

YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2017

KAHCHUN WONG



Beyond Singapore, Kahchun has been a guest conductor of many internationally renowned orchestras...



Conducting the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra, 2014

Photo courtesy of Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra



Winning 1st Prize at George Enescu Philharmonic Conducting Competition, 2013

Photo courtesy of Roza Zah

Kahchun Wong (b. 1986) is an orchestral conductor and composer. Kahchun obtained his Masters of Music in Conducting from Hans-Eisler Musikhochschule, Germany, and his Bachelor of Music (Composition) from Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music.

Kahchun has been featured multiple times by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO). He was also Conducting Assistant of the SCO from 2011 to 2012. As the Founder and Artistic Director of the Asian Contemporary Ensemble, Kahchun has led his group in performing the works of Singaporean composers such as Phoon Yew Tien, Bernard Tan, John Sharpley and Diana Soh.

Beyond Singapore, Kahchun has been a guest conductor of many internationally renowned orchestras, including the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra, Bamberg Symphony, Czech Philharmonic, German National Opera, China Philharmonic Orchestra, Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, Kanagawa Philharmonic Orchestra, Konzerthausorchester Berlin, St. Petersburg Symphony Orchestra, Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, and Kansai Philharmonic Orchestra. Kahchun's compositions were published by Tierolff Muziekcentrale (the Netherlands) between 2006 - 2012, and performed worldwide by various groups. He was recently commissioned by the Ministry of Education to compose a set piece for the 2017 Singapore Youth Festival (Secondary School Category).

A strong advocate of music education, Kahchun is the co-founder of Project Infinitude, a grassroots initiative that is committed to guiding and encouraging children from diverse backgrounds in their first musical steps. As he feels strongly about giving back to the community, in gratitude for what he himself had received when he was a budding musician, the pilot programme took place in Singapore at the Enabling Village with the support of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music and Superhero Me. He and his co-founder Marina Mahler (granddaughter of the composer Gustav Mahler) look to expand the project in a sustainable and thoughtful way to global communities in the future.

Kahchun attained international recognition through his outstanding achievements at the 5th Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition (Winner) in 2016, the 4th International Jeunesses Musicales Bucharest Conducting Competition (Winner) in 2013, International Lovro von Maticac Conducting Competition (2nd Prize) in 2011, and the 3rd Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition (Winner, Singaporean Composer Award) in 2015.

Kahchun was appointed as a Dudamel Conducting Fellow at the Los Angeles Philharmonic for the 2016/2017 season. Most recently, he was elected as Chief Conductor of the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra beginning from the 2018/2019 season. ■



A CONVERSATION WITH KAHCHUN WONG

“My role is to be the guardian of unity, to inspire orchestral musicians to bring the written notes of the composer to life.”



With mentor Kurt Masur in his Leipzig Home, 2013
Photo courtesy of Kahchun Wong

Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts. Who or what were your key influences?

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I joined the school brass band in Primary 1 and music has been a part of my life since then. Playing in the band was great fun. My friends and I would play soccer with 20-cent ice cream cups during the break, and walk home together singing our parts. I am grateful to the band scene in Singapore for nurturing generations of musicians. Time and again, I have met instructors who teach us not only how to play our instruments well, but also build our character and principles.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in your artistic journey, and how did you overcome them?

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Being an Asian performing Tchaikovsky in Russia or Beethoven in Germany can be quite daunting. Imagine a Frenchman conducting Chinese New Year music with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. How do I approach the orchestra, many of whom are twice my age? I have no ready solution for this question. My way is simply to work and learn ten times harder than anyone.



Conducting the Singapore Lyric Opera at Singapore Botanic Gardens, 2015

Photo courtesy of Bernie Ng



Project Infitude Showcase, 2017

Photo courtesy of Mahler Foundation

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

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I always look forward to the moment when musicians and audience experience a truly emotional and spiritual catharsis through the music which is being performed and heard. This doesn't happen every time, but when it does, there is resonance in the hall, through the hearts of everyone present.

What do you want the audience to experience through your work?

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As a conductor, I am the only member of the orchestra that does not make a sound. My role is to be the guardian of unity, to inspire orchestral musicians to bring the written notes of the composer to life. I would like the audience to experience the beauty and wisdom of the music they hear.

Please share what a typical day/year in your life as a conductor is like

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Conductors rarely retire; a significant number passed away on the podium! I hope that I will still be conducting when I am 80; and this makes me very cautious about my workload – conducting is a marathon, not a sprint. In my upcoming season, 26 weeks have been allocated for performances around the world. It's an incredibly exhausting schedule: I arrive in a foreign city on Monday, usually jet-lagged, and the next three or four days would be spent in rehearsals with an orchestra, followed by concerts. The rehearsals last for three to four hours, but after that, I am usually in my room studying for the next day until midnight. One can never be prepared enough. The other 26 weeks of the year are reserved for my training and recreation. I wear my learning hat and fly to different cities to attend rehearsals and concerts by my mentors. I am rather introverted, and I need time and space by myself, away from technology and other people. Being an occasional gardener in my Japanese home helps me to recharge.

What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?

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There are no short cuts in the life of an artist. For every success that comes your way, be prepared for a hundred rejections. Only pursue this path if you truly live and breathe music. This is not so much a job as it is a calling. It's going to be an incredibly tough journey ahead, but I wake up every day, totally loving what I do! ■

**“This is not so much a job
as it is a calling.”**





WORDS OF APPRECIATION

The National Arts Council has played an integral role in supporting my musical training and professional development over the past 10 years, culminating in the Young Artist Award today. I am grateful to have received this mandate of trust and faith, and will continue to give my very best each day.

Throughout my musical journey, I have met so many people who lovingly shared with me everything on music and life. My school band teachers, Mdm Yue Ai Chuan, Miss Chan Peck Suan and Mr. Takehiro Oura walked me through my first steps. My MEP teachers, Mrs Mary Seah and Mdm Tan Ee-Sin, built my academic foundation. My curiosity in composition was nurtured patiently by Mr. Phoon Yew Tien. At the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, Prof. Bernard Lanskey and Prof. Ho Chee Kong were always there for me whenever I needed their advice. The conservatory nominated me as one of three international participants for the conducting masterclass of Esa-Pekka Salonen, with whom I am still closely in touch with.

At the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Maestro Tsung Yeh gave me my first professional conducting opportunity, and Terence Ho inspired me with his great insight towards arts administration.

In 2012, I began my conducting studies in Berlin where I benefited from the rich experience of my professors Christian Ehwald and Hans-Dieter Baum. Internationally renowned musicians such as Kurt Masur, Bernard Haitink and Heinz Holliger gave me their attention, while back home in Singapore, I always had the mentorship of fatherly figures such as Goh Yew Lin and Patrick Lee.

After winning the Mahler Competition, I have been living my dream life everyday. I am excited as a Singapore citizen performing with the very best orchestras on the international stage. I am indebted to all who have supported me on this journey.





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