

Music Makers to play at English fests

The 106-strong Orchestra of the Music Makers will play in Cheltenham and Lichfield

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When a group of high school and university students asked conductor Chan Tze Law to help them start an orchestra, he told them to give up because it would not be child's play.

But since 2008, the Orchestra of the Music Makers have gone from an ensemble with no professional ambitions to receiving glowing reviews in international music magazines such as Gramophone and a landmark invitation to play at two noted summer festivals in south-west England this week.

"They have had to overcome big challenges, but they've done it," says Chan, 48, who leaves for the Cheltenham Music Festival and Lichfield Festival with the 106-strong ensemble on Wednesday.

The associate director of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music has been music director of the orchestra since it began with 80 students who banded together out of a mutual eagerness to keep play-

ing and performing after they graduated from ensembles in school and university.

"They play and perform music for the purest of reasons, because they love it," says Chan, adding that the musicians, not he, choose most of the repertoire.

At the Cheltenham Music Festival, the orchestra will hold an open rehearsal and later a concert on Friday at Cheltenham Town Hall. They will perform works from Debussy, Delius, Ravel and Holst with Singapore-born pianist Melvyn Tan.

On Saturday, the orchestra play pieces such as Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade for a family concert at Lichfield Cathedral, as part of the Lichfield Festival, as children's illustrator James Mayhew creates paintings live on stage.

Organisers confirm that this is the first time a Singapore ensemble have been invited to either festival. In an e-mail, Lichfield festival director Fiona Stuart says: "It will be a special treat for all of us. The group have a reputation for creating an exciting and dynamic sound, and we are looking forward to a wonderful evening of great music."

Cheltenham Music Festival director Meurig Bowen considers the orchestra "top-notch" and has labelled Friday's concert one of the highlights of the festival, calling it his "pick for luxuriant orchestral opulence and collective youthful exuberance".

"One of the things that really appealed to me

about the orchestra was the fact that their *raison d'être* is so different to your 'average' orchestra. At their core is a commitment to engage with the wider community, and not necessarily to make music just for music's sake," he writes in an e-mail.

Indeed, the orchestra often perform at charity events such as Singapore Press Holding's ChildAid later this year. It is estimated that they have helped raise over \$300,000 for various causes including ChildAid and the Children's Cancer Foundation.

Mr Bowen says contact was initially made via HSBC, a major sponsor of both the Cheltenham festival and OMM's activities. Having heard recordings of the orchestra playing Gustav Mahler's symphonies – a live performance of the Resurrection Symphony in 2010 received rave reviews from Gramophone critic Marc Rochester and other critics from Japan and Canada – the deal was sealed.

"I was in no doubt of the quality and commitment," he says.

The average age of the ensemble is only 22 and members include secondary school students at the School of the Arts and new university graduates about to start their first jobs.

The opportunity to play overseas is both thrilling and startling, says cellist Yeo Ying Hao, 22, a first-year undergraduate at Singapore Management University, who serves as the orchestra's president.

"When we got the news, we were excited, but it also dawned on us that we had to raise \$200,000. It's Olympic season and we have over 100 people flying into London," he says.

Costs have been covered by sponsors such as Keppel Corp, the National Arts Council and the Lee Foundation. At the Cheltenham Music Festival, the orchestra have the status of "resident orchestra" and musicians will be fed, housed and transported by the festival organisers.

The ensemble received a \$200,000 HSBC Youth Excellence Award in 2009, a year after making their debut at the bank's 2008 Youth Excellence Gala.

For the first three years, they found practice space at the Singapore Conference Hall and since late last year, have been granted space at the School of the Arts.

"I think we're doing not too badly," says founding member Lee Guan Wei, 24, who began the ensemble in 2008 because he could not bear the thought of no longer playing the violin with his friends.

He is justifiably proud of the group's success, even though he will not be boarding a plane on Wednesday. Having just completed his engineering degree at the National University of Singapore, he is about to start work as a civil servant. "I'm just really happy for the group. Whether or not I go, it's a fantastic event," he says.

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