

As they prepare for their upcoming performance with the HK Philharmonic, **Ivana Wong** and **Alex Fung** tell Arthur Tam about how they met and how they can finally hear their music played properly. Photography by Calvin Sit

MUSIC SPECIAL

The sweet smell of success

Wardrobe Route by Yuvia Huang Yaji, courtesy of Hong Kong Design Institute

Styling Arthur Tam
Art direction Phoebe Cheng and Noel de Guzman

Alex:
Hair: Niki Lee @ Headquarters
Makeup: Kirsty @ Facedesign

Ivana:
Hair: Kate Shek @ Hair Culture
Makeup: Janice Tao @ Zing the makeup school

It's a dream come true for musicians Ivana Wong Yuen-chi and Alex Fung Hon-ming. Finally, their music has been recognised and they have been invited by the Hong Kong Philharmonic to perform at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Concert Hall backed by a full orchestra in the show, *Fragrance of Music*. For classically trained singer-songwriters like Wong and Fung, this is the highest honour imaginable in the city.

And the timing couldn't have been more perfect. This is Wong's 10th anniversary in the music industry and she's more popular than she has ever been, selling out her Hong Kong Coliseum concert last year and nabbing the best newcomer title at the Hong Kong Film Awards this year for her comedic and on-point performance as a Mainland prostitute in *Golden Chickens*. Wong also has a new film in theatres called *Love Detective*, in which she plays a whacky cop who goes undercover at a modelling agency to figure out the identity of the woman who stole her boyfriend.

Upon meeting Wong though, you would never imagine that she would have such a natural talent for acting – especially comedy. Her shy, humble yet spritely demeanour belies her vibrant onstage presence on the big screen or on stage in musicals like *Little Hong Kong Season 5*.

She's a rising star on camera, but ultimately she's a musician first and foremost – and a chameleon at that à la Björk. But comparing Wong to any other artist would do her a grave disservice and it would be limiting. She can play a classic concerto with her eyes closed, compose haunting, wistful ballads and then seamlessly shift to ethereal dubstep.

Talent on its own, however, often isn't enough to make someone successful. Wong's current popularity is largely in part due to her long time collaboration with Fung (aka The Invisible Men) as her producer. Fung has worked with everyone and anyone in the industry and is highly sought after for his expertise in arranging musical pieces, but he commits

most of his time to work with Wong – an old friend who he has known since high school. Musically, they sync as well as Sonny and Cher, Simon and Garfunkel or The Carpenters and have been able to carve out a place in Hong Kong's music industry, away from the often trite and karaoke-driven Cantopop.

Ahead of their orchestral performance we speak to the pair about how they met, their makeshift studio and throwing keyboards at computer screens.

You've worked together for over a decade now. How did this relationship begin?

Wong: We've been friends from long ago, starting from secondary school, since Form 2.

Fung: I feel like we are at marriage counselling right now [laughs].

W: Since 14-years-old.

F: Now we're just getting old.

How did music come into play?

W: In the most cliché way. I was singing and he was playing the piano, and then our teacher asked us to perform together for Christmas events and all kind of festivals like the school anniversary.

F: They believed in us and let us create our own programmes.

W: We sang *One Sweet Day*. I basically had to skip my lunch to practise with him, which is a big sacrifice for me. It's a big deal for me to skip my lunch! [Wong is well known for having hunger management issues]. This just proves how much I love music.

F: It was a big deal indeed. They served pretty good chicken thigh at our school, so it was a big loss on both our parts.

But after secondary school, we actually didn't see each other for like 10 years. I went to the States and she went to Vancouver, so we basically lost contact.

But 10 years later you reconnected...

W: It's funny, we were just trying to remember how. A common friend put us in touch because he knew that Alex had just started in the industry and I had just

won the CASH (Composers and Authors Society of Hong Kong) competition. So the timing was right to reconnect.

And you guys just wanted to collaborate upon reconnecting?

F: It wasn't that cliché.

W: It was more like 'yo yo yo man', something like that [laughs]. Alex was keen to show me his studio at home, so I went – and he had this small keyboard that he was making demos with.

F: It was a so-called studio...

W: That's how you sold it, and it turned out to be this 10 sq ft corner within his room.

F: By my personal bed no less. To be fair, the whole room was about 40 sq ft.

By Hong Kong standards, that could actually be a studio.

W: I actually enjoyed it a lot.

F: She's actually the only girl that I allowed to sit on my bed [laughs].

W: We did a lot of demos in that studio for other artists. It was really fun because his keyboard was so tiny, so we always had to pause so he could shift the octave.

F: I couldn't even afford a full 88-key keyboard. It took dedication on both our parts to work like that. I'm glad Ivana wasn't repulsed by it.

Why do you think you work so well together?

W: I'm not sure, but all I know is that I feel so spoiled that he's been able to work with me for so many albums. I can't work with any other producers. I don't know how.

F: We share the same wavelength – the stuff that we love, our overall taste and musical sensibilities.

And what would that usually be?

W: The dreamy ones...

