

Professor David Gwilt, MBE

Professor Gwilt is a legend: his fame preceded his arrival in Hong Kong, in 1970.

That year, I was working as a volunteer, trying to raise funds to send the Hong Kong Youth Orchestra to the International Festival of Youth Orchestras, held every summer at Aberdeen, Scotland.

“Hong Kong is so fortunate! A wonderful musician will soon be joining us, from Scotland: David Gwilt, composer, pianist, and in his younger years, leader of the violas in the British National Youth Orchestra,” said Margaret Money, founding conductor of the Hong Kong Youth Orchestra, who also came from Scotland, in 1963.

Professor Gwilt’s fame was fully justified. Over the next 52 years, he took part in every field of work related to classical music education and performance in Hong Kong.

In every field, he excelled.



As a teacher, he has nurtured multiple generations of professional musicians and academics. As a performer, his skill as a pianist, violist and conductor was dazzling, deeply appreciated by audiences and fellow performers. As a music critic, his writing graced many a performance. His broadcasts on the radio were always educational, entertaining and inspiring.

As a composer, Professor Gwilt’s creations span every spectrum of classical music, from orchestral, Chinese and symphonic, to instrumental, to choral works. I shall write about two.

In 1973, he wrote “Rondino” for the Hong Kong Youth Orchestra, and conducted it on 14 August at its world premiere at Aberdeen, Scotland, when the Youth Orchestra performed at the International Festival of Youth Orchestras. Members of the Youth Orchestra were deeply impressed. “It’s wonderful!” said one player. “His music spotlights so many different scenes in Hong Kong: our busy markets, Cantonese opera, and our wonderful Harbour. Amazing!”



The second composition comes from an entirely different era and setting.

In 2009, together with a number of friends, I set up a charitable organization, the Music for Our Young Foundation (MOY), which provided training for children at Tin Shui Wai, where orchestral music training was, at the time, almost non-existent.

Professor Gwilt heard about the MOY.

“Good effort, Gordon. Let me write a short suite, for your Strings,” he said.

“Wow..... you are too kind, David,” I said. “But the MOY put little emphasis on musical talent or skill when we accepted our students. Actually we took anyone who came. Our goal is character training..... music is..... well, just a tool. So our standards may be.....”

“I know your goal and philosophy,” said Professor Gwilt. “It’s going to be challenging, for the students, and for me..... but let’s have a go. I’ll come to Tin Shui Wai and work with the students.”

To our students at Tin Shui Wai, Professor Gwilt's "Miniatures", which had six movements, was inspirational.

"You are blessed," said one string teacher. "Fancy playing a string Suite specifically composed for you, by a teacher of Professor Gwilt's fame and standing!"

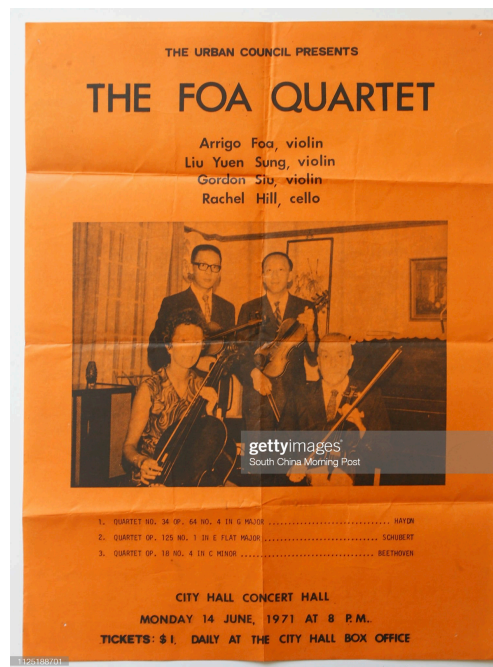
The MOY String Ensemble worked with Professor Gwilt over a period of twelve weeks, from 4 October, 2014. On 28 December 2014, Professor Gwilt conducted the premiere performance of "Miniatures" at the Y Theater, Youth Square, Hong Kong.



As I write this article, many pictures flash through my mind:

Professor Gwilt conducting, in the Concert Hall of the City Hall, me playing a viola in an orchestra, the name of which I can no longer remember.....

In a studio, Professor Gwilt recording a Haydn composition, played..... yes, by the Foa Quartet.....



At Radio Hong Kong, Professor Gwilt talking to his guests on Radio 4, the airwaves filled with his encyclopedic commentary on classical music, and his sparkling humour.....



Enthusiastic supporters of the Sport of Kings, Professor Gwilt and Mrs Shirley Gwilt, at the Club House of the Sha Tin Race Course, in search of that mysterious formula which can reportedly predict equine performance.....



And now, a view from the sitting room of their home in Sai Kung, with Professor Gwilt, Mrs Gwilt and their two cats, looking out on to a lush green lawn, on a crisp, autumn afternoon.....



Thank you, David, for all that you have done for Hong Kong, for so many fond memories, and for being a friend.

Happy birthday.

Gordon Siu

2 November 2022

