

Kung Chi-Shing

ARTIST

I would describe myself as a human being who practices art. Since I was a kid, I wanted to be a com-poser, musician. So art means a lot to me – from the very beginning.

At a very early age in my life I decided that art is my objective in my life.

I am a trained musician and composer, so music is my major language, my major medium.

In the past 25 years, I am focusing on finding my own language, finding my own way of doing art that means something to me. I don't want to follow other people's paths. I want to find my own way to present my own art. Because I think art is very personal

We are not the same as in the 19th century. That's a common practice that's a certain art form we can all use and then – through those forms – we can express ourselves. I think it is like starting the 2nd World War ... Artists know: the only way to be himself or herself as an artist is how you tie your personality to your expression. So, I think that is what I have been doing: finding my language, finding my form. In a way, it is like about how to live my life, finding my own existence through my action.

in the beginning, I am more focused in finding my personal language and doing so-called ... try to be an individual artist. But over the years I also realized: sometimes you are able to step away from yourself. You can still go with your own principle. For me, art is about sharing, about communication.

I feel myself as using art as a means to help the society or to give back something to the society. For example, it is like for the past 5 1/2 years, I have been organizing a lot of free outdoor concerts. And I learned a lot in doing that because this feeling about sharing, about communication. But my ego wouldn't be so much in the way of doing that. By stepping away from my own ego, I am able to see things in a bigger picture. And I am also more aware by supporting the young talented musicians or by sharing those artists' work with the general public. It has a different level of meaning – other than what I used to do as my own personal work.

When I create my own music theatre work, the authorship is clear. But when I am organizing an event, the roles change a bit. I am more a creator: I can initiate things to happen but I am not a so-called artist in that situation. Even though I think I am very different from most art administrators or curators because of my background as an artist. So, I don't think in terms of management. I don't think in terms of all the art administrators would think. For me, the artistic result is still just as important. Even though it is not my own personal work. But I still value a lot the artistic result of such a public situation.

ARTWORK

My background is modern classical music but I am also very much attracted by the pop language. Because the simplicity of pop language has its own beauty – very different from the classical tradition.

All my work in the last twenty-something years all relate to one another. Of course, the connection may be more distant, like the work I did three weeks ago and the work I did 25 years ago. But I would say that work no. 1, work no. 2, work no. 3, I mean, they have a connection. And the way I see the connection is like: each piece of my work, each of my productions reflects ... my state of mind at the moment, my state of existence at the moment.

It reflects my relationship with the outside world, with the people around me at the moment. So, for me, do I work, it's personal in a sense that it had to do with ... this particular moment of existence for me. So, I always think of doing art like living your life. Because every piece of art is a reflection of who you are at that particular moment.

I think when a person grows up, we inside us. And somehow we look the door and we lose the key to that door. The older we get, the more doors we have created inside us and then we don't have the keys. And sometimes, when you encounter a wonderful piece of artwork, a piece of art, this can provide you with a key, and then with that key I open one door. And then "WOW!" – I see something from my past which – I don't know why – I have forgotten about while I am so insensitive to this part of my past life. So, in a way, it is like I always like to use that example that art is obviously a key. That's why art is so wonderful, so beautiful. It is like ... a wonderful piece of art is a wonderful key for you to unlock the door you created.

I think in a way, art is a kind of a positive subversive ad. It's constructive, but subversive in a good way because art ... a good piece of art is really able to wake us up. I used the example of a key. That's how I see art. And that's how I benefit from art. And that's how I want my art to be for the other people.

PRODUCTION

I prefer to see my work as a long progress. I think the day I die, "that's it". That's it, that's the end of my production. And that artificial dead line, superficial dead line ...

For me, my work never ends because it can still continue growing in my head. I think it's a matter of how you are going to use that. I mean, the thing is still growing.

I think a production sometimes is like ... has a physical presence. And sometimes I think of production as a process. In my work, when I think about the physical aspect, I think theatre wastes a lot of materials. I mean, when you see a beautiful set, what do you do after the performance? You destroy and throw it away (laughs). So, I try to avoid to make things on stage and then I get rid, I throw away them afterwards. I always want to keep them. For example, like this chair, I used that as a kind of major piece in one of my productions a few years ago. And I think even before I do the production, I know I am going to keep that chair. (laughs) So, I decide the chair for the production. Because I don't want to waste anything. I think we can preserve every little bit in the production and continue using that. I have used that chair in my other productions as well. I don't want to hear "hey, I saw that in your last production", no. Because for me, doing art or doing productions should be a process.

I guess a lot of times I experienced failure at a younger age because I am too. . I wanted too much. I wanted to try too much. I am too greedy. So, usually when that happens it is easy for you to fail because you are doing more things than you can handle.