F: Music without limitations. We both like electronic music, artists like Björk and Frou Frou. But we were also classically trained, so we do have the fundamentals for what I would say is boring music for some people. But at the same time, I do love hip-hop and RnB, and she loves alternative rock like Radiohead. ▶

“ I threw stuff and punched walls. I literally threw my keyboard at my computer screen



What's your process like?

F: Sometimes when she's writing a melody, I'll add something in and then she'll retweak it a bit.

W: Yeah, it's a back and forth communication between us.

Do either of you ever get frustrated with each other?

W: Never towards each other, but towards the market or the music company. Everyone has an opinion and it sometimes makes us feel a little bit frustrated or lost.

How do you deal with it?

F: At the beginning, I would throw some stuff or punch walls. I literally threw my keyboard at my computer screen. Amazingly, I only broke the keyboard. I felt really disrespected and repressed in a weird way because music is supposed to free our minds, and art is supposed to free us from boundaries, but instead, it gave us a lot more steps and rules.

I'm still learning. I'm still learning to get the perfect balance between being a good pop-music producer and at the same time helping artists reach their full potential. It's hard, it's always a balancing act. You just have to learn through every piece of music that you make.

Do you both think you've gained more respect from the industry now?

W: I'm not too sure about that one. I do feel that people who liked us before treasure our music even more now. But I'm not sure if our fanbase is actually growing. Hopefully it is though [laughs].

Alex, you came out with your first solo album two years ago. Does this mean you want to come out from behind the curtain and into the spotlight?

F: I didn't intend to be the front man. But, like Ivana, I like performing. I would love to perform every piece I've created, so that people can get the emotions from me directly, instead of through someone else.

Ivana, musically, would you say that you are going back to your roots?

W: My music reflects what I'm feeling at the moment. I didn't intentionally start writing the way I am right now, but it turns out that the music style for my past few singles sound like three movements of the same piece. I'm not going backwards, but I'm connecting my original self with greater depth.

How do you feel about the positive responses you've been receiving regarding your acting career?

W: It excites me to know that people enjoy my acting style. I'm still a very green actress. I do sometimes feel worried that maybe people find me not too focused on music anymore. There are doubts about whether I still devote enough time to music and whether I'm really still the Ivana that everyone knew.

To be fair, you haven't come out with a CD for a while.

W: Not a full album, but songs here and there. I think it took me some time to actually believe that I'm being a versatile artist. During this whole process, I'm exploring my own potential and possibilities in performing on different stages, whether it's a drama stage, TV stage or a concert stage. So on the artistry side, I'm growing and developing, and now, I'm shaping myself as an all-round performing artist, and that's actually my biggest dream and goal right now. I don't want to make myself feel guilty that I spend less time on music. It's not true. I'm just giving myself time to come out with one very good album, instead of forcing myself to come out with two poor ones per year.

When is your next album going to drop?

W: The first quarter of next year and it'll be a Mandarin album because it has been a while since I last released one. It's not as easy as before you know – society changes, culture changes. It took more time for a Mandarin album to actually come true this time.

Can you elaborate on these changes for us?

W: In the past you could get a full budget to do a physical release, but right now the market is going for singles and digital releases, so budgets have changed. For an album to happen, you need allocate budget for the promotions, logistics, marketing and everything else, so it's way more complicated than just uploading a single or album.

Acting-wise, it seems you gravitate towards comedy. Is that on purpose?

W: People find me funny [chuckles]. At first, I didn't believe it because I don't find myself funny. So I decided to go to a regular screening of one of the films in secret, to see how people really feel about my acting.

The first time we met, you seemed very shy, but you become so vibrant and alive during your performances. Are you just pretending in front of us?

W: I am shy! But that's just the beauty and magic of the stage. When the lights are on and when the costumes are on, I feel full of energy and power. I transform into someone else. I'm enjoying this extreme change behind and in front of the screen.

How serious are you about developing your acting career?

W: I'm going to keep on doing different performances on different stages. I always think that even when I am singing a song, I'm actually playing the character of that song. I'm not just singing. So, in a way, my acting and music inspire each other. When I performed at the Coliseum last year, I wouldn't have imagined that I could have had that much power before I acted.

You seem like you're happier and having much more fun now...

W: I'm having more fun and I'm getting more inspired by everything I do now. But that hasn't changed the fact that I am shy [laughs]. I'm not pretending.

Tell me about your upcoming collaboration with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra for Fragrance of Music...

F: Actually, the Philharmonic invited Ivana and then she called me and said, "You're going to do a show with me for Philharmonic." And I was like, "Yay, finally!"

W: It's as if all the beautiful lines that we've written can finally be played properly.

F: Or put it this way, the size of the orchestra finally meets the energy we want people to feel.

What do you want the audience to take away from this music experience? And what do you think is different from your previous concerts?

W: I hope that their hearts will melt. It's not about how well we do. We just hope to inspire more hearts.

F: That's right. ■

Fragrance of Music HKCC, Oct 16 & 17. Tickets: \$280-\$780. hkphil.org.

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Producer & Director
Lo Kingman

Hong Kong Virtuosi

Chorus of the Opera
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Choreographer
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Sets
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