

AMAZING YOUNG SAVANTS

How two highly gifted young Malaysian savants are leaving their mark on the world.

Savant syndrome is a rare—but extraordinary—condition where a person with a serious mental disability displays an ability far in excess of the average person. The movie *Rain Man* first put the condition on the map, while television show *The Good Doctor* continues to bring visibility to current generations. We look at how these prodigious talents are making an impact in their fields in remarkable ways.

{ YEAK PING LIAN }

artist extraordinaire

At first glance, viewers are stunned by the sheer amount of detail of Ping Lian Yeak's ink and watercolour drawings. Utilising the line and contour as an extension of himself, Ping crafts scenes of his world travels that are charged with feverish immediacy. His mastery over the line takes on a life of its own through the architectural elements within his drawings.
(ARTisSpectrum magazine, 2017)

Text: Stephanie Francesca Pereira Images: Courtesy of Respective Interviewees/Stockphoto



This praise for Ping Lian’s artistic talents is a far cry from his early days. Diagnosed with autism as a young boy, Ping Lian was first given tracing and colouring activities as part of a home programme to address his poor motor skills. At that time, he was unable to use scissors to cut or even hold a pencil to write. But something extraordinary happened around the time Ping Lian turned eight. Seemingly overnight, he developed a sudden obsession with drawing. Over the next few months, his drawing abilities advanced rapidly.

Ping Lian’s mother, Sarah Lee, was determined to help him grow as an artist. Every day, she got him to repeat “I want to be artist”, a mantra that has since become the title of a book published by Sarah in 2017, *I Want To Be Artist: An Autistic Savant’s Voice and a Mother’s Dream Transformed Onto Canvas* which documents Ping Lian’s personal work and journey.

Speaking to *Marie Claire Malaysia* in 2018, Sarah revealed

“At 15, Ping Lian’s works found a permanent home at his own personal gallery at the Settlement Hotel in Melaka”



that she found three art teachers for Ping Lian upon discovering his interest. This was intentional; autistic children can be very rigid in their development and Sarah didn’t want Ping Lian to simply imitate the style of one teacher. Instead, she shared articles on autistic children with the teachers and encouraged them to let him develop his own style without specifically telling him what to do.

Having three teachers also gave Ping Lian an opportunity to interact with more people and exist in the real world. “I always

thought that was important... that he came into the real world and not stay trapped in his own,” Sarah says, reminiscing on how she used to take him to the National Art Market and have him practise his drawing skills in public so he would get used to distractions.

Ping Lian’s journey has indeed been a dream transformed. Just two years after his prodigious turn, Ping Lian’s work *Ubudiah Mosque 1* was donated to the Riding for the Disabled Association Malaysia for a charity auction and sold for a whopping RM100,000. The same year, he was featured in a 60-minute documentary in South Korea alongside Kim Peek, who inspired the 1988 movie *Rain Man*; and Kodi Lee, who is currently wowing judges and audiences on season 14 of *America’s Got Talent*.

At 15, Ping Lian’s works found a permanent home at his own personal gallery in Malaysia which you can still visit today at the Settlement Hotel in Melaka. Since then, his art works have also been featured in exhibitions in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Germany,



AN EXPERT’S VIEW

DR DAROLD TREFFERT

Retired psychiatrist and research director

For parents or educators of children with savant syndrome, Dr Darold Treffert, who specialises in the epidemiology of autism spectrum disorders and savant syndrome, believes the right strategy is ‘training the talent’.

“Let the child use their special

skill to its fullest because with more skill practice comes better language, social abilities and daily living skills. My approach to all persons with autism is to find that ‘island of intactness’, whatever it is. Discover it, celebrate it, reward it, love it

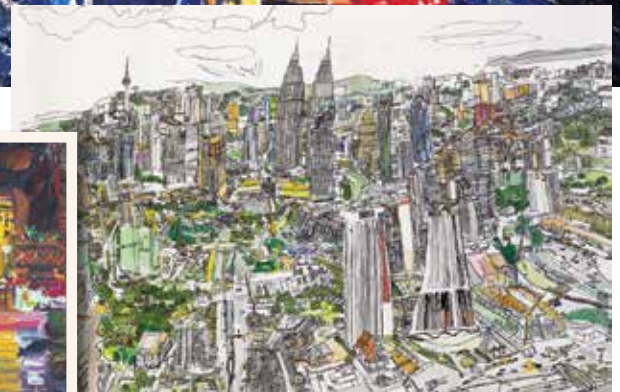
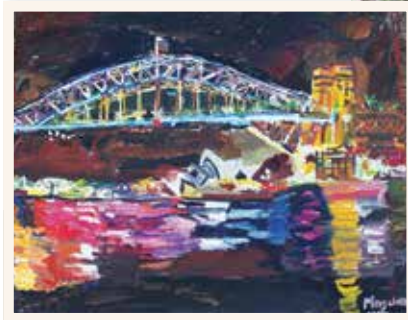


Japan, and Singapore. He's even been showcased at the United Nations Headquarters in New York!

In December 2018, Utah State University also acquired six of Ping Lian's original artworks which included two paintings of the Sydney Opera House.

