

Grants for two musical talents

Eileen Tay

He was a musician who was one of the pioneers of Singapore's arts scene. And yesterday, the late Paul Abisheganaden paid it forward, with two young music talents receiving funds from a grant for artistic excellence set up in his name.

An awards ceremony honoured conductor Wong Kah Chun and contemporary classical music composer Emily Koh, both 26, as the first two recipients of the grant, which recognises emerging young talents in the performing arts among students and alumni of the National University of Singapore.

Wong, who specialises in orchestral music, attended the ceremony but Koh, who is in Boston where she is associate director of concert series for the Boston New Music Initiative, was unable to do so.

In an e-mail ahead of the ceremony, Wong said: "This grant comes at a time when there is much more interest and passion in pursuing a life of creative arts in Singapore.

"I am positive it will become an important pillar of support for many young emerging talents in the future and beyond."

The musician, who is undertaking a two-year Master of Music in Orchestral Conducting at Hanns Eisler Hochschule for Music, Germany, and Koh, who is resident composer of Baltimore-based Lunar Ensemble, each receives up to \$10,000, depending on the courses they take. The grant is administered by the NUS Centre for the Arts.

Abisheganaden, who died in 2011 aged 97, was founding director of the university's Centre for Musical Activities, predecessor of Centre for the Arts.

Wong will use the grant money for a week-long training programme in Finland with a close mentor, Jorma Panula, 83, to learn about the symphonies of Jean Sibelius, a Finnish composer.

He says: "This experience will allow me to learn his music in greater and finer detail, and I would be very keen to perform more of his works in the future."

A \$10,000 grant each for conductor Wong Kah Chun (left) and composer Emily Koh (inset).



Wong's father, 63, is a retired civil servant and his mother, 58, works part-time in a childcare centre.

Accolades already under his belt include being the youngest candidate and the second prize-winner of the fifth International Lovro von Matacic Competition for Young Conductors in Croatia.

But he is not resting on his laurels. The graduate with a Bachelor of Music says: "Conducting is a never-ending study, and I am learning every single day."

Koh will spend the grant money on attending music festivals and conferences in music composition and contemporary improvisation, such as the Asian Composers League Festival and Conference, the Etchings Festival held in France, and Summer Institute for Contemporary Performance Practice in Boston.

Koh says in an e-mail to Life!: "It really means a lot to me for my work to be recognised in Singapore as this is where I first gained interest in music and composing, and because it helps my family relate better to my work."

Her father, 51, is a businessman and her mother, 53, is an administration assistant in an IT company.

Koh, a Bachelor of Music graduate, has won many awards and grants including the United States-based Barlow Commission and the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) Morton Gould Young Composers Award.

On the two winners, Ms Christine Khor, 62, director of NUS Centre for the Arts, says: "They have outstanding talent and potential in music despite being only 26 years old, and they have made strong contributions to the community at key NUS events such as the NUS Arts Festival, an annual arts flagship season every March.

"This is in the spirit of Paul Abisheganaden, who displayed strong musicianship and contribution to the community."

Ms Khor is one of the three judges on the panel. The others are Professor Bernard Tan Tiong Gie, 69, a NUS physicist-composer, and Dr Lee Soo Ann, 73, a senior fellow at the NUS department of economics and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. He is the former leader of what went on to become the NUS Symphony Orchestra, in the days when it was the University of Malaya Orchestra.

At the award presentation ceremony yesterday at the NUS University Cultural Centre, Wong received a certificate and a copy of Notes Across The Years: Anecdotes From A Musical Life by Abisheganaden.

The grant was set up last year by Abisheganaden's three daughters, who made a cash gift of \$100,000 to NUS.

Ms Khor says of Abisheganaden: "As a national and campus arts pioneer for over 40 years, though wheelchair-bound, he attended CFA concerts and interacted with CFA student members till shortly before his death."

Abisheganaden was the founder of the Singapore Chamber Ensemble, a precursor to the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

The grant welcomes public donations, which will attract a one-for-one government matching grant.