



YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2023

JULIAN WONG



Conducting the Metropolitan Festival Orchestra at 'KoFlow-MFO RELOAD: A Turntable-Orchestra Programme' at Esplanade Concert Hall, 2018.

Photo courtesy of Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay

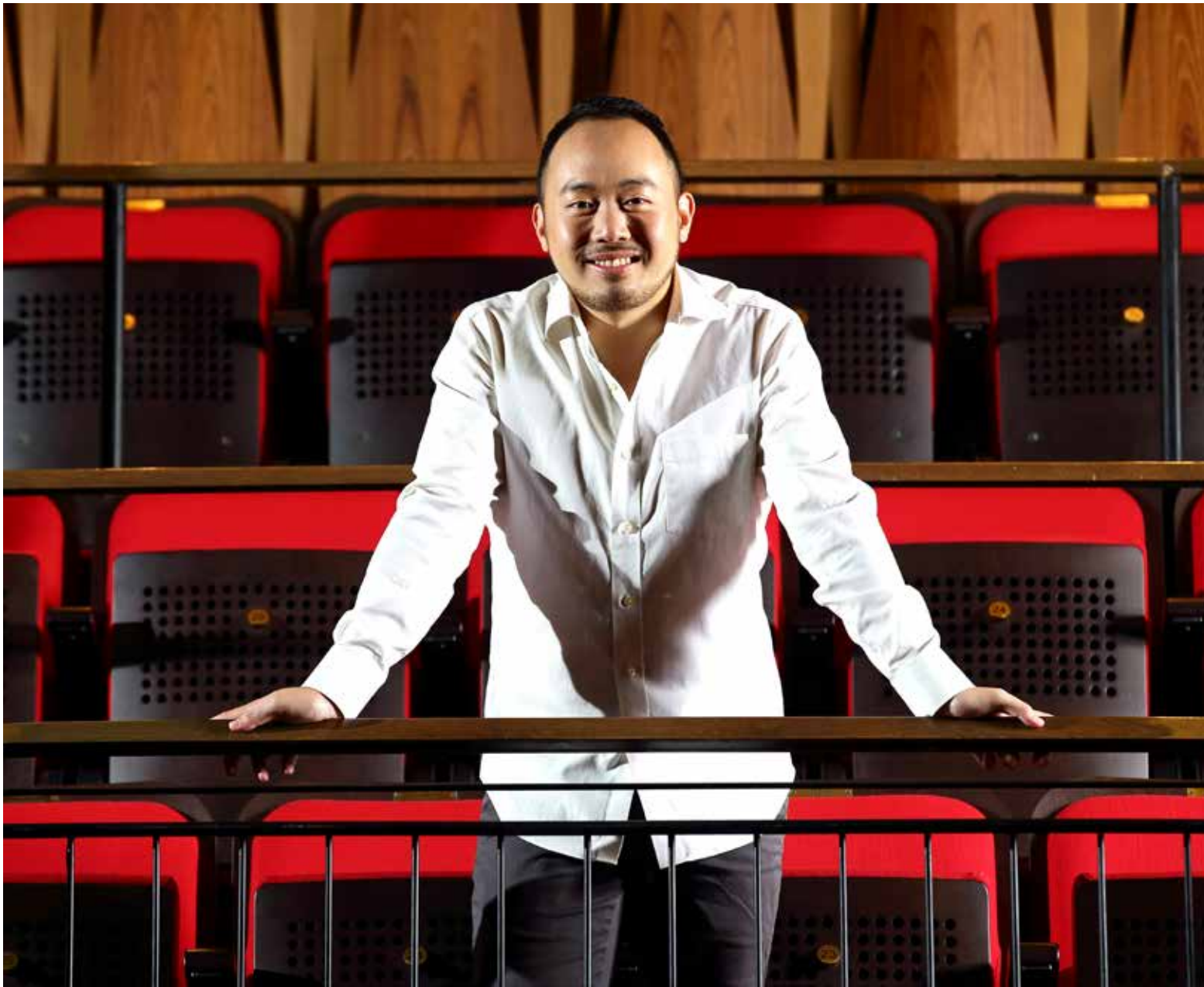
JULIAN WONG (b. 1988) is a composer, arranger, music director, educator and performer. He has composed for Wild Rice: 'An Inspector Calls' (2023); 'Pinocchio' (2022); 'Tartuffe: The Imposter' (2022); 'The Amazing Celestial Race' (2021); 'Peter Pan in Serangoon Gardens' (2019); and 'The Emperor's New Clothes' (2015). His other selected composing credits are Spare Room Productions' 'Tropicana' (2017); Esplanade's 'The Feelings Farm' (2021); The Theatre Practice's 'The wee Question Mark' trilogy (2016-2019); as well as for the firework displays of the 'Marina Bay Singapore Countdown' (2014-2016). His works for children have been performed abroad, including Kuo Pao Kun's 'Day I Met the Prince' (ACT Shanghai International Theatre Festival, 2016); 'Under the Baobab Tree' (Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 2011); and 'Magic Porridge Pot' (Petaling Jaya Live Arts, 2014).

