

Composer Chinary Ung Spurs on Local Musicians

In 1964 Cambodia was on the cusp of a bitter civil war and its neighbors embroiled in international conflict.

Then, Chinary Ung was a 22-year-old fledgling clarinet player — unknown and un-acclaimed.

Nine years before the country was engulfed in despair at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, Ung embarked on a journey to the United States that would forever change the course of his life.

In 1974, he earned a Doctor of Musical Arts from Columbia University, but, with his country falling the next year to Khmer Rouge, the contemporary composer entered an almost 10-year, self-imposed exile from musical composition, turning his efforts to aiding his countrymen.

“In the 1970s when the Khmer Rouge took over and began targeting intellectuals and artists, we Cambodians understood the real danger of losing our cultural and artistic identity,” Ung said in a video posted on Youtube.

“At the time I was still in the USA but I wanted to do what I could to help my homeland. So for nearly 10 years I stopped composing and started working with refugees arriving to the United States, helping them to adjust to their new country.”

Now, at age 74, the Takeo-born composer and first American recipient of the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for musical composition, has returned to his country of origin as an acclaimed and renowned artist to inspire a new generation of homegrown musical talent.

In collaboration with Cambodian Living Arts, a non-profit focused on promoting arts awareness, Ung has launched the very first Nirmita Composers Workshop — a two-week intensive program aimed at sparking creativity and improving the technical abilities of budding composers and traditional artists from Cambodia and the greater Mekong region.

“While Asia has benefited a great deal from the West in the field of composition, one thing is missing. Asia doesn't have a voice yet,” Ung says.

“Among composers, just ask yourself: ‘How many composers do we [Cambodia] have?’ This is part of a mission to encourage [people] to come forth with new pieces according to their village voices ... a culture can stand on

its own feet.”

From July 17-29, 10 emerging composers and traditional musicians from Cambodia, along with emerging talent from the US, Myanmar and Laos, will gather in Siem Reap under the instruction of an award-winning faculty of artists and composers from the US and eight Asian countries.

Jacob Sudol, the General Manager of the Nirmita Composers Workshop, says the program will allow participants to encounter a wide representation of cultures and a range of perspectives from across the region and around the globe. Fittingly, Sudol notes that a number of the invited mentors, pianists and violinists were once under Ung’s knowledgeable instruction.

One of the participants is Bosba Panh is a 19-year-old student at Boston’s New England Conservatory of Music and a workshop participant. She was once a popular singer in Phnom Penh but left the capital in 2012 to pursue education abroad. She spoke frankly about the program’s potential to influence the country’s next generation of musicians.

“I left Cambodia because there wasn’t enough, I couldn’t fulfill myself here,” she says. “I don’t like telling people that the reason I’m in the US is because there was no way for me to fulfill my dreams [at home]. And I don’t want the young generation to think the only option is to leave the county; it should be possible to make a career as an artist in Cambodia.”

Workshop participants were selected through an application and interview process as well as by recommendation of the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. All regional artists received scholarship funding supported by the Nirmita Composers Institute, and Sudol approximates that there will be an almost 1:1 ratio of mentors to students.

On July 23, the Cambodia Living Arts and Nirmita Composers Institute will present a classical concert of nine original works in Siem Reap, performed by award-winning composers and musicians from Japan, Cambodia, Taiwan, Australia and the US.

For students like Panh, it is a rare opportunity to cultivate and showcase Cambodia’s musical talent.

“A country that is aware of their culture is investing in themselves,” she says.

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