

In sweet harmony

AS the first private institution in Malaysia to offer degrees in music, UCSI University's Institute of Music (IMus) is no stranger to breaking new ground. All efforts so far have focused on pushing the envelope on the local front. But this year, UCSI is setting its sights on the global stage as it becomes the first in the world to offer studies in chromatic harmonica on a tertiary level. Students pursuing UCSI's Bachelor of Classical Music (Hons) or Foundation in Music with a classical specialisation will now be able to choose the harmonica as their major instrument.

A project which has been in the pipeline for over a year, the syllabus was written from scratch with the combined efforts of UCSI IMus director Prof Dr P'ng Tean Hwa, Classical Music programme head Ysan Sui Yin and UCSI alumnus and award-winning harmonica artiste Ho Chee Kin.

In building the syllabus, Ho incorporated all his playing techniques which he had perfected over the past 22 years.

A well-known musician in this growing industry, his distinctive playing skills has taken him all over the world where he bested the competition in Germany, Japan and the UK and performed at concert halls in Beijing, Hong Kong and South Korea. Most notably, he swept four champion titles at the International Harmonica Festival and Competition in Great Britain. For being the first to represent Malaysia at an international harmonica competition, he was awarded a place in the *Malaysia Book of Records*.

Ho highly recommends the harmonica to everyone, especially students. "What makes it special is that you play completely by touch. This helps develop one's imagination, which is equally important as knowledge."

While the harmonica may not be the first instrument to come to mind when one thinks about playing music, its popularity is certainly gaining ground.

This is largely due to the musicians who have been working hard to elevate the harmonica's prominence in the music industry. On the home front, UCSI alumna Evelyn

Choong of Fresco Harmonica – a leading harmonica band in Malaysia – is able to look back and trace the difference in public perception from about a decade ago.

"We had to have many performances just to create awareness," said Choong, who founded the band in 2006 with fellow course mate Aiden Soon when they were in their second year of study at UCSI. "We worked very hard to build up the harmonica's image as a serious instrument and thankfully, more people have started to appreciate the harmonica's unique sound and the musicality involved."

Fresco Harmonica has expanded from a performing duo to an ensemble of 10 and established the first harmonica symphony orchestra in Malaysia. They have won several championship titles in Germany, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan and have shared the stage with Asia's prominent artistes, including Shila Amzah, Nicholas Teo and Alan Tam. Their success paves the way for future players.

It is UCSI's Classical Music programme that first put the university on the map. Since then, the introduction of the Bachelor of Contemporary Music (Hons) and Master of Music (Performance Studies) have equally served to contribute to the institute's

standing as Malaysia's foremost music force.

Students have won competitions based on their talent and skills in a variety of instruments. They have performed at the famed Carnegie Hall in New York. The UCSI choir with 120 students have performed with the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra twice. With UCSI expanding its Kuala Lumpur campus to encompass two new academic blocks, the institution will continue to train future musicians in dedicated teaching studios, practice rooms and a 500-seat recital hall.

■ To find out more about UCSI University's Institute of Music, call 03-9101 8882 or log on to www.ucsiuniversity.edu.my/onlineenquiry.

The KL campus is also open daily for extended counselling sessions, inclusive of weekends and public holidays.



Ho Chee Kin has honed his harmonica skills and he's sharing all that he has learnt in UCSI's new syllabus.



Fresco Harmonica has won multiple awards over the last decade including the coveted championship title twice at the prestigious Germany World Harmonica Festival.