

# Concerts of the Month Guitar vs Piano

By Dr Chang Tou Liang

**Singapore International Guitar Festival**  
Regional English Language Centre  
30 Orange Grove Road  
13-19 June 2011  
Concerts on 15 to 18 June begin at 7.30 pm  
Concert on 19 June begins at 2.30 pm

**Singapore International Piano Festival**  
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Concert Hall  
16-19 June 2011  
All concerts begin at 8 pm

As luck would have it, two important festivals in Singapore's musical calendar will take place in exactly the same week! If you are a lover of the classical guitar and the pianoforte, you will be spoilt for choice. Instead of picking a side and staying there, why not mix and match? Dr Chang Tou Liang speaks to Thomas Liauw, founder and Artistic Director of the Singapore International Guitar Festival, and Lionel Choi, Director of the Singapore International Piano Festival, to get the low down on what's happening.

## Pro Guitar

**Dr Chang Tou Liang:** How long has the Singapore International Guitar Festival been in existence, and how has it transformed the guitar scene in Singapore?

Thomas Liauw – TL: Since its inception in 2000, the Singapore International Guitar Festival and Guitar Competition have raised the

profile of the classical guitar in Singapore. It has served as a platform for learning and sharing through its concerts, seminars, workshops and master classes, besides being a showcase of new talent. It began with just three concerts and some seminars but has grown over the years to become a weeklong extravaganza for the instrument, the only one of its kind in Singapore.

**Dr Chang:** Besides guitar recitals by visiting artists, what else can guitar enthusiasts also expect during this festival?

TL: The festival has featured some of the world's top guitarists in recitals, including Paco Pena (Spain), Manuel Barrueco (Cuba), Yang Xue Fei (China), Roland Dyen (France), Carlos Bonell (UK), Kazuhito Yamashita (Japan), David Tenenbaum (USA) and many others. Amateur guitarists and students also have the chance to engage guest artists and invited speakers on a direct and personal basis, to discuss any subject relating to the guitar, including interpretation, repertoire and technical issues. The competition is judged by an international panel and winners get to win cash prizes, instruments and international coverage. The seminars and sales of instruments will also be of interest to many.

**Dr Chang:** Is there an underlying theme for this year's festival?

TL: For the very first time, all the guest artists are women! Although many people imagine the guitar to be a masculine instrument, some of the top guitarists today are from the fairer sex.

**Dr Chang:** Who are this year's recitalists, and are there any special works one should look out for?



Pianist Janina Fialkowska (Canada), performing 16 June



Guitarist Kaori Muraji (Japan), performing 18 June



Guitarist Gaelle Solal (France), performing 17 June



Pianist Shai Wosner (Israel), performing 17 June

TL: All five women guitarists will be performing for their first time in Singapore, including premieres of works written specially for them. Kaori Muraji (Japan) is one of the best known Asian guitarists today. Maria Isabel Siewers (Argentina) has performed in most of the great concert halls of the world. Dale Kavanagh (Canada) will be premiering her own work *Tales of Greiffenberg*. Gaelle Solal (France) is one of Europe's best female artistes. Elena Casoli (Italy), who opens the festival, will play both classical and amplified guitars. Her concert can easily be enjoyed by casual listeners, as it covers early music to Gershwin and the Beatles.

**Dr Chang:** In five words, how would you describe the Singapore International Guitar Festival?

TL: Experience! Enjoy! Explore the guitar!

## Pro Piano

**Dr Chang:** The Singapore International Piano Festival was founded in 1994, and this is your second year as Festival Director. What have been your inspirations in the planning and running of this annual event?

Lionel Choi – LC: I have returned to the fundamentals, having always been thrilled and inspired by great piano music given fine, well-thought performances by outstanding pianists. That provides an opportunity for our audiences to not just hear great music, but to revel in a high level of musical understanding. It is the sheer joy of piano music and experiencing it being performed live in a meaningful, hopefully inspiring way which I hope audiences will take away with them after every recital, every year.

**Dr Chang:** Is there an underlying theme in this year's festival?

LC: This year's festival is entitled "Transformation". There is the obvious reference to the art and technique of metamorphosis in musical and piano writing: taking a theme and transforming it through multiple, creative variations; recreating non-piano works through inventive transcriptions; taking a basic musical concept such as a ballade or a scherzo and expanding it into an entirely independent, personal form, and so on. There is at least a set of variations and/or transcriptions in every recital.

There is also the inextricable link between life-changing experiences and what shows up in the performance of the artist. In this specific respect, I was particularly moved by the story of Janina Fialkowska (Canada) who opens this year's festival. A protege of Arthur

Rubinstein, she was diagnosed in 2002 with a rare, cancerous tumour in her left shoulder muscle, which threatened to end her career. Determined not to give up, she first set about learning the concertos and works originally written for the left hand only and transcribed them for her right hand. Following experimental treatment, surgeons completed a rare muscle transfer procedure, which eventually allowed her to regain control of the movement in her left arm. This allowed her to make a gradual return to the concert platform. What is particularly inspiring is how hard she worked at going back to the top of her craft. She still sounds completely unfazed even by the most fiendishly difficult of her repertoire, which she despatches with such electrifying directness, poetic power of narration, inner emotional freedom and pulsating agility!

**Dr Chang:** Who are this year's recitalists, and what will your audience expect to take home?

LC: Fialkowska will present a programme of contrasts, with Schubert alongside Szymanowski and Chopin. From deeply meditative to wildly virtuosic, Liszt's works and transcriptions round off the thrilling festival curtain-raiser. Arnaldo Cohen (Brazil) began his illustrious career in the 1970s. His graceful and unaffected stage manner belies playing of white-hot intensity, intellectual probity, and glittering bravura technique bordering on sheer wizardry. He will perform the Bach-Busoni *Chaconne*, Chopin's *Four Scherzi* and a dazzling array of pieces from his native Brazil. Nareh Arghamanyan (Armenia), in her early 20s, won the Montreal Competition in 2008. She will play works by Rameau, Clementi, Schumann, Liszt's *Ballade No. 2* and Rachmaninov's *Etudes-Tableaux Op. 33*. Shai Wosner (Israel) brings a beautifully constructed programme of themes and variations by Brahms, Beethoven and Oliver Knussen, and ends with the mighty and dramatic *Appassionata Sonata* by Beethoven.

**Dr Chang:** Are there any particular performances which you think are going to be special or different?

LC: I have been very judicious and discerning in our choice of pianists; each and every one selected for his artistic maturity and overall excellence in musicianship, over and above technical skill. I have also left the pianists to play whatever repertoire they are most comfortable with and I expect every performance to be, in its own way, special! **SMA**

*For more information on the Guitar and Piano Festivals, please check out their websites <http://www.tomas-music.com> and <http://www.pianofestival.com.sg> respectively.*