


Music

Cantonese is a colorful, colloquial language — a vibrant and idiosyncratic tongue that is uniquely expressive, and imbued with an inherent singsong quality. Yet paradoxically, these are the very same reasons why Cantonese does not figure widely in formal classical music.

Composer Daniel Lo is among a few trailblazers to attempt an original Cantonese stage production in the Western classical idiom. Premiering in August, the 85-minute *Pressed for Love* isn't just homegrown choral group Singfest's first attempt at staging an original work. Lo believes the piece could be the first cantata-style art-song cycle ever composed entirely in Cantonese.

The reason why it has taken this long to materialize is owed to the richly tonal nature of Cantonese. Teachers swear that one needs to master nine distinct tones in order to truly grasp the language. And yet that's not the whole story.

"There's a stereotypical idea that spoken Cantonese is not good enough — not highbrow or formal enough — to be taken seriously and used in a high-art context," asserts *Pressed for Love* lyricist Wong Yi. She was naturally thrilled to settle that score when Lo approached her to work on the project.

Getting in tone

The tonal nature of Cantonese — in which the rise and fall of different syllables change their meaning — renders composing melodies inherently complicated. The words in a lyric are required to tonally match the flow of any tune they are set to — a fact that has handcuffed pop lyricists for decades. In the Cantopop industry, traditionally, the music always comes first, leaving gifted lyricists to shoehorn in tonally harmonious words later. Lo says that he "always felt unsatisfied" by the mismatch between the idea contained in words and the music they were set to in the Cantopop numbers he listened to during his growing-up years.

The same music-first philosophy is almost always true of traditional Cantonese Opera, explains Chan Hing-yan, a music professor and head of the University of Hong Kong's School of Humanities. The process is the antithesis of the Western tradition, which in opera typically sees a librettist's work set to fresh music. Art songs often repurpose existing verse — a method perhaps best epitomized in Franz Schubert's recasting of Wilhelm Müller's poems as *Winterreise*.

Inspired by such storied fare, Lo broke away from the conventions of Cantonese music when he invited Wong to adapt her highly popular short-story collection, *Ways to Love in a Crowded City*, into a song cycle, at the behest of Singfest resident artist Kenix Tsang. Lo insisted on receiving a finished sheet of verse before getting to work on composing its musical interpretation. He let the natural flow of the text's tones dictate the melodies he would write — an approach many told him was useless. "A lot of compositional techniques usually employed in Western classical music cannot be borrowed directly," explains Lo.

"Our composers are 99 to 100 percent educated in the Western meth-



Can Cantonese tones fit into the Western canon?

Though Western classical-style music in Cantonese stage productions is a rarity, intrepid Hong Kong composers might have found a way of working around the unique challenges posed by the tonal complexities of the language. **Rob Garratt** reports.

Above: Performed by the choral group Singfest, and composed by Daniel Lo, *Pressed for Love*, which premiered in August, is probably the first cantata-style art song cycle ever composed in Cantonese. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Above, from left: Composer and academic Chan Hing-yan estimates that it is three times more difficult to compose in Cantonese than in Mandarin; composer Daniel Lo found his own ways of navigating the difficulties of setting Cantonese words to Western classical-style music; and writer Wong Yi, who wrote librettos based on her own stories for *Pressed for Love*, says the process is akin to taking apart a perfectly fine spaceship and then using the fragments to build a sailboat.

Top right: In his long and illustrious career as a composer, Chan Hing-yan has set only one Cantonese chamber opera, *Kungfood* (2023), to music.

Right: In 2021, composer Daniel Lo and writer Wong Yi collaborated on the Cantonese chamber opera *Women Like Us*, adapted from short stories by iconic Hong Kong writer Xi Xi.

od, where one of the main devices is counterpoint," Chan says, referring to a musical device that sees two vocal lines sing the same lyric while moving in different melodic directions — an impossibility in Cantonese.

To navigate the idiosyncrasies of Cantonese, Lo arrived at his own methods, analyzing the relative pitch of each character based on the tone

that precedes it. He found that there was a natural range each word transition could accommodate — while small tone shifts can only cover a few musical notes, at times it was also possible to jump as high as an octave. Meanwhile, rising and falling tones are accommodated by the natural glissando in a native singer's ornamentation. "The singers really have to

adapt, as a lot of tones in Cantonese might not be very good for projection," Lo says.

Alongside contemporary Chan Kaiyoung, Chan Hing-yan is one of the few brave souls to have previously tackled the challenge. Notably, he was musical director of the landmark multilingual *Hong Kong Odyssey* cantata — a piece in which two-thirds of the

libretto was in Cantonese — staged at the 2017 Hong Kong Arts Festival (HKAF). It followed the relatively low-profile Cantonese chamber opera *Fish in Hand* by Alain Chiu, presented at the 2015 New Visions Festival.

Among Chan's five major chamber operas, four are in Mandarin, including *Heart of Coral* (2013) and *Ghost Love* (2018). His first such work in

Cantonese, *Kungfood*, debuted in 2023.

Having worked in both languages, Chan estimates that it is three times more difficult to compose in Cantonese than in Mandarin — partly because Mandarin has just four main tones, but mainly because there is a lot more flexibility left up to a vocalist's interpretation. "If you listen to Mandarin pop music, it never follows the tones," he says. "If you did the same in Cantonese, it just wouldn't work."

Close collaborators

Lo and Wong have previously collaborated twice. Wong was the librettist tasked with adapting two of legendary Hong Kong writer Xi Xi's short stories for Lo's score to the 2021 production, *Women Like Us* — the first Cantonese chamber opera commissioned by HKAF.

