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Interview: Ode to Trees Chamber Music Series

Hidden Forests Chamber Music Series 室內音樂系列

Nature never ceases to inspire artist's creativity. Trees and forests are one of these muses that not only mothered many opuses of musicians, but also provide the very materials for music making. As part of *Hidden Forests*, the Chamber Music Series *Ode to Trees* features composition inspired by trees and nature across different cultures and eras, presenting the vast imaginations and sonorities brought to us by the ontogenesis of woods.

The closing performance of the Ode to the trees series curated by Project 21st; *and the forest also gazes into you* world premiere held on Saturday 7 September 2019 marks the end of the chamber music series.

Do you want to know more about the story behind the curation? Curators **Katherine Don** and **Joyce Wong** share an interview with **Sharon Chan** and **Charles Kwong** of **Project 21st** who share fun insights into the artistic process of creating and composing music for the *To See the Forest and the Trees* exhibition.



Katherine Don: Nature is a big source of inspiration for composers across time and space, how did you go about selecting the musical works for this chamber music series?

Sharon Chan: We created the programme with two main objectives in mind. One is to showcase musical works that took trees, forest and nature as their inspirations. The other one is to highlight the fact that many musical instruments we have today actually derive from the resources of Nature; the sounds of our music, in a sense, are also the sounds we create of Nature.

Joyce Wong: "Lachrymae" is an original score Charles composed in response to the felling of Banyan trees in Hong Kong back in 2015, could you tell us more about the story behind this composition? Is it the first time you drew inspiration from nature for a musical work?

Charles Kwong: Nature is always a very important source of inspiration in my works. "Lachrymae" is neither first nor the last.

This particular work is indeed inspired by the history of the Banyan wall trees in Hong Kong and the sad incidents of how they being cut down that have deeply touched me. These giant old trees became part of the brick walls of Hong Kong Island West not by planning, but by accidents under the power of nature. By grabbing the bricks, the roots of these trees actually helped to hold our walls in withstanding the weathers. These accidental interventions of nature in our city not only formed a kind of protection, but also gave us a very unique urban landscape where generations of Hongkongers shared a community.

However, when the government decided to cut down the four Banyan trees in Bonham Road in 2015, they did it exactly in the fear that these tall trees may fall and thus "threaten the safety of people". It is both very ironic and symbolic, how these guardians-like trees now being regarded as a threat, and therefore "slaughtered". The sight of the remaining "corpses" of these four trees on the brick wall is also highly saddening. "Lachrymae" is basically a work based on such sight, by sounds conjuring four old trees that were slaughtered but still stand.

