

IN CONVERSATION WITH ALEX HO TANGRAM

Alex Ho is a British-Chinese composer based in London. Recent commissions are from London Symphony Orchestra, Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC Radio 3, Royal Opera House, National Opera Studio, Music Theatre Wales, London Sinfonietta, and Riot Ensemble. Alex was joint-winner of the Philip Bates Composition Competition in 2016, winner of the Arthur Bliss Prize in 2017, one of Sound and Music's 'New Voices 2018', a Help Musicians UK Fusion Fund Artist in 2019, and winner of the George Butterworth Award 2020. He is currently studying for a doctorate at the Royal College of Music with a full AHRC scholarship (LAHP Studentship supported by RCM).



TANGRAM 七巧板组合

Tangram is a London-based artist collective catalysing transnational imagination and celebrating the vitality of Chinese cultures. Made up of researchers, composers and performers of Chinese and western instruments, the group launched in 2019 as recipients of the Chinese Arts Now Artist Development Bursary 2019 and winners of Nonclassical's Battle of the Bands 2019. They are currently Associate Ensemble at SOAS.

Tangram has worked with the London Symphony Orchestra and Silk Road Ensemble, and regularly commission works as a way to expand the contemporary classical music space to include non-Eurocentric cultures. Highlights include commissions by Raymond Yiu (shortlisted for RPS Awards 2020), Sun Keting, Jasmin Kent Rodgman, Tonia Ko, and the premiere of Alex Ho's anti-opera, Untold (winner of George Butterworth Prize 2020).

alexhocomposer.com | tangramsound.com

How did Tangram first come about?

The idea of Tangram first came about when I collaborated in 2018 with Tangram co-director Reylon Yount on a piece for solo yangqin (Chinese hammered dulcimer). The piece reflects on shared experiences of our diasporic identities, and on what creating and performing a piece of new music on the yangqin meant for us at that time. The process was hugely generative and we felt there was more in the collaboration than could be expressed in a single piece. We worked on several further projects in the next few months including a yangqin concerto for the Cambridge University Chinese Orchestra and a yangqin-guitar duo for Syracuse University as well as recording Rituals and Resonances at Abbey Road Studios later that year.

Through these projects and through numerous badminton sessions, the idea to form an artist collective dedicated to Chinese diasporic culture emerged. We had met several outstanding artists who shared our vision for a wider musical space that included more music influenced by non-Eurocentric traditions, and so in January 2019, Tangram launched at LSO St Luke's as part of Chinese Arts Now Festival.

What skills have you developed in the process of building Tangram?

Co-directing Tangram has allowed me to understand much better how the classical music industry works. As a composer, I was used to contributing to what I now see is a tiny part of the huge process and effort it takes to put on a single performance. Now that I am responsible for finding opportunities and making them happen, I suddenly have much more culpability though this isn't a bad a thing!

I've learnt so much from the whole process, from how to lead projects to working effectively in a team, from managing my time as a composer and co-director to commissioning other composers on Tangram's behalf, from raising funds for five-figure budgets to making sure we have enough cash flow, and from the joys of making music together to conducting premieres to sell-out audiences!

What did you wish you knew when you were starting out, and what advice do you have for students looking to develop similar projects?

One thing I wish I knew when I was starting out was how much time marketing takes and how important it is!

One bit of advice I would have for students starting their own projects is to be able to summarise what your project is and why it is important in a single sentence!

How do you balance the creative and administrative processes within your business?

Balancing the creative and administrative processes is always a bit of a struggle because we want to prioritise the creative processes when these are only possible once the administrative processes are in place. One of the most important things that we do is to delegate specific administrative responsibilities to different artists. This helps spread the work and means that when we do get to the creative processes, we know that everyone has done their bit to get us to that point.

How do you balance maintaining the standard you want to achieve in your composition/performance while running your business/projects?

Time management and early planning is everything. Each artist in Tangram leads very busy musical lives outside of the collective and so we try to help ourselves as much as possible. This means planning events early, making timelines which tell us when we need to do what and by when, and including contingencies in these timelines when we are inevitably too ambitious. I have had some very late nights to meet composition deadlines that perhaps would not have been so late otherwise, but as long as I am enjoying creating music both as a composer and co-director, I am happy to put in the time and effort!

“Time management and early planning is everything.”

How would you describe your typical audience?

Tangram’s audiences are a mix of groups due to the wide spectrum of projects we undertake and our mission that combines cultural identity, social impact, and music-making. We therefore have audiences whose interests include contemporary classical music, traditional Chinese music, Chinese culture, and East Asian activism.

Do you have any ‘side-hustles’ and how do they support and relate to your artistry?

I am fortunate to be on a full scholarship for my doctorate though I do some teaching at RCM (shout out to History of Opera!) as well as some tutoring beyond. To my surprise, I have found that these ‘side-hustles’ actively help me develop key skills that are relevant to both pursuing a career in composition and directing Tangram. I would encourage musicians who are looking for work outside of music to sustain their artistry to see it as an opportunity rather than a chore in this sense.

How do you see your business evolving going forward? Do you see your model changing?

The main change that current climate has necessitated is how to continue creating music online. We have a few exciting projects that are about to get off the ground and hopefully answer this question to some extent so watch this space!

The focus of today is ‘Building my Business’. Do you have any advice for students relating to this?

I feel we are at a critical time in the classical music industry in the UK. Perhaps more than ever before, due to things like BLM, COVID, and a bleak environmental situation, the industry is open to change and transformation for the better. If you are thinking about creating your own business or group, I would advise you to have a deep think about how your ideas intersect with the current social issues that we face on a daily basis, and we need your ideas to come to fruition now.

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