While that production adheres to the formal Cantonese of the original text, in *Pressed for Love*, Wong chose to represent the realities of modern city life by writing primarily in the colloquial Cantonese of the *cha chaan teng* and social media variety. "I've heard from opera singers that they feel completely different when they sing in colloquial language," Wong says. "There's more direct emotion."

At the song cycle's premiere, at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre over the weekend of Aug 29, bemused nods of recognition were especially evident during the chorale number, *Spring Slumber, Unaware of Dawn*, which saw Singfest's animated, marching vocalists paint an audio caricature of the city's daily morning symphony of dripping air cons, screaming babies, car horns and construction drills. "The production is very true to everything I thought about and felt and wanted to achieve with the book," Wong says. "It's just in a completely different form."

The source text, *Ways to Love in a Crowded City*, is a medley of romance-adjacent vignettes in which Hong Kong's cramped environment is the silent character shadowing the narrative. Wong says she wanted to capture how clichés — Hong Kong being a claustrophobic, fast-moving "shopping paradise," for example — translate as a lived reality.

Lo handpicked just seven of the book's 44 stories to adapt. Each chosen story inspired both a chorale piece for 16 unaccompanied voices, typically used to paint a third-person narrative, as well as a stand-alone solo, or duet, piece — backed by musical director Dominic Lam on piano — charting a given character's interior world. This meant stripping the stories to their most basic emotions — a contrasting musical-literary palette of humor, grief, anger and jealousy.

In the centerpiece, *Crowded City*, the chorus sings out a list of ironic statements. As well as being home to the "most extravagant high-rises," Hong Kong boasts the most "congested tunnels," "prolonged work hours" and "protracted interactions" — a biting yet reductive distillation of the ironic detachment in the source text's title.

Wong says her process could be summed up in a simple allegory: "I figured out that the process of adapting my stories into a song cycle was akin to taking apart a perfectly fine spaceship, and then using the same materials to transform it into a sailboat. The idea is that they're both vessels that carry people through a distance — but the context is completely different."


Music

Resistance songs score a resounding victory

By LEON LEE

The *Songs of Resistance* concert at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts on Aug 30 was a celebration. It marked the 80th anniversary of China's victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1931-45). Produced by Radio Television Hong Kong Radio 4, the show featured a selection of resistance songs composed between 1931 and 1945. These range from rousing paeans to the Chinese soldiers' unbreakable spirit in the face of fierce battles to poignant songs describing wartime hardships endured by civilians.

Although the songs are products of unfortunate circumstances, the concert provided an elevated listening experience, blending history with musical excellence. Each song was introduced by the concert hosts — the Education University of Hong Kong academic Jim Chang and Eunice Chow — who provided valuable historical context to help set the scene. The songs

were thoughtfully arranged in chronological order, tracing the evolution of the resistance movement.

The concert opened with what is considered the first song of protest against the Japanese invasion of China — *Song of Resistance Against the Enemy*, written by Wei Han-tseung and composed by Huang Tzu in 1931. The Educators' Singers ensemble beautifully conveyed the song's uplifting spirit, with a powerful-yet-restrained rendition of the song. Its companion piece, *The Flag is Fluttering*, followed. Being relatively somber, the song offered an intriguing contrast to the opening piece.

The Educators' Singers continued with selections from *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the first Chinese cantata, composed in 1932. Its 10 movements cover the political history of the time, including a reference to protests against the Kuomintang government's policy of nonresistance to the Japanese invasion. Five movements were chosen for the concert, showcasing the work's musicality and emotional range, moving

from joy to sorrow to a reflective mood, as expressed through patriotic lyrics.

The sizeable audience sat in a semicircle around a relatively small stage with a grand piano and a visually striking backdrop. Spectators were able to watch the performers from up close in this intimate setting. The well-designed lighting and vivid watercolorlike projections in the background perfectly complemented the mood and emotion of each song.

Performances by two opera singers added one more layer of sophistication to the evening that had already surpassed expectations. Tenor Chen Chen and pianist Huang Naiwei marked their entry with a rendition of *Along the Songhua River*, written and composed by Zhang Hanhui. Chen's reiteration of the words "September 18" powerfully underscored the pain and significance of that historic date in 1931, when the Imperial Japanese Army launched its invasion of China — marking the beginning of the 14-year Sino-Japanese war. Louise Kwong, a soprano, sang

Clouds Over My Hometown, composed by Lin Sheng-shih and written by Wei Han-tseung, and *Flowers in May*, written and set to music by poet Guang Weiran. Her elegant yet powerful voice projected the moving lyrics about displacement and longing for home with elan, effortlessly capturing the audience's attention.

As the Sino-Japanese war intensified, resistance songs evolved from solo pieces to large-scale, multimovement choral works — *The Yellow River Cantata*, which marked the evening's finale, for example. Inspired by a long, patriotic poem by Guang, Xian Xinghai composed the piece in eight movements in 1939. The Educators' Singers performed four of these, culminating in the stirring final movement — *The Roaring Yellow River*. The resounding cries of "Defend our homeland! Defend the Yellow River! Defend North China! Defend all of China!" echoed throughout the amphitheater, bringing the concert to a triumphant close and earning a well-deserved ovation from the audience.



From left: Soprano Louise Kwong and tenor Chen Chen sing patriotic songs at the *Songs of Resistance* concert at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

Below: The Educators' Singers ensemble line up for a performance at the same concert.

