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Wonder Boy Graduates with Bachelor of Music

By Stephen Ng

It was a day of celebration for mother, Janet Ooi Tong Chin and her husband, Ng Chee Pheng, when their son, Colin Ng Soon Beng, graduated with a Bachelor of Music (Honours) in Contemporary Music from University College Sedaya International (UCSI) here.

His graduation was special as Ng was born with premature fusion of the skull termed craniostenosis, which left the T-junction of his face, comprising the eyes, nose, ears and the mouth, being deformed.

Probably, the first visually-impaired person to have graduated with a music degree from a local institution of higher learning in the country, Ooi was touched when his son went up the stage to receive the testamur from UCSI's Chancellor Tan Sri Dr Abdul Rahman Arshad.

With teary eyes, she reflected over the years of hardwork as a mother to her only child born in 1984. She thought of what it could have become of Ng had nothing been done to help him.

After several years of consultation at local hospitals, nothing could be done to help the deformed baby. On advice from friends, the story began when she frantically wrote to hospitals in Australia - the addresses which she got from the Australian Embassy.

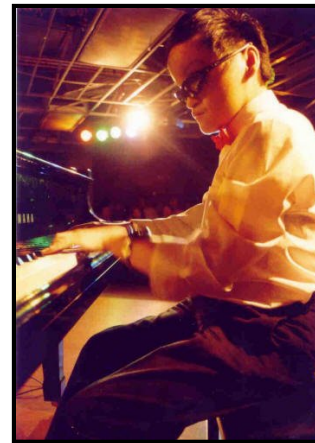
When Australian craniofacial surgeon Dr J. David finally got word about his condition in 1989, Ng was already five. To avoid any possible brain damage, David had recommended reconstruction of the skull - which he said should have been done before Ng turned nine-month-old.

Today, the 22-year-old young musician has both the Malaysian public and his doctors to thank. Both surgeries costing a total RM60,000, the first which was done at the Adelaide Women and Children's Hospital (formerly known as Adelaide Children's Hospital) in 1989, followed by a second surgery at Calvary Hospital in Adelaide, was partly funded by the generous Malaysian public.

"When we finally returned to Malaysia a year later, follow-up medical care was done by a dedicated neurosurgeon Dr Richard Veerapen," said Ooi, who devoted many hours of hardwork to raise the wonder boy to reach his full potential as a musician and a budding recording artiste.

"Not many institutions were prepared to accept Ng since he only completed Grade Four and Five of his music education. He could not make it to Grade 8 like most other music students because no where in the country is music theory taught in Braille," said Ooi.

Ng, added Ooi, was fortunate enough because of his innate ability to play a tune by the ears. At the age of three, his mother was surprised when she heard a musical composition by Klaus Wunderlich from the bedroom where the young Ng had played using a musical calculator.



Colin Ng during his Graduation Recital recently

During his audition in December 2000, Ng had mesmerised all four lecturers at UCSI who were assessing his suitability to do a diploma in music, which he completed successfully in 2003.

His acceptance into the diploma programme did not come easy, as there were no facilities to cater to the needs of a visually impaired student who must read in Braille. At the same time, to deprive a music-talented person of proper guidance on grounds that the university college was meant for sighted students did not seem right to its Head of Music School Elizabeth Lou.

The main concern was how the theory part of music could be imparted to Ng. Neither Ooi nor any of the lecturers could write music Braille. And, Ng could only read Braille. A number of other obstacles had to be overcome.

After a thorough assessment, Lou and the lecturers present suggested that Ng took Contemporary Music programme as they saw this course suited him better than the Classical Music programme.

Ooi said currently Malaysia does not have any schools or organisations equipped to help talented musicians who are visually impaired to pursue their interest in music.

"For Ng to successfully obtain his degree, extra effort had to be put in by everyone that was directly or indirectly involved in guiding Ng," said Ooi, adding: "Ng's success is also the success of those who had assisted him."

The examination was one of the biggest challenges. With no one who could transcribe music notation into Braille, the examiner-in-charge had to dictate the examination questions one at a time to Ng.



A special presentation by Colin during convocation while his parents look on

Ng would answer the questions orally, while the examiner would write it for him. To the surprise of everyone, Ng was able to do well for all the four theory papers of Harmonic Analysis of Modern Music.

Like most teenagers who did not want mother around on-campus, Ng preferred to attend class and manage things independently.

Described as the more helpful of all are Ng's own peers at college who took turns to explain to him what was being taught.

They helped him with all sorts of difficulties and there was no denying, said Ooi, especially his big "brothers" and "sisters" in his Christian Fellowship group, had contributed to Ng's successful completion of the Bachelor's degree in Contemporary Music.

Mother was of course always there in the library transcribing his books and lecture notes, and ensuring that Ng had his reading materials in Braille.

In an endorsement letter from the National Council for the Blind Malaysia (NCBM), its Executive Director Ivan Ho said: "From our record, the other two blind musicians received their formal education from foreign institutions. They are namely Peter Chin who completed his Grade 6 at Trinity College, Australia, and Liew Chee Chau, who did his Diploma from La Salle SIA School of Arts, and his Degree from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore."

Ng is probably the only musician to have graduated from a local private institution of higher learning, but what is his future, his mother asked. "I cannot be with Ng a whole lifetime," she said. "Is the society able to accept people like him, not to make him great but to give him a decent job opportunity?"

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