Now that I get older, I feel that my work is simpler and simpler. And the other thing is: I have no intention to do a perfect piece. It makes no sense to me. I think if my work, at the end, has certain problems arisen or reflects a problem, this is a good thing.

When you are an experienced artist, it is easier to do a so-called piece that ... people cannot see or mistake so easily. But of course, on a conceptual level, it can be another story.

I always accept mistakes. As long as I don't screw up too big I think it's alright. I think one can avoid screwing up too big by using your good instinct or listening to people's evaluation. These days, when I do my work, there are one or two people I really trust, I ask for their opinion. Very often it safeguards the work from failing too badly (laughs) because those people, I respect their opinion and they are very critically-minded people. And I respect their observation, I respect their comments. And usually, I will change according to their feedback. So, I, at the end, it will help. My own experience from the past... Especially when I was younger, I didn't listen to anybody (laughs) and I got into more problems.

MATERIAL

My background is music. And of course, with music you talk about musical instruments or you talk about the combination of notes and rhythm, the pitch, different tone colours of different harmonies.

It depends on the nature of my work, I will call different musicians. They can be in New York, in L.A., in Tokyo, in Beijing or in Taiwan or in Japan. It depends on what work I want to do, I will invite them. It is like a family. So, for me it is like ... medium ... material and those individual artists from different disciplines mix up together. Because I worked with this Japanese dancer/actor – his name is Makato. His primary language is body movement. But when I work with him, I am not thinking about his body movement. I am thinking about who Makato is. I am thinking about his energy. I am thinking about his emotions. I am thinking about his voice. So, it is not so clear for me. It is like the material, the medium, the person. Because for me – especially when you work with them for such a long time – you don't even have to explain to them exactly what you want and be able to hear – or when we watch each other – be able to have a response. And for me, that is very beautiful.

MEDIUM

I worked with people from different disciplines. In a way, it's like multimedia. But sometimes people refer to multimedia as a production using different mediums. For me, it's not quite that. Yes and no. Yes, I work with a visual artists, I work with movement people, either actor or dancer, I work with individual artists – writer, designer. I think more in terms of multi-direction. Each medium can point to a different direction to me. I am interested in using different media but what interests me the most is people. Working with different kinds of people, different kinds of artists fascinates me. I guess I am afraid of boredom. That's why I don't want to do a thing by myself. For me it is like I have this pool of artists that I've worked together with for the past twenty-something years.

Everytime I discover a new medium, I am able to make a connection. So, that point explains why all my work is more than music. Because each medium is different. But somehow they address similar human emotions. But some are still different. Let's say, a film about sadness. Or a poem about nature. And I can listen to music talk about this subject matter. But somehow, they are different. They give you a different sensation. I don't know. I cannot explain why. I mean, that's the nature of different mediums. Even though they have the same emotion, even though they deal with the same human condition, the result is different. And that's why I am interested in working with different mediums.

PROCESS

I remember that I once asked my composition teacher, "how am I supposed to know the end of the piece, when I am composing a piece of music? Why do I know 'this is the end'?". Or some time I asked him, "I have this idea. How can I move from this idea or develop this idea? Because I feel I got stuck."

So, in a way, that's like music has to do with time. Time is always a journey. Music is time art. So, we deal with time all the time, even on a local level. And I still remember my teacher told me how to develop an idea or what happens when you get stuck with an idea. He would say one thing like "maybe the idea you have is not the beginning. Maybe that's the ending. Maybe you have to work backwards. Maybe what you have is the connex already. You have to trace back." So, in a way, when I do music ... that's a working method in writing a piece of music. Like, say a 5-minutes piece from zero-second to the last minute. I mean, in a way ... it's a process, right? On the other hand, on a high level, process is about life. I always tell people that doing music or creating art – over the years – is a long process. And I think the end of the process is the day I die.

I mean, I do art as the way I live my life. It gets old (laughs), it grows, it decays. It's a natural process – both my art and my life. They go hand in hand together.

PRESENTATION

With music concerts, you have the performance on a stage and you have the audience on the other side. And there is a kind of gap between the audience and the stage. The stage is higher than the audience and then you see the performer. That's a practice for many many many centuries. I always wonder, "is this the best presentation?"