Despite Ping Lian's heady success and the determined hand his mother played in its development, Sarah is cognisant about dispelling common myths that most autistic children are savants—a belief that can place pressure on both children and parents, and lead to heartache and frustration if allowed to take root. Instead, she encourages parents of children with autism to trust that they just need to do their best, no need to be the best.

"[At the time, I thought] if in 15 years, the teachers still couldn't make an artist out of him, it didn't matter. I'd give up my dream. But at least Ping Lian would have found a hobby... We had nothing to lose."



and let it flourish."

Dr Treffert also notes that training should take the child's specific needs into consideration. For instance, a musical savant's training through playing by ear is different from learning to read music and the

teaching strategy needs to be tailored to that method of music.

Still, parental support is key. "[Training] might mean music or art lessons with the right teachers or engaging a mentor in scientific or math interests, but for me, many times parents

are the real experts on their child and [should not be afraid to share] those observations and instincts with professionals. Above all, maintain hope and perseverance and apply liberal amounts of love. Love is a good therapist too."

Feature

Amazing Young Savants

{ CLARENCE KANG }

musical genius

Piano-playing prodigy Clarence Kang's talents come as no surprise given his family's background; the 22-year old's parents, Joyce Lim and Kang Kim Heng, own a music centre while his older sister Chermaine is a music teacher. As a toddler, Clarence was already able to decipher musical notes and could be found composing, reading music scores, and memorising difficult pieces on the piano. In fact, he would often listen to songs on the radio and play them from memory!

Clarence has been performing in public since his teens but first made a splash when he emerged as a semi-finalist in the 2015 edition of *Asia's Got Talent* where he received four 'Yesses' from renowned judges David Foster, Anggun, Jay Park and Spice Girl Melanie C. He's been on a roll since then—just a year later, he won the 'Best Expression' and 'Excellent Performance'



AN EXPERT'S VIEW


DR ROSA MARTINEZ

Special education specialist & President of Strokes of Genius

Being the president of Strokes of Genius—a movement that helps create awareness of the 'abilities' in special individuals by encouraging, celebrating, and supporting their artistic talents— Dr Rosa Martinez notes that teaching individuals with autism requires a very structured setting as well as a

supportive environment and a rich reinforcement schedule to accommodate their limited attention spans.

Speaking about some of the myths she has encountered, she says, "My early training to become a teacher of individuals with autism taught me to ignore 'perseverations';



awards at the Hong Kong's International Autistic Talent Gala 2015 for his performance of "Hold my Hand", a song that his mother wrote about their experience with autism.

He's performed for luminaries like Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and given a TEDx talk via piano narration. In 2017, Clarence also shared the stage with fellow home-grown talent Yuna at the 9th ASEAN Para Games opening ceremony where they played the theme song "We Are One".

Clarence's achievements and accolades are testament of his extraordinary talent, but the road to recognition wasn't an easy one. A bubbly child who knew the alphabet by heart before he turned one and was reading children's encyclopaedias by two, his behaviour began to change around the time he turned three.

"He became withdrawn and very quiet and isolated himself," notes Joyce in a 2018 interview with *The Star*. "He seemed preoccupied and it appeared that a lot was on his mind. He started to mumble to himself and

arrange his toys in a very straight order and kept staring into space for hours."

A trip to the hospital and a number of tests later, Clarence was diagnosed with both autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Lim was advised to place Clarence in a special needs school and supplement his treatment with speech and behavioural therapy. High therapy charges and long waiting lists at the government hospital were just two of many challenges; researching and finding the right help for Clarence was an uphill task in

"Clarence first made a splash when he emerged as a semi-finalist in the 2015 edition of *Asia's Got Talent*"

2001 when the Internet wasn't a thing yet.

Through it all, his parents ensured that Clarence's love for music was nurtured. At ten, he started formally training—some of his notable teachers include Dr Nicholas Ong, a senior lecturer at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts who was the first Malaysian to receive a Doctorate in Piano Performance from the prestigious Juilliard School in New York; and noted jazz pianist Tay Cher Siang who you might have seen performing with his band WVC and Chinese jazz artist Jasmine Chen in *Crazy Rich Asians*.

In 2018, Clarence himself graduated from the University of West London with a London College of Music diploma and further cemented his musical pedigree with the release of his debut CD, *Hold My Hand*.

His mother's emphasis on Clarence's strengths, rather than limitations, is a lesson for everyone dealing with these 'differently abled' persons. Hopefully, more people around the world can learn about Clarence and enjoy his extraordinary skills. ■

to avoid student interests and to focus on 'eye contact'. [But] I soon learned that was not the correct educational approach. Empowerment, nurturement, observation and motivation are the keys to advancement, despite the challenges."

Dr Martinez believes that

most people are knowledgeable about autistic awareness, but that the focus must continue on autistic ability awareness.

"Renowned artist George Widener once told me he preferred not to be included anymore in exhibitions for artists with autism. This comment has always remained on my mind.

Thus, I now expose the works of emerging artists via an audience interested in autism. However once the artist starts to gain exposure and recognition, our approach transitions to inclusion in mainstream communities—they're artists in their own right; not artists with autism."