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# Rising Dragon, Soaring Merlion brings sounds of Vancouver and Singapore together

The Asian metropolis's Chinese chamber orchestra joins forces with this city's culture-crossing Sound of Dragon Ensemble

BY **ALEXANDER VARTY**



Singapore's adventurous Ding Yi Music Company.



Ding Yi music director Dedric Wong  
Sound of Dragon founder Lan Tung



## Sound of Dragon Society presents **Rising Dragon, Soaring Merlion** at the Annex on May 26

CONSIDER IT A TALE of two cities: Singapore, a bustling metropolis of 5.4 million people laved by the waters of the South China Sea, and Vancouver, situated on the shores of its Salish equivalent. One has been a meeting place of cultures—Malay, Chinese, South Asian, and European—for centuries. The other is younger but similarly cosmopolitan—and growing even more so every month. There are differences, of course: Singapore is run by straitlaced authoritarians, while Vancouver offers a veneer of democracy and an anything-goes attitude towards sex and drugs.

But there's a lot that these two centres can learn from each other, and that might be especially true in the cultural sphere.

That, at least, is the underlying message of *Rising Dragon, Soaring Merlion*, a concert of intercultural music-making that brings together Vancouver's innovative Sound of Dragon Ensemble and Singapore's equally adventurous Ding Yi Music Company.

Again, there are differences: Sound of Dragon mixes instruments from both East and West, while Ding Yi is more purely a Chinese chamber orchestra—although that in itself is a fusion of Asian instruments and European orchestral techniques. But when Ding Yi's music director Dedic Wong and Sound of Dragon founder Lan Tung met, the two immediately realized that they had enough in common that they would soon need to collaborate.

"We met Lan before Covid, two or three years back," Wong explains, in a Zoom conversation from Singapore. "Actually we had invited Lan to Singapore; there's a Chinese chamber music festival in Singapore that we collaborate with, and we presented her concert and had a workshop with her. But before that we had already seen her videos with a mixed ensemble in Vancouver, and thought it was quite unique—especially the instrumentation, and the work that she's doing. Not many ensembles do such mixed-ensemble work, and I think it's also unique how her passion has influenced Western instrumentalists to learn Chinese music."

Wong adds that while improvisation is a large part of Tung's practice, both with Sound of Dragon and her smaller Orchid Ensemble, Ding Yi focuses almost entirely on two separate streams of through-composed music. "One is very traditional Chinese music," he says. "And on the other hand, we also do very, very contemporary works, works that are very challenging."

While each ensemble will have its own separate set during *Rising Dragon, Soaring Merlion*, the event's overall theme of transnational and multi-ethnic cooperation will, naturally, be best expressed when they play together under the baton of another intercultural music pioneer, Taiwan's Chih Sheng Chen. The evening's finale, Ontario composer Alice Ping Yee Ho's *Four Dragons*, is one of those pieces where the performers will definitely have to stretch, but Wong says their exertions should prove exciting.

“Personally, I think that the textures are very rich,” Wong says of *Four Dragons* and the other Canadian works on the program, which includes scores from intercultural stalwarts Tung, Farshid Samandari, Jordan Nobles, and Moshe Denburg. “They’re more towards a new-music type of genre, modern music, but it’s also energetic music that Lan has chosen. And it’s not easy, especially the *Four Dragons* that we’ll be performing. There are a lot of extended techniques on the Chinese instruments, and a lot of percussive sounds that will make for a very energetic performance.”

Wong is also impressed by the environmental themes of Ho’s piece—her “dragons” are four of the Earth’s great rivers, all threatened by climate change—especially as Ding Yi will be offering its own program of environmental music later in the year.

“I’m calling it *More Than Music*, although the title is not confirmed yet, and we’re trying to show that music can be more than just entertainment,” he explains. “So it’s about music and environmental sound, and I’m hoping that the audience will take home the message that the sound of the environment is so beautiful that you shouldn’t destroy it.”

Extramusical concerns also animate Singapore-based composer Chenwei Wang’s *Winds of Affinity*, in which Sound of Dragon’s Paolo Bortolussi will join Ding Yi’s Ng Hsien Han to compare and contrast the sounds of the Western silver flute and its Chinese counterpart, the bamboo *dizi*. Conceptually, the score is based on the Chinese philosophical concept of *yuan*, which encompasses aspects of similarity, coincidence, and sympathy.

Singapore-based composer Chenwei Wang



“This piece was actually commissioned in 2016 by a Singaporean *dizi* player,” the composer Wang notes in a separate Zoom interview. “He was holding a concert with his teacher, a well-known professor from China, and so he asked me to do a piece for two *dizi* and chamber orchestra. So I said okay, and then I asked him to tell me about his teacher—how he met his teacher and what the lessons were like and so on.”

After learning that the teacher in question was a

master of southern Chinese music—“more delicate and intricate” than Beijing style—Wang built his piece accordingly, but also using Western classical techniques that he learned during his own training in Vienna.

“The *dadi*, or the bigger dizi, represents the teacher, and then the smaller dizi represents the student,” he says. “The big dizi plays first, and then there is some free counterpoint. There is a fugue which represents some intellectual discourse, and in the end they play in unison and fade out.”

The work has become quite popular, and has been arranged for several different instrumental combinations, including an especially apt version for dizi and erhu, or Chinese violin. In that case, the commissioning soloists were a couple, one from Taiwan and the other from Hong Kong, and they performed it at their wedding.

But there are other affinities at play here, too, and those most definitely include what all of Rising Dragon, Soaring Merlion’s principals hope will be a growing bond between two similar, but very different, cities on either side of the Pacific.



## Alexander Varty

Alexander Varty is a senior West Coast journalist specializing in cultural reporting of all kinds. An active musician on several instruments, he has also worked as an event producer in the cultural community. In his spare time, Alex is a keen ocean swimmer, record collector, amateur mycologist, and cook.