

YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2019

# EMILY KOH

**E**mily Koh (b. 1986) is a composer of contemporary classical music. Her music is characterised by inventive explorations of the smallest details of sound.

Emily learnt the piano as a child, and took a keener interest in music after picking up the double bass in the Dunman High School Chinese Orchestra. She studied music formally at the Music Elective Programme (MEP) at Temasek Junior College (TJC), where she wrote her first compositions.

Since then, composing and performing have been equal outlets in Emily's musical interest. In 2009, she graduated with honours and as class valedictorian from the Yong Siew Toh (YST) Conservatory of Music's Bachelor of Music programme in Composition, and won a full scholarship at the Peabody Institute of the John Hopkins University where she attained a Master of Music in Music Composition and a Master of Music in Music Theory Pedagogy, Baltimore in Maryland, USA (2011). She also received a Ph.D. in Music Composition and Theory from Brandeis University, Waltham in Massachusetts, USA (2017).

She has received multiple awards, including the Asian Composers League Yoshiro Irino Memorial Prize (Hong Kong, 2013), and the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers Foundation Morton Gould Young Composer Award (USA, 2012). She has also been commissioned by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (2015) and the Barlow Endowment General Commission (USA, 2012); and received the Paul Abisheganaden Grant for Artistic Excellence (2012). She has been a fellow at the Copland House (USA, 2019) and The MacDowell Colony (USA, 2018).

Emily believes in taking a holistic approach in educating musicians and artists. Although she is based in Atlanta in Georgia, USA, she gives workshops at various schools every time she is back in Singapore. She encourages all musicians to participate in every form of music-making actively, ranging from composing to performing and conducting. She teaches in the Young Artist Program at the Asia Pacific Saxophone Academy in Bangkok, Thailand. The programme pushes talented young performers outside of the standard performance box by rethinking performance space, practice, gesture, movement and engagement.

Today, Emily is Assistant Professor of Composition at the University of Georgia (UGA) in Athens in Georgia, USA, and performs as a double bassist in the Atlanta contemporary music scene. Outside of teaching, she leads outreach performances and discussions with various communities in Atlanta, including children, immigrants, the elderly, and the disabled.



Playing at Symphony Hall in the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Onstage at Symphony Programme, Boston, USA, 2015.  
*Photo by Aram Boghosian, courtesy of Boston Symphony Orchestra*





## A CONVERSATION WITH EMILY KOH

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

When I was in Secondary 1 at Dunman High School and attended a co-curricular activities (CCA) fair there, I watched a short performance by the Chinese Orchestra's winds and percussion ensemble.

I was so mesmerised, I decided to join the Chinese Orchestra, even though I did not know anything about orchestras, or play any Chinese instruments. That was the first time I felt overwhelmed by the power of music, and it was such an ethereal experience.

The music and lives of both Freddie Mercury and Claude Vivier are heavy influences on my growth. My teachers, Ms Winnie Chew and Dr Ho Chee Kong, as well as conductors I've played under, Mr Lim Yau and Mr Quek Ling Kiong, have also had a profound influence on my musical outlook early on.

**“I want my audience to be stimulated, intellectually and emotionally, and be encouraged to find their own meaning in my work.”**



Leading the double bass section of the New England Philharmonic, Boston, USA, 2017.

*Photo by Jeff Harman, courtesy of Emily Koh*



Taking bows after the premiere of 'aphonia' by Sonic Apricity, at the Alba International Music Festival, Alba, Italy, 2019.

*Photo by Badie Khaleghian, courtesy of Emily Koh*

*What were some of the biggest challenges you faced when creating new works? What motivated you to continue in spite of these challenges?*

My life is so different from other people's lives that it is difficult to communicate with my family and friends about what I'm thinking, doing, and working toward. Finding people to bounce ideas off and have meaningful discourse with has been difficult. However, I knew I had to be a musician; I could not imagine a future where music was not at the core of my existence. It was a swim-or-sink situation, and I had to keep swimming until I found my people with which to form a community to float with.

*What is the most rewarding aspect to experience through your works?*

The most rewarding experience is for art to create and nurture a community. As a composer, I cannot create music alone. My compositions remain as notes on a page until performers rehearse and perform them, creating music. I enjoy collaborating with performers and other creative artists, and greatly value their added influence and input in any project. It really takes a village to see a project from inception to performance!

*What do you want the audience to experience through your works?*

I want my audience to be stimulated, intellectually and emotionally, and be encouraged to find their own meaning in my work. Many of my titles and programme notes are intentionally vague or nonsensical so that the work can be open to interpretation. There is so much black and white in our world, but art is just various shades of grey. There is not one singular message or way to experience art, and that is the beauty of it!

*What are your vision and hopes for Singapore's music scene?*

I hope to see more diversity in musical offerings. We need intellectually-stimulating and difficult-to-explain music as much as we have popular and easily-consumed ones. In having a spectrum of musical genres, we have more inlets into the arts, and more opportunities to share and educate so that we move forward as an artistic community.

“I also hope to see more collaborative projects between different artistic fields and musical genres. We should embrace and amplify our ‘rojak-ness’ to nourish a cultural scene that speaks to us Singaporeans.”



Presenting on 'Jia[k]', commissioned by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, at the Intercultural Transfers in Music Symposium, 2014.

*Photo courtesy of Dr Ruth Rodrigues*

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

Do everything! Be a composer, an instrumentalist, a singer, a conductor, a stage manager, an orchestra librarian, your own business manager! Being a musician is not one job but many jobs, and you have to be good at juggling them all and switching between them quickly and seamlessly.

It is not enough to like, or even love music, to be a musician. Making a career and living as a musician is insurmountably difficult, and even the best of us succumb to the demands of life. If you can imagine being happy doing something else to earn a living, do that instead, and continue in your music-making. Music must be the first thing you think of when you wake, the last thing you think of when you rest, occupy all aspects of your being, and is the one thing that you cannot live without, before one should consider this path. Even then, the road ahead is a never-ending uphill climb that never peaks, but it is all worth it!

*How does receiving the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.*

I am elated and very honoured to receive the Young Artist Award. The award is an affirmation of my work, and encourages me to pursue bigger goals. I want to be bolder in taking risks, and in experimenting and exploring new sonic worlds. I will also continue to be a firm advocate for new music and composers from Singapore overseas, as well as share my experiences and compositional adventures back home in Singapore.



## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I would like to thank Singapore, my home, for being the inspiration of many of my works, and the National Arts Council for their acknowledgement and support.

To all the ensembles I have performed with growing up – Dunman High School Chinese Orchestra, Temasek Junior College (TJC) Strings, Singapore National Youth Orchestra, The Philharmonic Orchestra, City Chinese Orchestra, and more – thank you for drawing me into your fascinating musical world. That was the first step!

I would also like to express my gratitude to Ms Winnie Chew, who took me into TJC’s Music Elective Programme (MEP) when nobody else believed in me, and Dr Ho Chee Kong, for guiding me through this world of composition since my undergraduate years.

To my friends, colleagues, teachers and students at MEP@TJC, YST, Peabody, Brandeis, and UGA, thank you for being reliable sounding boards for my crazy ideas. As a composer, my music is not music until it is performed. To all the musicians, ensembles, individuals and organisations all over the world who have commissioned, performed and championed my art, you have my most heartfelt thanks and appreciation.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the Koh, Tan and Rogers families, for supporting me and believing in what I do, even if you don’t fully understand what that is. That blind belief is love.