

# **Youngest student in the history of National University of Singapore**

## **14 year old piano prodigy goes from secondary one to 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate**

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music of the National University of Singapore enrolled 14 year old pianist Abigail Sin, making her the youngest undergraduate in the history of NUS.

Dr Thomas Hecht, the head of piano studies at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music observed, "Abigail's pianistic abilities is equivalent to those at the Conservatory, and we have no reason not to enroll her. Her academic result is excellent and she is as matured or even more mature than many adults that I have met. We welcome her to our Conservatory and hopefully, this will help prepare her to shine on the international classical music arena in due course."

Abigail Sin is well known to the Singapore classical music community. From her first solo piano recital at the age of 9, the proclamation in Times magazine when she was 11 as "Asia's Wunderkind" and the HSBC Youth Excellence Award in the same year, when she was awarded \$200,000, assisting her to participating in a series of local and international activities, and her trip to Hamburg to select her personal Steinway grand piano are all duly noted by the public.

Although Abigail has been a well known pianist for sometime, she pointed out that her musical turning point was in 2004 when she started her studies with Dr Hecht.

"Dr Hecht completely changed the way I play the piano as well as the way I listen to the piano. He literally opened my eyes and ears and showed me new and bigger possibilities of what I can do with the piano. You can say that he completely turned my musical world around. Although I had played the piano for many years, I never knew the kind of sound that the piano is capable of making. In the past, my piano playing was not too bad, but after I started learning from Dr Hecht, I understand how to play even better."

Abigail taped each of her lessons with Dr Hecht. "By listening to my first lesson with Dr Hecht, I can clearly see the vast improvement that has been made since then."

After one year of lessons with Dr Hecht, Abigail embarked into international piano competitions last year winning many prizes. In the first half of 2006, she undertook a 7 concert tour of performances in US and Europe. To date, she has been featured as the concerto piano soloist in 11 concerts.

When the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music officially notifies her of the offer of enrolment to the Conservatory in December last year, Abigail was then a secondary one student at the Methodist Girl School. Jumping from secondary one to first year undergraduate, a Herculean and awesome task for most, is not a prospect that intimidates Abigail.

“Since I started lessons at 12 with Dr Hecht, I have been coming to the NUS campus for lessons once or twice weekly. I have come to know many of Dr Hecht’s students in NUS and they have been wonderful. We get to work together and I have been looking forward to the prospect of coming to NUS for lessons daily.”

Wouldn’t the first lesson at NUS at the age of 12 make one feel out of place?

“It is no different from a master class where you have students of different ages but one common interest in piano performance,” said Abigail. “As long as we have a common goal in our studies of piano performance, I can very quickly fit into the group. The same applies to attending classes at NUS”.

When it comes to her first love – Piano – Abigail explained that it could generally be divided into practice and performance. “During practices, I try to explore and appreciate the different tonal colours, whereas in performances, I reckon it to be a story telling session between me and my audience. Both practice and performance gives me tremendous satisfaction, especially when my audience responds to my performance and show that they appreciate my music. The feeling can be very ecstatic.”

Abigail has often been referred to as a “musical prodigy”, but she feels that the label is not appropriate.

“Please do not call me a prodigy. I have seen many young musicians and they are all very good and they are all prodigies. What is more important is what has become of the prodigy afterward.”

Abigail plans to take up French or German language studies in addition to her studies at the Conservatory.

“Learning French or German will help me become more mobile in Europe as well as deepen my understanding of French and German musicians and music history.”

# **We must treasure those that are truly talented**

**Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music**

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music of NUS last year accepted 15 year old violinist Loh Jun Hong for enrolment, this year it enrolled 14 year old pianist Abigail Sin, showing a trend of enrolling increasingly younger undergraduates. Has the issue of the emotion quotient of these young prodigies been considered by NUS?

Dr Gene Aitken, the director of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, explained during the interview "We do not regard their young age as a problem. Generally, we do not accept students that are too young unless the student has exceptional musical talent, good academic results and maturity of thought. It is only when these three criteria are satisfied that we would accept the student. Ultimately, it is our hope that their admission to the conservatory will pave the way for their future success, and not their failure."

Regarding the various young undergraduates, NUS had sought the views of the Principals and teachers of their respective secondary schools, considered their performances at international music competitions, how often they have performed with orchestras etc in deciding if they should be offered enrolment.

Dr Aitken, 69, said "Abigail Sin performed with the Lamont Symphony Orchestra in Denver last year. I happened to be in Denver at the same time. That performance was also on her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. She performed very well. With young talents of her caliber, if she does not join NUS, other universities would enroll her. We must not miss out on such talents."

This year, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music has 48 new students, many of whom come from China, Japan and Korea, amongst them are many 15 to 16 years old.

"We are a new music conservatory," said Dr Aitken, "in order to raise our profile, we send our teachers to foreign countries to conduct master classes, and through these master classes we build up our relationship with foreign teachers and students. We give them the opportunity to hear our teachers perform as well as giving us an opportunity to assess the standard of the students. Further, we encourage our students to participate in various top class international music competitions and festivals so that their performance can become the bill board of the conservatory."

This year marks the 4<sup>th</sup> year of student enrolment for the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. Student population now stands at 181. In the next two years, the Conservatory will enroll 4 students annually for studies in recording art and technique. The student population will grow to more than 200 in the near future.

Dr Aitken explained, "A state of the art recording studio will be ready in one to two years time, when that studio is ready, we will enroll the students. The studies in recording art and technique require that students have a good understanding of music as well as the abilities to master recording equipments and electronic engineering. This will be a 5-year course leading to a bachelor degree.