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PIANO PIONEERS OF SINGAPORE

Nicholas Chiu



Mr Chiu Yeo Teck was born in Ningbo, Zhejiang and raised in a close-knit family of six children. He left China during its turbulent Republican era. The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) had just ended and China was mired in a full-blown civil war.

In the 1920s, Yeo Teck's uncle first came to Singapore in search of opportunities in the piano trade. Yeo Teck's elder brother, Yeo Ding, followed suit in the 1930s. At age 21, Yeo Teck joined them in 1947 to establish the nascent piano industry in Singapore.

The Ningbo Connection - A Predestined Lineage in the History of Piano-Manufacturing in Asia

The piano was first imported into China at the end of the 19th century by British trader, Moutrie, who in 1890, had built the first piano factory in Shanghai. Moutrie employed only British or Indians as he did not want to transfer the skills to the Chinese.

However, by the late 1890s, Moutrie started to recruit Ningbonese woodcutters to work in piano production. Hiring from Ningbo was an obvious choice. The City, near Shanghai was famous for its woodcutting skills which were crucial to piano-making – wood makes up the bulk of a piano's raw materials. That decision marked the start of the close relationship between the Ningbo people and the art of piano-making.

Not surprising, some of these Ningbonese went on to build their own factories. By the turn of the 20th century, all 12 new piano factories in Shanghai were Ningbonese, in addition to the many Ningbonese still in Moutrie's two factories. Well into the 1950s at the start of the People's Republic of China, Ningbonese continued to dominate the piano industry – all the heads of China's four state-owned piano factories were Ningbonese. This shows the collective importance of individual Ningbonese in shaping the piano industry in the region as we know it today.

Struggle – The Early Years

In the late 1940s, Singapore's post-war economy had just begun its recovery. Pianos were still largely the preserve of our colonial rulers and the upper echelons of society.

The Chiu brothers rented the ground floor of a 3-storey shophouse along Cairnhill Road where they started their first piano business.

This was where Yeo Teck learnt every trick of the piano trade from his elder brother. Those skills were rare and of increasing demand as there were very few qualified piano technicians. Over the coming years, he developed an all-rounded technical mastery of the trade.



Orchard Road (c.1928)

Piano repairs and the sale of refurbished pianos kept the Chiu brothers going until their tenancy was abruptly terminated in 1950, with their shophouse slated for re-development. This brought a premature end to their first piano business.

The next few years would prove to be lean ones for Yeo Teck. The sun was setting over the British Empire in the politically and socially turbulent climate of the 1950s. With many in the fast-shrinking colonial administration and British army returning home, public auctions of pianos were commonplace. Yeo Teck would regularly attend these auctions and engage in bidding wars for these pianos.

Every lot of these pianos he won received the individual and meticulous attention of a craftsman brimming with passion for his craft. He would spend days on end working in isolation, expertly restoring these pre-owned pianos to their former glory. His stock of newly-restored pianos never remained with him for long, representing the best price for the quality in the market. This unwavering commitment to both quality and value would endure the transition from second-hand pianos to dealing in new pianos and became the founding principle of *Chiu Piano*.

Convergence & Divergence

Years later, Yeo Ding left their uncle's piano business and with Yeo Teck, started their second piano business, *Singapore Piano*. This was their first foray into the firsthand piano business, to satisfy the already widespread and fast-growing demand for new pianos. Yeo Teck personally oversaw and attended to all technical aspects of the business to great success. Business was brisk and it wasn't long before the company had built up an impressive European



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For marketing or any other enquiries, please contact: enquiry@tutti.sg

Editorial Team

Prof. Lim Yeow Khee (Advisor)

Carol Cheng (Editor)

Tay Weiyang (News Editor)

Pung Ki May (Design & Layout)



dealership, representing some of the most prestigious piano brands at that time such as *Ibach and Rippen*. However, due to a schism in opinion over the company's strategic direction, independence soon loomed over the horizon again.



Chiu family and staff outside the newly-opened shop, 1979

Chiu Piano finally settled at Thomson Plaza (where it is today) after much deliberation and opened for business in 1979, being the latest in a long line of Chiu family piano dealerships. By this time, Yeo Teck's son, Ernest had already joined the business as a third-generation. Ernest, having apprenticed at *Singapore Piano* for two years prior to the split.

Starting almost from scratch again was an extremely humbling experience for both father and son as they sought to build up their new dealership. *Chiu Piano's* first brands, such as the English-made Cramer, were very well received and served as the perfect stepping stones to approach the industry's most established brands.

Steingraeber & Söhne came first in 1981. Mr Udo Schmidt-Steingraeber having been thrust into the company's management after the passing of his father, developed an unshakable friendship with Ernest. Their friendship blossomed in a time of great uncertainty for many established European manufacturers facing stiff Asian competition.

As a small and highly-focused dealership, *Chiu Piano* consistently outperformed their bigger rivals and embarked on a curated consolidation of only the best. In a string of milestones, they became the home of the best British pianos with Kemble's dealership, followed closely by Austria's Bösendorfer and Germany's Schimmel, all similarly impressed with their expertise in handling the finest quality pianos. In 2009, August Förster became the latest addition to their prestigious range of German pianos.

Today, *Chiu Piano* continues to be a family-run business with its fourth-generation already waiting in the wings.

"Though challenging times lie ahead for the piano industry, we look towards the future with strength and inspiration from our storied past and an unwavering commitment in helping others find their keys to happiness".



From left: Yeo Ding & Yeo Teck



Ernest with Udo & Cordelia Steingraeber and Wolfgang Schäffler at the Musikmesse Frankfurt 2016

EDITOR'S KEYBOARD

Have you ever been inspired by people around you? Or feeling unmotivated at the start of 2017? We hope three articles, "Piano Pioneers of Singapore", "Pursuing a Rare Profession" and "Musicians with Disability" can inspire you! It is noteworthy that the people we featured in these articles have the same attributes which influenced their success. Determination and perseverance are the keys! The piano pioneers set foot on this land way back in the 1920s and were determined to establish a flourishing trade. While the two young Singaporeans did not give up pursuing a rare profession that may not be lucrative but fulfilling. In "Musicians with Disability", read about how the three musicians; a percussionist, a violinist and a pianist overcome their disability to become internationally acclaimed musicians.

Fret not, if you are feeling blue, our writer Xiao Ling shared with us why listening to sad music can alleviate our negative mood and emotions. However, it may not work for people with depression. Dr Helen Bonny's method of "Guided Imagery and Music" has proven to be an effective method to help people with depression in the USA, Europe and Australia. Unfortunately, this is unknown in Singapore. Read about this method in my article "Guided Imagery and Music".

On a lighter note, we have included some upcoming music camps organised by Quarternotez as well as Rachel's trip to Yale University with her interesting find at the "Yale Collection of Musical Instruments".

Tutti wishes all readers a Great 2017!

Carol Cheng