

Jahja Ling

The Indonesian-Chinese conductor tells **Oliver Chou** about his musical beginnings and performing for Queen Elizabeth.

MY LIFE

EARLY NOTES I was born in Jakarta in 1951. My parents are Indonesian Chinese, originally from Fujian province. In 1946, while my father was a civil servant with the Dutch administration, they took in a lady from Wuhan, in central China. Li Zhixiu was a piano teacher and started a kindergarten at my parents' house. Kids were always singing nursery rhymes, with Li playing the piano my grandma bought for my sister. That became my listening memory. One thing the Dutch left behind after 300 years in Indonesia was the tradition of Western classical music. My father – with his thousands of vinyl records – was familiar with musical legends, such as conductor Erich Kleiber and violinist David Oistrakh. He brought me the knowledge of classical music. But it was Ms Li who took me to the Chinese church where I first sang and harmonised Christian songs and, after formal music training at age seven, played piano and conducted the choir.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? I had a solid training in Mandarin, but it all ended with the anti-Chinese campaign in the 1960s. I even had to take an Indonesian name, Jahja Irwandiarto Mursalim. Jahja, my new first name, pronounced “ya-h-ya”, is the Arabic rendition of Johann, as in Johann Sebastian Bach. Although I have long resumed my Chinese surname, after becoming an American citizen in 1980, I decided to keep Jahja for the sake of my Indonesian origins.

PASTURES NEW I had always wanted to study in Europe, but instead I went to New York on a scholarship after I won the Jakarta Piano Competition in 1968. Professor Mieczysław Munz, of the famous Juilliard School, had been advised by my teacher to hear me play. So en route to a holiday in Bali, he saw me rehearse the Grieg concerto. “You should come to Juilliard,” he said afterwards. And I did. In 1970, I went abroad for the first time. The first stop was Hong Kong. From



there I went straight to New York. For five years at Juilliard I majored in the piano, while studying choral conducting with John Nelson, who told me after a year I had a natural talent in conducting and that I should take that as a major. After graduating, I took his advice and studied orchestral conducting at Yale University under Professor Otto-Werner Mueller, who was a student of the late German guru Richard Strauss. So my wish for European training came true after all.

MEETING MENTORS In spite of my conducting studies at Yale, where I obtained a doctoral degree in 1985, the school advised me not to give up my piano career. I acceded and participated in the 1977 Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition in Israel, where I won a bronze medal. After the 1978 Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition in Moscow, I did my first Asian tour as a pianist, including in Hong Kong, at the new Academic Hall of the Baptist College (now University).

At the Tanglewood Music Festival in Boston, in 1979, I met the late Leonard Bernstein. He became a mentor to me and granted me a conducting fellowship at the festival in 1980. “You’ll be a good conductor one day,” he said to me after a concert, with a hug.

It was with his reference letter, plus those from maestros Seiji Ozawa and André Previn, that I got an audition with the San Francisco Symphony, and beat some 300 applicants to win the position as assistant conductor. The music director then was Edo de Waart (who would, in 2004, become the artistic director and chief conductor of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra). I was made responsible for forming a youth orchestra.

TAKING THE LIMELIGHT In 1983, the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra enjoyed the honour of performing at the state visit of Queen Elizabeth. Aside from works by Elgar and Copland, we accompanied Tony Bennett in the famous hit *I Left my*

Heart in San Francisco. The hour-long event was televised nationally and that put the youth orchestra on the map. Accolades were showered on me afterwards, as were guest conducting invitations from the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra and Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. But more importantly, Christoph von Dohnanyi, the new music director of the renowned Cleveland Orchestra, invited me to be the resident conductor. He stayed there until 2002, a total of 18 years, and so did I.

Concurrently, I served as music director of the Florida Orchestra. A major highlight of my tenure was performing at the Super Bowl XXV in 1991, and accompanying Whitney Houston in the national anthem. Before the show started, I said to her, “Miss Houston, it’s such a great pleasure to perform with you.” She replied, “It is my honour to do this with you.” It was during the first Gulf war, so security was very tight.

LOVE LOST My career took me overseas, too, with the appointment as artistic director of Taiwan’s National Symphony Orchestra. My wife, Jane, was Taiwanese, so we decided to take up the post in 1997. But just before I was due to start, a year later, she died of lung cancer. It was devastating. Only by the grace of God could I cope with the depression. Our two boys were very good and kept me company during the difficult times.

MUSIC IN THE MAINLAND I joined the San Diego Symphony Orchestra as music director in 2004, and it has been a satisfying partnership for the past decade. Last October, we made our debut at Carnegie Hall, in New York. After that we went on our historic tour of China. It was a truly memorable experience to perform at Yantai, Shandong province, the sister city of San Diego. The host arranged for 101 children to sing with us to *America the Beautiful* then *Jasmine Flowers*. We did *Jasmine* again in Shanghai and the audience went crazy.

We have all kinds of barriers, race, politics, language, to name a few. But all these are eliminated by the one universal language: music.