USIC is not the most lucrative music scene here, as local musicians can well attest. With Singapore’s small mar-
ket size, it’s the rare talent who can make a full-time living while the oth-
ers rely on part-time jobs. So how does that account for a group of foreign musicians from coming here and forging remarkable careers for themselves?

The genres that these musicians fall into range from jazz and pop to chamber and chamber music. Whether it’s in a lively bar, hotel, or university campus, the scene is one of vibrant, diverse activity, which is the hallmark of a world-class music scene. And while some might say that the scene is dominated by foreign musicians, the fact remains that the talent is here and it’s growing.

The overall consensus from the veteran musicians is that international experi-
ence is key to their relevance and marketability. While not all local musicians actually need to travel abroad to be successful, some believe that foreign experience is necessary for success. For some, the exposure to different cultures and musical styles is key to their development as musicians.

Colin Goh Li-Wei, who heads choirs studies at the National University of Singapore’s Yong Siew Hon Lee School of the Arts and is the music director of the Singapore National School of the Arts, encourages his stu-
dents to always think globally even if they don’t actu-
ally travel much.

“If you’re going to be a musician, you must get the music into your head. There is no substitute for being in another country and learning about different cultures. That’s what makes you a better musician. I’ve been in many different places and it’s helped me to grow as a musician. I’ve learned to adapt to different situations and to be open to new ideas. That’s what makes you a better musician.”

Amorphous challenge

Western classical music presents a clear career path for musicians because the market is more defined. But for traditional Asian musicians, there’s no such clear path. In Singapore, the music scene is in a state of flux and there are many opportunities to perform in a variety of settings. This can be both exciting and daunting, as the musicians must constantly adapt to the changing market.

Some musicians have successfully transitioned to the world of pop and rock, while others continue to perform in more traditional settings. The key is to stay open to new opportunities and to be willing to take risks.

“Sometimes I may come across as critical and negative when I give my students a reality check, but the truth is that not everyone is going to be a soloist and international star like Lang Lang,” says Ti, 43. “They have to diversify and be versa-
tile, and this includes being open and accom-
modating, which is somewhat under-appreciated,” he add.

A global mindset by itself doesn’t seem to be enough for Ti, who encourages his students to travel. “I encourage my students to explore the world by going to music festivals and competi-
tions, even if they don’t go to study abroad, because these are some of the ways to recognize the reality of the music world and to see what it’s like around the world,” Ti said.

Just like Ti, Qiu embraces a diverse range of tasks, from teaching and performing to music education and community outreach. “I’ve been in this for 12 years and I’m still learning,” Qiu said.

The key to success as a musician is not just having talent, but having a strong work ethic and a willingness to learn. This is something that Qiu has discovered in his time in Singapore. “The music scene here is very demanding, but it’s also very rewarding. I’ve learned to be patient and to be open to new challenges. That’s what keeps me going.”

Both Qiu and Ti agree that the music scene in Singapore is constantly evolving and that the musicians who succeed are those who are willing to adapt and to take risks. “This is an exciting time to be a musician in Singapore,” Qiu said.

Expat musicians share lessons on career building in the local music industry with CHRISTOPHER LIM

As a US-based musician, Qiu is not your typical expat. He is a musician who has made Singapore his home, and he has become an integral part of the local music scene. “I’ve been in Singapore for three years now, and I’ve really enjoyed the experience,” Qiu said.

Qiu’s advice to other expats looking to make a career in music in Singapore is to be open to new opportunities and to be willing to take risks. “The music scene is constantly evolving, and there are always new opportunities to be found. If you’re willing to be flexible and to take on new challenges, you can really make a name for yourself in Singapore.”

Qiu also stresses the importance of networking and building relationships in the music industry. “Networking is key to success in the music industry, and I’ve found that the Singapore music scene is very open to new faces and new ideas. If you’re willing to reach out and to make connections, you can really make a name for yourself in Singapore.”

Qiu also advises expats to be open to new experiences and to be willing to learn. “The music scene in Singapore is constantly evolving, and there are always new things to learn. If you’re willing to be open to new opportunities and to be willing to learn, you can really make a name for yourself in Singapore.”

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