As music director, he has helmed overseas assignments such as 'Liao Zhai Rocks!' (Shanghai International Musical Festival, 2019); 'Spotlight Singapore' (Mexico City, 2015); Mark Chan's 'Flight of the Jade Bird' (Hong Kong New Vision Arts Festival, 2012); and home-grown projects such as Hossan Leong's 'Hossan-AH! 50!: Love You LEONG Time!' (Double Confirm Productions, 2019); Pam Oei's 'Faghag' (Wild Rice, 2018); 'Lao Jiu: The Musical' (The Theatre Practice's Kuo Pao Kun Festival, 2012), Goh Lay Kuan's 'Returning' (Singapore International Arts Festival, 2015); and 'If There're Seasons' (The Theatre Practice, 2014).

Additionally, Julian has conducted and arranged for Joyful Strings, Ministry of Bellz, Orchestra of the Music Makers, Metropolitan Festival Orchestra, Rave Harps, Bossa Celli, re:mix and many more.

Throughout his career, Julian believes in the importance of championing Singapore stories. At every opportunity, he chooses to work on original local projects that can stand proud on the world stage. His pride in Singapore's musical heritage is evident in Wild Rice's 'Don't Call Him Mr. Mari Kita' (2022), The Theatre Practice's 'The Nursery Rhymes Project' (2017 onwards); and NAC-Esplanade's 'KoFlow-MFO: A Turntable-Orchestra Programme' (2017-2018).

A recipient of the NAC Arts Scholarship in 2012, Julian graduated from Berklee College of Music in 2013 with a Bachelor of Music, majoring in Professional Music and minoring in Conducting. At Berklee, he also received the Professional Music Excellence Award and the Alex Ulanowski Award.



A CONVERSATION WITH JULIAN WONG

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

My violin teacher Sylvia Khoo got me to play percussion at her annual concerts until I was big enough to hold up a violin. She filled my childhood with her joyful spirit and fierce discipline in music-making. When I was 10, I performed in 'Chang & Eng'. There, I met the late Iskandar Ismail, who changed my life. Till this day, I remember getting goosebumps when I sat next to him as he conducted his beautiful score.

Please share what a typical day in your life as a musician and theatre practitioner is like.

There is no typical day. It depends on the production(s) I am working on. When I started working professionally in 2007, I acted in school



Masterclass at School of the Arts, 2023.
Photo courtesy of Wild Rice

assembly shows in the morning, played for rehearsals in the afternoon, accompanied productions in the evening, and practised, wrote or recorded at night. As I gain recognition as an arranger and a music director, I have become more selective with my work because there are many tight deadlines in a theatre production. Whatever is rehearsed today must be ready tomorrow, fully orchestrated.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in your artistic journey and what motivated you to continue in spite of these challenges?

When I started out, I felt that our industry was unkind and many of its players condescending. My career began as a mistake, and I often found my personality incompatible with the industry. I loved my work in music and theatre, but I disliked the business of it. I would have given up if not for the guidance and support of my mentors Iskandar Ismail and Belinda Foo during those early, difficult years. I soldiered on because they believed in me, and they led by their shining example: they were always respectful and kind to their collaborators.

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

I always think of that electrifying moment I witnessed as Iskandar conducted the orchestra at 'Chang & Eng' – it took me out of myself, inspiring and opening me up to sounds, ideas and worlds I never knew existed. It affected me in a most visceral way. I try to recreate that sense of wonder and possibility for others, and to serve them through my practice.

What advice would you give the younger generation who would like to pursue a career in the arts?

Don't do it unless you absolutely cannot do anything else. A career in the arts will take all the dignity, diligence, discipline, grace and resilience you can summon – and then more. Pursuing a career in the arts when you are young can make "adulting" difficult. But with a little luck and a lot of perseverance, it could turn out to be a rewarding career.

What are your hopes and vision for Singapore's performing arts scene?

I hope we can be kinder to the next generation of artists, and start to recognise that we do not always have to look beyond our shores for great art, music and culture. We must trust that we have the capacity, the talent and the responsibility to tell our own stories, and support local artists in reaching their fullest potential.

How does receiving the Young Artist Award change things for you?

I don't think receiving the Young Artist Award changes things for me. I am grateful for the honour, but I have never felt comfortable with awards. Everyone is important, and nobody should be placed on a



With the late MS Maniam at the recording of the Marina Bay Singapore Countdown fireworks display soundtrack, 2015.

Photo courtesy of Pavane Recording Studio

pedestal. Iskandar instilled in me three rules since I was 10 years old: work hard, stay humble and don't be late. It astounds me to this day that his rules have nothing to do with talent or music, but everything to do with respect: for your gifts, your work, and the people around you. I will continue to uphold his values and, hopefully, pass them on.

Tell us more about how you would like to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

I will continue to work with companies and practitioners who are at the forefront of investing wholeheartedly in local artists and local works. When I was 18, I asked Iskandar, "Could you teach me how to be a great musician like you?" He replied, "Be a better person first." Be a better person first. I never forgot that. Through my work as an educator, I will pass on the knowledge and values that I have gained from my own teachers.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

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My artistic collaborators: I depend on their kindness and discretion, and I am lucky to ride the wave of their talent.

The production, technical, stage management, administrative and marketing staff – they are the true artists of our profession.

My teachers, especially Ms Sylvia Khoo, Ms Belinda Foo and Mr Iskandar Ismail. Their voices ring in my head, animate my conscience and compel me to pay it forward.

My family: my sister Crystal Wong, my godmother Nancy Lum, my late grandmother, and my cousins, aunties and uncles, especially Michael Wong.

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