

Composer knows the score

David Fleischer

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He makes his living developing software, but Tony KT Leung's real love is making music.

This weekend, the York Symphony Orchestra brings one of his compositions, "In the Beginning," to life and it is an apt title for the Richmond Hill resident's work.

Talking about the parallels between his musical and computer careers, Mr. Leung says both processes are solitary and involve acts of creation from nothingness.

"I guess music is software and the orchestra is the hardware," he says.

Beyond the Steinway grand piano in his living room, Mr. Leung's house is filled with music.

Cellos — classical and electric — are on display, as are erhus, the stringed Chinese instrument on which Mr. Leung was first trained.

His enthusiasm for music is palpable and he gives off a vibe of nervous excitement, punctuating his speech with frequent laughs.

Mr. Leung moved to Toronto from Hong Kong with his family at the age of seven. He, his wife and their two daughters have lived in the Leslie Street and Elgin Mills Road area for nine years.

It was through playing together in a musical ensemble Mr. Leung met his wife, Patty Chan. Today, she teaches piano and continues to perform with the Toronto Chinese Orchestra, among others.

While he studied engineering at the University of Toronto and still develops software as his day job, Mr. Leung's love of music never waned.

He took private lessons in composing, delving into the field in 1989.

"I take (music) seriously," he says, recognizing it is not easy to make a living doing it exclusively.

"I can only write maybe a few pieces a year. I select the things I want to work on and I need the freedom to do that."

In general, he prefers to compose based around a concept, whether it is the Bible or the concept of 'six degrees of separation.'

"I have the time. Sometimes I don't have the idea," he says.

The York Symphony Orchestra will perform "In the Beginning" March 29 and 30 and Mr. Leung says he is not getting pre-show jitters.



Tony KT Leung.

"I'm not nervous," he says. "It's OK. I guess I'm flattered to have it played in the local community."

The piece, composed in 2003, had two readings, in Thunder Bay and with Toronto's Esprit Orchestra before the Kiev Symphony Orchestra recorded it.

Our local orchestra's performance will be its formal premier concert performance, however.

The 14-minute symphony consists of seven tone poems, each describing a day in the Biblical account of the creation of the Earth.

Incorporating elements of western, Chinese and modern music, it is a unique mixture, typical of Mr. Leung's style.

"It's mainly for western instruments," he says, "but to a western ear it will sound like it's in between, somewhere."

He enthusiastically opens a manuscript of the score on his coffee table, showing how the atmospheric, esoteric music of the first day (gliding strings, a timpani) coalesces into something melodic.

By the sixth day and the creation of humanity, he is weaving ancient Chinese melodies into the mix.

"The type of music I write is not really commercial," he says with a light laugh.

Mr. Leung still gets excited hearing orchestras bring his compositions to life and is ready to hear what his own can do with it this time.

"He's a very gifted composer (and) I thought it was time we played one of his pieces," the orchestra's music director, Greg Burton says.

Every year, the orchestra tries to do something local, but Mr. Leung's piece presented challenges for the 70-member ensemble.

"It's a rich, colourful expression," Mr. Burton says.

"It's fun for the orchestra to play. It's not really avant garde, but it's got some new techniques."

For the past two years, Mr. Leung has played cello with the orchestra, but he will stand on the sidelines when it performs "In the Beginning".

That piece is nearly five years old and Mr. Leung is always working on something new.

When he can, he sits in the ad hoc recording studio set up around the computer in his basement,

There are challenges getting government grants and winning support within the industry, but Mr. Leung is driven by a deeper artistic need.

"We composers, we need to compose," he says.

"I want to take a chance ... and the only way to do it is to do it on my own terms."

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