



Award-winning Singapore musician Abigail Sin is doing a four-year PhD programme in performance practice at London's Royal Academy of Music. ST PHOTO: TIFFANY GOH

Child prodigy grows up

Pianist Abigail Sin is pursuing a doctorate after a teaching stint and starting a concert series



Venessa Lee

When Abigail Sin was five years old, she started learning to play the piano with a neighbour.

The following year, the music teacher said she "wasn't good enough" for the six-year-old, who had outgrown her tutelage, says Sin's mother, housewife Tan Yang Hong.

The preschooler was then sent for lessons at the School of Young Talents at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

Madam Tan, 51, had seen her only daughter displaying some interest in the piano at the age of four, when she took the child to a Yamaha music appreciation class. However, she and her husband, legal counsel Sin Lye Kuen, 52, "didn't recognise her musical talent" until their neighbour's prompting.

Madam Tan says: "We're both non-musicians. I knew only that Abigail was very bright. She was reading, at 18 months, stories such as Spot The Dog. By kindergarten, she was reading Enid Blyton and could do long division, multiplication and fractions."

Sin, now 23 and one of Singapore's most prominent classical musicians, recalls her parents' early influence: "My mum used to take me to Singapore Symphony Orchestra concerts from when I was about six years old. They put classical and pop music on at home."

She has a twin brother Josiah, who is studying accountancy at a private university. Their younger brother David, 20, is studying medicine at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

As a child, Sin was enrolled in art, swimming and ballet classes. Her mother says she "picked out the tunes" in ballet

class, rather than focusing on the dance steps. In her teens, she also played the violin and the cello.

But only the piano stuck. Sin has long been associated in the public eye with precocity, making her debut at age nine with a full-length solo piano recital at Chijmes Hall.

Her piano teacher at the time thought it was a good idea as Sin enjoyed performing, recalls Madam Tan, and she and her husband agreed. The couple organised her first concert, getting her performance recorded on a CD that they distributed to friends, family and well-wishers.

Conductor Wang Ya-Hui first met Sin around that time, when she was a pupil at Methodist Girls' School (MGS).

"She was quite shy and quiet, but from our conversation, I could sense she was very mature and had strong ideas about how she wanted to play a sonata, how she wanted to express her work. Usually, children at that age would play how their teacher taught them," says Wang.

Sin's talent was soon internationally recognised. When she was 10, Time magazine called her a "bona fide prodigy". The accolades, awards and international prizes have been rolling in since.

At 11, she won an HSBC Youth Excellence Award and spent about half of the \$200,000 prize money on a piano by renowned piano-maker Steinway. At about 18, she became the first South-east Asian musician to be named a Young Steinway Artist.

She gathered numerous accolades at piano competitions across Asia, Europe and the United States. At 14, she toured Eastern Europe, playing in places such as Lithuania and Ukraine, where she won an international piano competition.

Making her US debut with the Lamont Symphony Orchestra at the University of Denver on her 13th birthday, she has since played in London's Wigmore Hall and with the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

She also fulfilled her early intellectual promise.

The top PSLE student in MGS, she also

topped her Secondary 1 cohort in the school. She then left to embark on a music degree at NUS' Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at just age 14, becoming its youngest student.

She topped her graduating class at the conservatory and went on to do a master's degree at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London.

"I'm a performer as well as interested in academic research. I've always wanted to do a doctorate, that's the nerdy side of me," says Sin, who is engaged in both interests in her current four-year PhD programme in performance practice at London's Royal Academy of Music.

The pianist, who performs solo and in chamber music groups, is at the academy on the sought-after Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship. Given to outstanding Singaporeans to help them pursue postgraduate studies, the bond-free scholarship, worth \$50,000 annually, is one of several she has won.

Despite these awards, she has, in some ways, taken the road less travelled, rejecting more ostensibly glittering opportunities. Madam Tan says her daughter turned down offers to join the "prestigious" Gifted Education Programme here and, "despite our protests", Britain's storied University of Cambridge.

She also declined an offer to study at New York's Juilliard School, the famed performing arts conservatory whose alumni include cellist Yo-Yo Ma, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and actor Kevin Spacey.

Even the subject of her doctoral studies, little-researched American composer Charles Griffes (1884-1920), seems of a piece with this non-marquee name approach.

As her father puts it: "She is not tempted by fame and glory. She knows her own mind."

Regarding school choices, Dr John Sharpley, a Singapore-based composer, performer and teacher who has known Sin since she was 11, says the pianist is "not really 'brand-conscious'".

Sin says she was able to pursue music

at MGS, where she had supportive friends and teachers. It was the "more comfortable option" at the age of nine, compared with moving elsewhere for the Gifted Education Programme.

She declined the offer from Juilliard she received at age 15, a year after entering Yong Siew Toh, because she wanted to continue working with the teacher and mentor she met at 11, Professor Thomas Hecht, head of piano studies at the conservatory.

"It was an early turning point in my life," she says. "Professor Hecht installed a pianistic operating system for me. He changed the way I looked at music, made it a lot more organised. I started playing with a new level of rigour."

Her parents also felt that at age 15, she was too young to be an undergraduate in New York.

She does not think she has "missed out" in rejecting the offer from Juilliard. "Yong Siew Toh, as a small school, gave me lots of opportunities."

