TUNE SMITHS

It’s hard to make a living writing classical music in Singapore, but a small group of composers here scores in terms of passion

YOU might not know it, but two music compositions in the recent Singapore Arts Festival caused a small ripple of excitement in the classical music community here. Two works commissioned by festival director Goh Ching Lee — Shades Of Oil Lamps by Ho Chee Kong and Cherish by Tan Chan Boon — were premiered by the London Shadows Orchestra and the Singapore Festival Orchestra respectively.

Tan, who is head of composition at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, says: “It was an honour to have my work premiered by a world-class orchestra.”

The finale of the last work his work was performed at the Singapore Arts Festival was nine years ago when his work, Grand Caprice, was performed by viola player, Jensan Lam.

The performances at the festival have done a spot-light on the small but thriving group of 20 to 30 classical composers in Singapore.

Concertgoers can expect to hear local works played on a fairly regular basis. At least one Singapore work is performed every two to three months, alongside the works of the masters or international contemporary composers.

Singapore composers range from pioneers Leong Yoon Pin, 76, and Phoon Yew Tian, 55, to Dr Ho, 44, and Tan, 42, who are fairly well-known. Heating up the scene are newer composers such as Zachariah Goh Toh Chai, 38, and Joyce Koh, 40.

Some of the more famous tunes that Singaporeans have written include Leong’s Dayang Sumpah, Symphonic Suite by the late Tsao Chieh and the overture Move On Singapore by Phoon.

Most of the composers have degrees in composing, mostly from European universities or music institutions. As compositions are few and far between, composers here must make do with what they have.

Yet, the scene is growing. The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, for instance, produces two composition students a year, and each year, new faces come onto the scene.

Professor Bernard Tan, 65, a physics lecturer at the National University of Singapore who has composed more than 60 pieces, says: “We of the older generation were once concerned that there wouldn’t be composers after us. However, the next generation of composers has emerged strongly.”

The future of composing in Singapore lies in people like Emily Koh, 22, who is in her final year of composition studies at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music.

Koh, who also plays the double bass, says: “I’ve heard it’s not easy, but I want to give it a go. Composing lets me express myself, rather than being a musician who plays someone else’s music.”

While the composers do get their works performed, some say more can be done to put Singapore music in the front and centre.

BACH IN BISHAN: Composer Tan Chan Boon, in his four-room HDB apartment in Bishan, has written 829 pieces of music to date, including four symphonies.

Names: Dr Zachariah Goh Toh Chai, 38 (above) Composer, Victoria Junior College Choir in 1996 and has travelled the world in numerous performances.

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The piece, written as a tribute to the Singaporean composer, was first performed by the Victoria Junior College Choir in 1996 and has travelled the world in numerous performances since.

Dr Goh, who received the Young Artist award in 2003 for music, is one of Singapore’s leading young composers.

He says he was so excited when the Victoria Choral conductor, Nelson Kwei, who also conducts my church choir, asked me to compose a song.

Relatives chipped in for the second and third years and obtained a scholarship for the last four years. Since coming back in 1991, he has had his works performed in festivals here and abroad. These include Retromusics II last year, the first-ever full-length concert in Singapore to feature only string quartets by one local composer. The most recent premiere was Cherish, an eight-minute orchestral work for the Singapore Festival Orchestra’s concert at the recent Singapore Art Festival.

The nature lover都说s: “Whenever I am close to nature, there is a feeling that grows particularly strong when I reach a mountain peak, a feeling that is akin to what I would feel upon the completion of a movement in a symphony.

I feel a great sense of satisfaction that my desire to compile the third and fourth symphonies by the time I am 40 has been fulfilled.”

A baritone and choir conductor, Dr Goh also plays the piano, saxophone, trumpet and recorder.

“When I was eight years old, I made up my mind to be a composer. And since then, I’ve been working steadily towards my goal. I cannot imagine doing anything else.”

After obtaining his diploma in music from the Nanyang Academy Of Fine Arts in 1989, he got a scholarship to work on his master of piano at the University of Kansas in the United States. He was awarded the prestigious Anthony Hsu Prize for Outstanding Student Composer twice.

Dr Chng Toh Liang, a classical music reviewer for Life!, says: “Toh Chai’s music is very contemporary and accessible. His classical pieces dub-

Touch of jazz

HE HAS written 829 pieces of music to date, including four symphonies. “I’m probably famous for the sheer volume of my works,” the bachelor says with a chuckle.

“I write for myself rather than wait for commissions, which are highly irregular. Sometimes I can get a few a year, sometimes none.”

The bachelor says that one day when he was 12, he just sat down and started to write something, and hasn’t stopped since.

“I can’t imagine doing anything else. I was very much into the violin then, and my interest grew when I was writing music on a daily basis.”

“I had no music background, no family background in music at all. But my parents had no objections to my pursuing music.”

At age 20, he enrolled as a composition major at the École Normale de Musique de Paris.

He says: “I was so excited about school that I by thrust to Paris without knowing a single word of French, or sorting out the accommodation.

“We are not that well off. My mother, who was a cook, invested all her savings into financing my first year.”

Day Job: Gives private music lessons in the viola, violin and piano

Prolific composer

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