

An Interview with Composer Wong Kin Wai



Breaking into the film music business in China and Hong Kong isn't easy. The A-list of Chinese film composers is a short and exclusive one that gets most of the high-profile assignments, with the rest often going to seasoned foreign composers. And yet in just a few years, Wong Kin Wai has managed to go from composing TV jingles to creating his own company, **Fun Track Music Ltd**, and scoring one of the biggest Chinese films of the 2016 summer: Benny Chan's *Call of Heroes*. No wonder, he's a versatile and ambitious new musical voice, one that will most probably be heard more and more in the coming years in the fast-expanding Chinese film industry.

Can you tell us about your academic background, and how you came to be a film composer?

I studied English for Professional Communication at the City University of Hong Kong. I started to learn jazz guitar right before the first year's semester. It wasn't long before for I decided to become a musician. When I graduated, I didn't find any full time job, but I spent a year – in poverty! – shaping up my composing and production skills, making and sending out demos to different producers and bosses out there in the music industry.

Then Chan Kwong Wing gave me a job offer as a composer in his production company, Click Music. There I mostly did jingles and music for TV commercials. The job contract between us was four years, and after that I was offered to be a composer in Peter Kam's company, Opus One Music, where I had a lot of chances to compose for movies. I worked with Peter for five years, and then I started my own business three years ago, in 2013.

Although I've composed several pop songs, I never want to be in the record industry. Neither do I want to be a performing musician. Rather, I am more interested in writing music for stories and for pictures. Whenever I met crossroads in my career path, I just chose by heart. That's how I became a film composer. I think I am quite blessed to have chances doing something I love.

What are your main musical influences?

A lot of Hong Kong people of my age grew up with Japanese pop culture, and I am surely one of them. Animation, games, comic books, drama and movies – and J-pop. I remember the days I put up my headphones and went to secondary school with pop stars like Utada Hikaru, Misia and Ken Hirai. And naturally I like to listen and collect soundtracks from composers like

Yoko Kanno, who is my favourite, Naoki Sato, Iwasaki Taku. I listened to jazz and fusion artists when I was in university, like Chick Corea, guitarist Mike Stern, Weather Report...

Later when I became a composer, I started to listen to – and watch – Hollywood stuff: all those great composers, trying to pick up their composing techniques and observe how they approached different scenarios in movies. Sometimes the approach of Japanese composers and American composers can be quite different, and it's interesting to see and hear how these differences work well in the context.

So what do you feel is the difference between Japanese composers and American composers in their approach to film music, and which ones are you closer to in your own approach?

In my observation, Japanese composers use a more lyrical and expressive approach towards emotional scenes. They rarely make the music detached or abstract, contrary to what you often hear in American movies. I think it's related to what people from different countries and cultures expect to see and hear. Japanese movies – actually I should say Asian movies, in general – their scores have tighter hints of emotion. I often feel western movies comparatively give bigger space for interpretation to audiences. As a Hong Kong composer, I naturally stick closer to the Asian way of scoring movies. And of course how Hong Kong directors shoot their movies does shape my scoring as well.

What are you referring to in particular when you say “how Hong Kong directors shoot their movies does shape my scoring as well”?

When I was composing for my first few Hong Kong movie jobs, I found that Hollywood or Japanese soundtracks did not seem to fit as temp tracks. The feeling was not quite right, especially for the drama parts. I didn't realise what the problem was until one time when Peter Kam told me that the movie language of each country is different and affects the way we should score a movie. That is why temp tracks from other countries do not work perfectly with Hong Kong movies – because the shooting, editing, and the intentions of directors from every culture differ. An example of that is what I mentioned before – tighter hints of emotion are expected in the scenes of Asian movies, compared to Western movies. The movie language of Hong Kong movies has its unique way of talking. So, I think how Hong Kong directors shoot their movies does shape my scoring as well.

So how was working with Peter Kam? What did you learn from him, and how did you share the work on films such as *Speed Angels*, *Out of Inferno*, *Cold War* or *Detective Dee*?

It was a great time. I learned a lot of things about the movie language, and of course about music too. The work schedule was always busy but this is good for picking up skills and developing abilities fast. Peter Kam is a generous teacher and good in explaining how things work. Sometimes he would tell me, “your music in this scene is good. It works. But it's just not my preference. Since it's my movie let's change it to my way.” I think that's a good way to develop a young composer's confidence: by explaining why he made a particular decision. Of course, there were also times when he told me my pieces were not working. The way we share the work really varies by different movies. Sometimes we split the work by reel, sometimes by scene. It depends on the schedule of recording and by the nature of the movie. Usually, he would like me to handle action scenes and chase scenes. He would spend the time on sketching the themes, and I would orchestrate those themes for him.

You mentioned that you created your own company, Fun Track Music Ltd. Can you tell us more about it? What are your ambitions for it?

I guess it is every composer's desire to be able to interpret and to express musical ideas in their own way. “What if I handled this scene my way?”, “what if I were to use this sound palette instead of the one my boss chose?” These are the type of questions that came to me. The urge grew strong, and eventually I quit my position at Opus One to start my own company. During the first year, I had no movie jobs, but TV commercial were coming in as usual. In the second year, I scored two movies, *Little Big Master* by director Adrian Kwan, and *The Strange House* by director Danny Pang. 2016 is the third year, I completed *Call of Heroes* by director Benny Chan. They are movies of different genres and I am quite happy to have the chance

of handling them myself. To me, having my own company is a way to satisfy my desire to express ideas. I do not and cannot think way too far down my career path, but to just keep doing what I like to do.