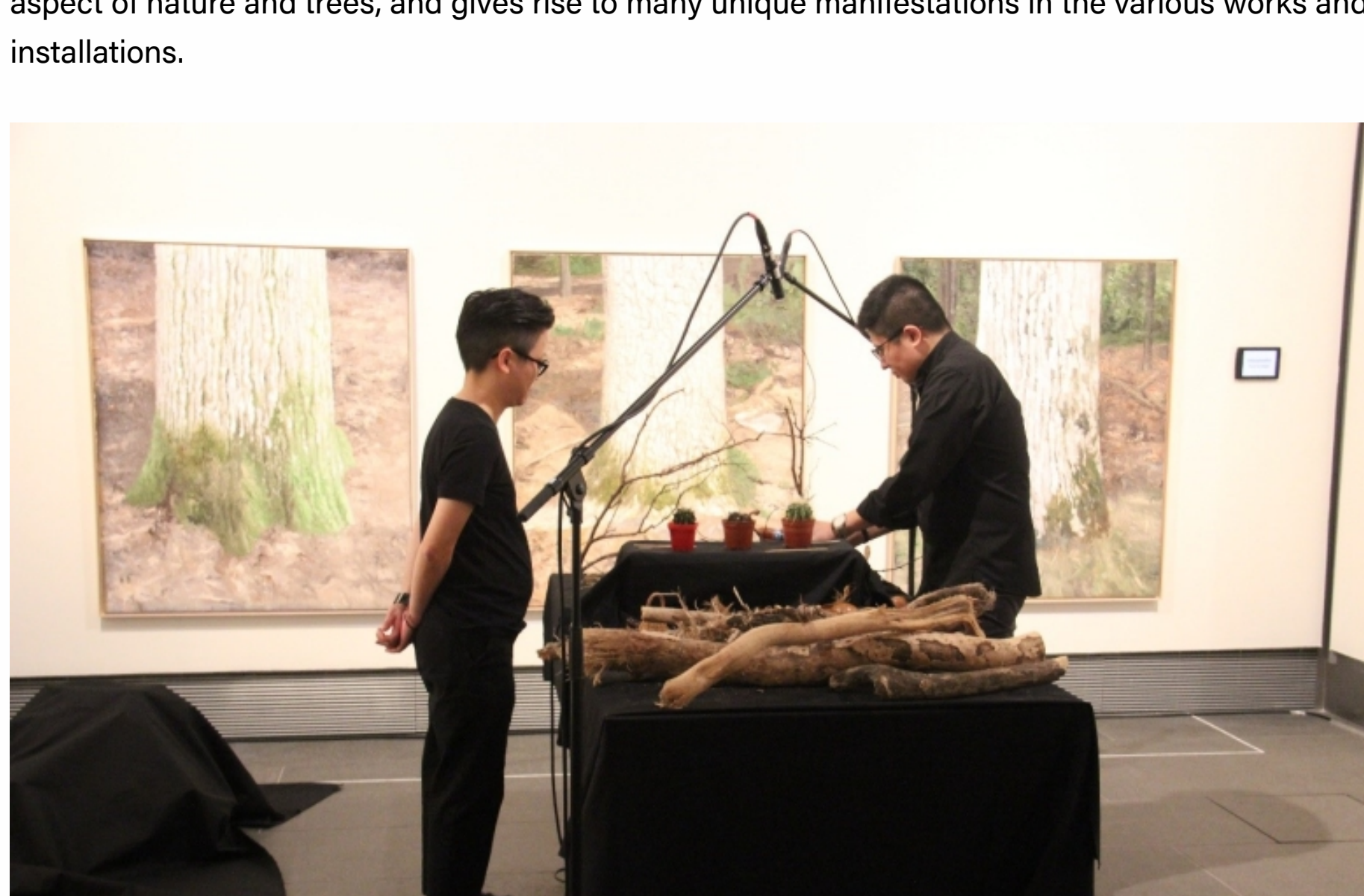


KD: The series also features the world premiere of Charles's new composition "the forest also gazes into you," could you tell us more about this work? Did the environment of ASHK provide any inspiration?

CK: The work is directly inspired by the exhibition title "*To See the Forest and the Trees*". In seeing the trees, I am thinking, some of these trees in Hong Kong could have already stood here for more than hundreds of years, much longer than any of us. I wonder, what they would think, and feel, if they also gaze into us, witnessing how the history of ours unfold, experiencing all our deeds to them, in all these decades and centuries. The work is such imagination of the mind of forests, inspired by the standing of the ancient trees in Hong Kong. And of course, we could spot a few of these very old trees in ASHK, including an impressive Banyan tree struck by lightning in 2015 who although deformed, still elegantly stands. It is awesome that this work could be performed in such a place surrounded by these trees of their own stories.

JW: There is a combination of Chinese and Western compositions in the series, do you find that there are differences in how different cultures approach the subject of nature musically?

CK: Nature is a universal inspiration for artists of any art form, beyond eras and geographical boundaries. When we have an inspiration so universal, the approach of each artist to the subject becomes something that reveals individuality. That's how I conceived of the *Ode to Trees* programmes, and how this exhibition comes together as a whole: each artist picks a different aspect of nature and trees, and gives rise to many unique manifestations in the various works and installations.



KD: Were there any challenges or fun stories behind curating and/or performing this music series?

SC: In the first concert we programmed **John Cage's** compositions "Child of Tree" and "Branches", both of which require the musicians to pick a range of wooden objects to perform with. During the installation of the exhibition and first rehearsal in the gallery, Joyce and Katherine showed us some Shaker-O driftwood and branches of trees leftover from the installation [see *Ripening of Mangosteen* by **Haley Alexander van Oosten**]; from that we selected some as the "instruments" for the performance! In a sense, the setup for the two works is very specific to this exhibition. We are very happy to see this linkage has "naturally" happened.

(Organized by Jason Li)

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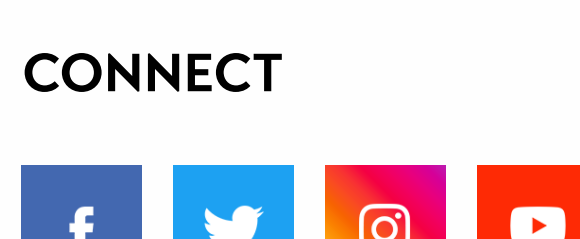
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