At 16, for instance, in the space of a week at the conservatory, she had worked with renowned musicians Murray Perahia, an American pianist, and Hungarian violinist and conductor Gabor Takacs-Nagy.

She felt "protected" at the school, where she was "always a younger sister in a way".

On an exchange programme with the Peabody Institute in Baltimore in the US at age 15, "the older kids never let me see them drunk", she says. They made it a point to walk her to the dormitory daily after dinner.

For her, the Royal Academy won the coin toss with Cambridge because of the academy's emphasis on both performance and research.

Society can be "cruel" to child prodigies, says Dr Sharpley, who taught Sin as a child.

"How many prodigies never made it? I've known many. They feel they're not interesting when they become teens, that society doesn't want that. As a result, they don't grow," he says.

Sin's groundedness, that he in part attributes to her "loving, close-knit family", helped her grow beyond the prodigy label.

"It's very easy to be caught up in ego when you're doing something that puts you in the public view. She doesn't allow the ego to interfere. The greatest example of this is in the way she plays. She is focused only on making the music come to life, as opposed to being very conscious of showing oneself as fabulous."

Prof Hecht says Sin had an openness that allowed him to help her mature in her craft.

"When someone is that successful at that young an age, the inclination to change may not be as great. The fact that she was so pliable was why she's so successful. She was so open to the ideas I would give her," he adds.

"I always tried to steer her towards repertoire that most people her age would not be interested in. I introduced her to Griffes' Piano Sonata, which she was playing at age 13 in an international competition. Its style is very elusive and she was mastering it at that age. It blew people away."

Sin says Prof Hecht's introduction to the piece influenced her to do research on Griffes, whom she was also curious about as an American who was sometimes compared with the great French composer Claude Debussy, but not easily categorised.

Violinist Loh Jun Hong, an old friend of Sin's who also studied at Yong Siew Toh, says: "One thing that amazes me about her is how humble she is. Probably no other musician in Singapore has gathered as many honours."

In 2013, they founded More Than Music, a concert series that aims to remove classical music's stiff, inaccessible image and break down audience's barriers, with musicians talking about as well as performing their works. The pair will be playing together at a concert at the Victoria Concert Hall on June 12.

Sin returns to Singapore a few times a year from London, sometimes to perform at More Than Music concerts.

Professor Bernard Lanskey, the director of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, says having home-grown talent like her is a boost for music in Singapore.

He says: "With More Than Music, Abigail is looking at how she can energise and engage with audiences in Singapore. In the past, students like her and Jun Hong would probably have gone abroad and not come back."

"Because they've done their initial studies here, they've got the connections with Singapore, they're thinking about what they want to see evolve. It's beginning to be possible for young artists like them to base themselves in Singapore, but have activities all around the world."

He adds that, given that not many people can perform exclusively at her age, a PhD is probably the right option for her.

"She's of a normal age to be doing what she's doing now. She almost never had that. As a teenager, she was doing things more like a postgraduate. Now, she's getting life and study more into balance," he says.

Indeed, after she finished her master's at Guildhall in London at age 20, she felt the need for a break.

She did not feel that plunging into a PhD was "the right thing to do". She turned down an offer of doctoral funding from Guildhall and came back to Yong Siew Toh for two years.

During those years, she did a graduate diploma and became a teaching assistant at the conservatory. She also played chamber music and set up More Than Music with Loh, a kind of "advocacy" for classical music, she says. It was a chance for her to "grow up a bit", she adds.

Now it feels like she is going through her "college experience", she says.

In London, she lives in a "posh" hall of residence in Russell Square, where candidates in the recent British election came for the hustings. She practises five or six hours a day and volunteers at a children's club.

Sin, who is single, reads avidly; Ray Bradbury is a favourite author. She caught British actor Ralph Fiennes in a play recently and will be watching Taylor Swift in concert later this month.

Questions of prodigy and giftedness, she insists, were "never the focus. The question, rather, was 'am I improving?'" The challenge for Sin, who relishes performing, but hopes to work in a tertiary institution one day, is "having to confront yourself in the practice room every day".

She says: "Musically, we struggle with it every day, knowing we can do better. The focus is always the work. I'm still trying to make my way in the profession."

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My life so far



Abigail Sin at age eight in Methodist Girls' School.

"It's an honour in some ways. I'm grateful for the opportunities from an early age. But there's a really long road ahead; I need to grow as an artist."

Abigail Sin on being identified as a child prodigy

"By the time I started at NUS (at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music), I was quite comfortable with the idea that I wanted to pursue this professionally."

On entering the conservatory at age 14

"Live performance is a physical experience. The air is literally vibrating. I don't think being nervous ever goes away."

On performing



Abigail Sin at age four with her twin brother David and father Sin Lye Kuen.

"When performing overseas, both Jun Hong and I had a lot of experience talking with audiences and introducing ourselves. It was something we wanted to bring back to Singapore."

On why she and violinist Loh Jun Hong started their More Than Music concert series



Abigail Sin at age 11 receiving the HSBC Youth Excellence Award from then President S R Nathan. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ABIGAIL SIN

"Composer Olivier Messiaen's Quartet For The End Of Time was written while he was a French soldier captured by the Nazis. His response as a prisoner of war in World War II was to praise God. It's quite extraordinary. It's almost like a spiritual experience. It's not a work a typical 16-year-old would play. It's so difficult to play. There are palindromes in the music."

On a memorable piece of music that she, a Christian herself, first played as a teenager