Last year's *Little Big Master* was your first high-profile and successful film as a solo composer. How was the experience?

It was as surprising as it was challenging to me. I did not expect to work on such an inspirational movie, since most of the movies I had been involved in, up to then, had been action movies. In *Little Big Master*, the stories of the five kids were revealed to the audience one by one. I experimented different ways of making the scenes without them sounding choppy or like a documentary. I think the best part of the music was not my score, but the several old songs chosen by the director. They had a good effect in the movie. All of the critics liked them. I learned quite a lot from the experiments I did in that movie.

This year you reached the next level in your career, as you scored your first big summer film, Benny Chan's *Call of Heroes*. Can you tell us more about the challenges of working solo on a big Benny Chan film, and what approach you took?

Benny only had one requirement: to combine the feel of Clint Eastwood's western movies with the power of Wong Fei Hung movies. There were only two to three rounds of revisions, so the process was very smooth. One thing I really want to share is the strings recording. Unlike most of the other Hong Kong movies, which take their string sessions outside of Hong Kong, I did mine in Hong Kong with local musicians, in the concert hall of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. I hired the strings from Ponte Singers & Orchestra, whose players are all local Hong Kongers. The conductor, Stephen Lam, is a good violinist. He understood my musical intentions really well, gave me a lot of suggestions in articulation, and he conducted the session as well. I also custom ordered the microphone and preamp from the equipment supplier. The team was good and efficient, and the strings sound came out great!

I wish I could get a bigger budget next time, to record brass and woodwind sections too. A lot of Hong Kong movies record their orchestral part in China or Eastern Europe. But I do wish there would be more movie recording sessions done in Hong Kong with local musicians. This would not only bolster support for the local music industry but also help develop a unique "Hong Kong sound", which is important. I wish some day the soundtracks from Hong Kong movies can be used as temp tracks by directors from other countries too. But I think there is still a long way to go.

So far, which of your scores is your favorite, and which one was the most difficult to compose?

I like the one I did for director Danny Pang's thriller, *The Strange House*. Unfortunately, the movie did not do well at the box office. The main theme of the score features a solo violin, and the actress, Xu Jiao, played it on screen: she knows violin, and she even hired a violin teacher for this scene. I like this theme. And there's one scene in the movie, where a demon comes out, and Danny made the face of that demon occupy nearly half of the screen, for like two seconds. Usually, when we see a similar shot taken in Hollywood movies, the music bangs really loud. But I tried doing it the opposite way: a buildup to the shot then total silence for these two seconds. Imagine you are sitting in the dark cinema, with that horrible demon's face occupying that big screen, but no sound at all — just you and that face. I really scared myself doing this scene when I was alone in the studio. I never work on that scene at night. (Laughs) I think the most difficult one was *Little Big Master*. I experimented quite a lot in different scenes and went through each of them one by one with the director.

What are your upcoming projects?

There will be another movie from director Benny Chan, which is a family drama entitled *Meow*, featuring an alien cat. There's not much news released officially so I can't talk more about it, but I am sure the production company One Cool Film will have more updates soon. Also, director Adrian Kwan of *Little Big Master* told me that he's having another movie too at the end of this year. I think I will get more news from him later.

You haven't yet released any of your scores commercially. Is that something you want to do in the future?

Yes... I know it's cliché to say something like “the best is yet to come”, but I always find room to improve after a movie I scored is launched, and that makes me hesitate to release any movie soundtrack of mine. Although I may try to release the soundtrack to *Call of Heroes*, since I really want to promote Hong Kong musicians.

Many thanks to Wong Kin Wai for taking the time to answer my questions.

FILMOGRAPHY :

Shaolin Vs Evil Dead (2004 – Douglas Keung), with Brother Hung

Osaka Wrestling Restaurant (2004 – Tommy Law), with Brother Hung

The Days of Noah (2005 – Yeung Wing Cheung), with Au-Yeung Yip-Cheun

The Haunted School (2007 – Cash Chin)

Single Blog (2007 – Lee Po Cheung)

Fate (2008 – Raymond Yip)

Team of Miracle: We Will Rock You (2009 – Adrian Kwan), with Peter Kam

Reign of Assassins (2010 – Su Chao Bin), with Peter Kam & Anthony Chue
(additional music)

Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame (2010 – Tsui Hark), with Peter Kam (additional music)

Shaolin (2011 – Benny Chan), with Nicolas Errera
(additional music)

Speed Angels (2011 – Jingle Ma), with Peter Kam

The Viral Factor (2012 – Dante Lam), with Peter Kam
(additional music)

Cold War (2012 – Sunny Lunk & Longman Leung), with Peter Kam
(Additional music)

Out of Inferno (2003 – Oxide & Danny Pang), with Peter Kam

Fall in Love (2013 – Hua Ming), with Peter Kam

Little Big Master (2015 – Adrian Kwan)

The Strange House (2015 – Danny Pang)

Blind Spot (2015 – Danny Pang)

Delusion (2016 – Danny Pang)

Call of Heroes (2016 – Benny Chan)

Meow (2017 – Benny Chan)

Find your Voice (2018 – Adrian Kwan)

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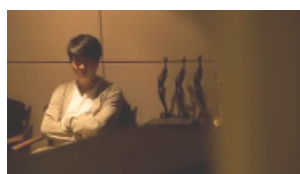
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