsa and kopittians

Food and family relationships inspire composer Chen Zhangyi’s music, which has been performed by internationally acclaimed orchestras such as the London Philharmonic, Tokyo Philharmonic and Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

In October, local chamber opera group L’Arena Productions will perform the 24-year-old’s Singapore Trilogy, three bite-sized operas with a Singapore theme, directed by Neo Sanmoei and with libretto by violinist and music writer Jac Lim.

Labsa Cantata (2013) is a hommage to Bub’s Coffee Cantata, but instead of a father and a daughter squabbling over coffee, a bride and a groom quarrel over whether to serve iksa at their wedding. Window Shopping (2016) takes on a famous Singaporean pastime.

“I was always thinking about how Singaporeans could relate to this music,” explains Chen (above).

The third work, his newest, is Kapi For One, about a daughter thinking of her father while he is kepiton (coffee shop). It includes clods struck by the composer’s 16-month-old daughter Clara, as she experimented on the piano.

“She has a natural feel for music,” says Chen, who is married to fellow composer Wyune Fang.

His father has an electronics servicing business and his mother was a housewife. He studied the violin while at Geylang Primary School, Anglican High School and Temasek Junior College.

He had hoped to study violin at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, but was taken in for composition instead.

Now, he is glad things worked out the way they did. In 2011, his work for orchestra and choirs, Arilade’s Love, was recorded by The London Philharmonic and Eric Whitacre Singers at Abbey Road Studios, which was where The Beatles recorded their albums. Arilade’s Love was aired on BBC Radio 3 and dubbed “music for a chorale voice of the future”.

That year, Chen also conducted the Tokyo Philharmonic in the Japan premiere of his Singapore-inspired melody, Rain Tree. In 2014, he received the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council.

Rain Tree was performed by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) in 2015 and the SSO took another work, An Ethereal Symphony, on its 2016 tour of Europe. Acclaimed violinist Kam Ning played Chen’s Vanda Concerto for the SSO’s National Day concert earlier this month.

Chen is an assistant professor at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, where he teaches atonal composition. He leads the new music ensemble, Opera Nova, and plays the viola in period ensemble Red Dot Baroque, set up by fellow alumni Alan Choo.

Chen credits the conservatory for creating an environment where musicians like him can find their feet.

“The music school is like a dream come true. It provides the environment where I could learn different things, from composing and performing to conducting and research. It’s quite special. It’s a great honour to be one of the first alumni.”

Akhita Nanda

BOOKING / SINGAPORE TRIVIUM
WHERE: The Blue Room & The Living Room, The Arts House
1 Old Parliament Lane
WHEN: Oct 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 20, 21
ADMISSION: $40 (standard) and $35 (student) from singaporetrivium.com.
includes refreshments

PHOTOS: DANIEL CAMPBELL, JULIANA TSAY, KAREN PERCIVAL