

"Music as a pillar of stability"

Kieran Tan has been learning the piano for the past decade at Coronation Music School with Teacher Angela since he was 6 years old.

Let's find out more about his journey, takeaways and more!



Kieran, you're currently 16 years old and have been learning the piano with Coronation Music School and Teacher Angela for the past decade. What has been the most memorable moments of your music learning journey during your primary school years?

I think the most memorable moment for me learning music in my primary school years was during the Twinkle Music Soiree the school had in 2017. It was my first real experience of playing in front of a somewhat large audience, and it sort of diminished the notion that I had, that playing the piano was solely about getting all the notes right, when in actuality it is so much more than that. This, in addition to regular lessons and rehearsals, allowed me to brush up on my skills of expression, articulation, etc.

The Soiree was also the first time I have ever accompanied someone, my brother. The piece that we chose was quite unconventional at the time for me as it was a jazz piece, "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered". It allowed me to explore different aspects of performance and to understand the importance of the stylistic traits that a piece encompasses with regard to its era. The element of accompaniment also taught me vital communication skills which I am very grateful for and still use frequently, be it in music performance or just in daily life, to be able to pick up on cues and to be able to allow the leader, in this case the singer, to shine.

I remember being quite a stubborn kid during lessons. In my primary school years, I recall not putting a lot of effort into learning the piano and Teacher Angela had to assign me weekly practice schedules with parental signatures to ensure that I at least had some degree of consistent practice in preparation for the imminent exams then. In hindsight, I am beyond grateful for this. Although I initially was reluctant to practice, I came to see that improvement will only come through consistent practice and saw the tangible results, which motivated me to practice further and improve myself, both as a musician and as a person. This also helped to instil in me the discipline that is required to achieve improvement.



What were the toughest setbacks to deal with back then?

One of the toughest setbacks for me to deal with was my stamina during practice, both physically and mentally. My finger strength was (and still to an extent is) quite weak, and this showed in my playing. My lack of technique also exacerbated this at the time. Hence, I had to program myself to practice slowly, with firm touch, and resist the temptation to play everything at full speed.

Back then, some of the pieces that I played did not really interest me at first. It was only around Grade 5 or Grade 6 that I somewhat understood the emotional value of the pieces that were in the lists, and came to really love music. This encouraged me to play them as best as I can.

How has music or piano influenced your outlook on life?

At first, it did not hold much importance to me. But over time, I realised that learning music was really about learning to empathise, with the composer and with the struggles of a time and place that I have never been to. To be able to learn music has given me the ability to express myself better, and allowed me to empathise with others to a degree that I otherwise would not have been able to. Music has also allowed me to be more optimistic but also realistic - when I put in the work, I believe that the results will show the effort I put in.

How has it changed going into secondary school?

The period from my PSLE in 2018 up to the beginning of Secondary 1 was a turning point in my musical journey, in my opinion. I started to take music and piano much more seriously and found a lot more joy in learning in general. In secondary school I joined my school's Music Elective Programme which also helped to reinforce what I had already learnt prior.

Going into secondary school, I became more open-minded to try pieces of different styles and by different composers - originally outside of my comfort zone, a notable example being Faure (which Teacher Angela introduced to me). Although it is not exactly my strongest suit to play pieces by composers outside of my comfort zone, I get to explore and discover new things about music and empathise with the history/era that it embodies.

Tell us more about the preparation process for the 3rd Nanyang International Competition.

How nerve-wrecking was the process and what did you learn the most from it?

The preparation process for the 3rd Nanyang International Music Competition was definitely challenging and stressful. I had a 3-month window between the date of application for the competition and the date of submission for the virtual audition. I was very shocked that I made it through to the live performance round, which I reacted to with more anxiety than excitement. I had 1 month more of preparation after being notified of my selection. The preparation period for the NIMC was very stressful for me. This was my first participation in a music competition and the fact that I was someone growing up with a considerable amount of stage fright certainly did not help. Moreover, the requirements of a competition are vastly different from that of an exam. Teacher Angela has emphasised to me that significant showmanship, in addition to refinement of my articulation, dynamics, tone etc was necessary to have any chance of success in the competition.



Although I did not win any big prizes and did not achieve my personal target of at least getting the Bronze award, I am extremely grateful for the feedback and learnings in the process of preparing for the competition. The adjudicators commented on areas of my playing that I have consistently overlooked. Their feedback, in addition to years of Teacher Angela's feedback, has helped me to enhance my playing and remind me the need to improve many aspects of my playing (pedalling, cantabile style, tension and release, contrast and colour change). Overall, I learnt to take the harsh but very helpful and detailed feedback in my stride and use these to improve my playing.

To Teacher Angela:

What are some of the biggest changes you have observed in Kieran throughout all these years of learning and music making?

What has stayed the same that could be improved?

Kieran has matured as a student over the years, becoming more conscientious and enthusiastic in learning. He also has a keen interest in exploring a wider range of composers and genres.

As a primary school student, Kieran, like many other children his age, had many distractions. Because of this, he was not as diligent in his daily practice as he could have been. Learning a single examination piece could take us several months.

Kieran was also careless and impatient, skimming through the pieces but disregarding details such as the fingering and expression. His goal was to get through the whole piece regardless of the many wrong notes. We would then have to go through the piece, bar by bar, and even then, he would still get it wrong at the next lesson.

Today, Kieran's music scores are well-annotated with fingerings, practice posts, bite-size reminders, and other performance notes. He takes it in his pride to prepare well for each lesson.

Despite school and other commitments, Kieran now plans his practices in smaller bites which often yields better results. He probably remembers my constant reminder of "quantity over quality!"

Kieran has also grown to be self-aware and sensitive in his playing. He does get a little upset with himself if he cannot perform a passage correctly, but I believe this makes him even more determined in perfecting the piece as best as he can.

Still a little impatient and impulsive at times, Kieran can definitely improve his playing through slow and careful practice, and to internalise the music before bringing it up to speed. Nonetheless, Kieran has definitely grown musically and has great potential in excelling further.



To Kieran:

What are your thoughts on Teacher Angela's feedback?

I feel that it is very straightforward and direct, which makes understanding my mistakes quite a lot easier. Her feedback has allowed me to discover the different aspects of playing that makes music, music. Admittedly I tend to forget a lot of the fundamentals when learning something new as I get too excited to just play, and she helps to firmly point this out to me. I want to thank her for tolerating my stubbornness and still giving me her unwavering support and helpful feedback over the years.

You'll be stepping into the world of higher education stage soon, how can music and piano help you cope with that transition and uncertainty of the unknown?

The world of higher education is definitely quite daunting to me, especially with the looming exams that I will have to undertake in addition to new people and a radically changed school environment that is junior college.

I hope that music and piano will help me to relieve stress from time to time and give me a creative outlet to pursue my passion as it has done for a good 10 years. I hope that this will be a pillar of stability for me in transitioning to a completely new environment and lifestyle, and something that I can always count on amidst the ever-increasing challenges and responsibilities I will eventually have to face.

Any other thoughts and advice for younger students who might be struggling with managing and coping with music learning, schoolwork, and life?

I don't think I am in the position to advise them, but, if I had anything to say, it would be to believe in yourself and that if you put in the effort conscientiously, the results will, more often than not, show. For balancing many various commitments, I believe that if you love what you do, you can and will get it done. I hope that they will achieve what they set out for!