So, for me, I always wanted to experiment, especially in the early days, how I do open theatre situations – the audience would walk around in the whole space ... Or I changed process between the audience and the performers. I always tried to do that because sometimes, if you use a traditional presentational format, certain expectations will happen. Like the audience, when they walk into such an environment, they just put themselves back into a situation they are familiar with. They can watch the Berlin Philharmonics playing Beethoven or watch Lady Gaga on a stage or watch an experimental concert. If the physical set-up is the same, it very often limits the audience's response. So, for me, I think it is very important to all the artists, especially musicians, to think about, "what is the subject matter? What is the best way to present your work?" – And be brave. If you ought to have to break away that format, then you have to do it. There's no solution ... or there's no standard solution for all situations but I do feel it is very important to try to find a presentational format that works with your personal piece.

The art experience I talk about is my outdoor concert. I think one of the reasons my outdoor concert is different from how other people do outside concerts, for example, I always have four different groups in the concert. And they have four completely different styles. I can start the concert with a Cantonese opera – a some 200 years old art form that no young people will listen to – and that is followed by a Canadian punk band. And then followed by jazz and it ends with Mozart. If those young kids, they just want to come hear the Canadian punk band, but they are arrive too early, they listen to Cantonese opera; the first time, like, physically because they may have heard it on the radio or watched it on TV. But they have never a physical encounter with that art form – and they are fascinated. Very often when you go to see a concert, it's one style throughout. If it's classical music, it is classical music all night. If it's pop, it's pop all night. Jazz? Jazz. You never have an unexpected situation. For me, art is all about surprises.

For an audience, if they experience something unexpected, it can be a wonderful thing. Because, especially city folks, they are so programmed. I mean, everything is on their schedule. They know: Friday night, 8 o'clock, they will go to the cultural centre to listen to the New York Philharmonics, Beethoven, Dvorzak – they know all the music. They will get what they expected: the number one orchestra, the number one symphony – they know that's not the fashion. And I will ask, "why bother? Why do you still bother to go? Why can't you have wonderful music 5 o'clock in the afternoon? Why do you have to be so robotic, so mechanical when it comes to deal with arts?"

INTENTION

I am very traditional. I am more conservative than I realize. I think to a certain extent, my aesthetics are 19th century, very Romantic. I believe that music has the power to transcend, I believe that music is positive and constructive. I want my music to inspire people, I want my music to add a key for the people to unlock the door and they see what they have lost.

Especially today when I see the world is getting darker and darker and I think art is very important as a counter-balance to counter this dark, destructive force that is no prevalent in the world today.

I don't think art will ever win. But because of art we never lose either.

METHOD

I think when I compose music I do have a certain kind of method. I ... like accidents. I like chances. So, when I do music, the first thing I like to do is try to empty my head. I don't want to have any specific idea, sometimes I almost do an exercise. Just do whatever and see what happens. I like to collect material like that. So, I create a sound mass, maybe a melody, maybe a rhythm ... and then I

evaluate. I go back to see if it makes any sense to me. I don't want to plan too much ahead. For example, if I say "accidents" – like, I will create something intentionally and then I deconstruct it randomly, so I am able to have different kinds of results. And that will let my ear decide whether this is useful or not.

It is almost like playing. It's just play. It's just like ... follow your heart, follow your ear and just create whatever. Because, for me, doing art is a decision-making process. You choose what is right for you, what is not right and you throw away what is not right for you.

ART

I think everybody on earth has a different role. Some people become philosophers, some people become a religious person, some people are farmers, some people are business people. And I respect all. I think the main thing is to be able to recognize who you are, what role you are going to play and do the best of it. In my case, my role is to do art, my role is an artist. And I just ... I am very happy with that. The good thing is my role is not a lawyer or doctor (laughs). I think that maybe it's my personality. I don't think I am an aggressive ambitious person. For me, doing art is not about getting famous, getting recognized. For me, doing art is very much a way to live my life. It's like breathing, eating, make friends. So, I am not that terribly concerned about authorship to be honest with you. I am more interested in how to create a positive situation so people can ... I can share with people. So, I think art is so much fun. Art makes no sense and makes so much sense at the same time. I just feel blessed...

BIO

* 1961, born and raised in Hong Kong, Kung Chi Shing is a composer, performer and music activist. Kung studied classical music and composition in the United States with Allen Trubitt and George Crumb. He is known particularly for his work in the music and performance group 'The Box', which he founded with Peter Stuart in 1987, and since 2009 as founder and curator of the 'Street Music Series' of free public concerts in Hong Kong. In 1994 he was awarded a research grant by the Asian Cultural Council. In his compositions and performances, Kung focuses on experimentation with different formats, including pop, classical and improvisational music, and theatre art. Since 1996 he has created, composed and staged six full-length music theatre pieces. He has collaborated frequently with choreographers, directors and theatre artists, and has performed his music in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Cuba, Tashkent, New York, London, Berlin and Venice.

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Credits

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