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NABILLAH JALAL, 24

After four years of studying at the prestigious Royal College of Music in London, Nabillah Jalal will return home for good later this month.

It was in London that the youngest of three children became interested in Malay culture.

The pianist and conductor says: “I felt strongly about how I was Malay. Being away from Singapore, I realised that it formed a huge part of me.”

For her thesis, she decided to research traditional Malay music from the 1960s, an era with a wealth of original music from genres such as pop yeh yeh, and on film soundtracks.

At first, Nabillah – who is the school’s first Malay Singaporean student – was afraid that her school would not allow her to do it.

She says: “Being a Western classical college, there is nobody who knows South-east Asian music.”

But her tutors referred her to supervisors from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, who have the requisite expertise.

She also received help from musicians in Singapore, including Iskandar Khairuldin, a member of pop yeh yeh band The Rhythm Boys, which was formed in the 1960s.

Since then, she has developed a particular interest in contemporary music, in relation to her identity as a Malay Singaporean.

Together with six other Singaporean students in London, she formed The Bhumi Collective earlier this year.

The group premiered a work titled Bhumi at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe last month, which married traditional Malay dance and music. Nabillah was the music director.

She says: “It was a humbling experience because I had to learn about instrumental Malay music. My background is Western classical, so it was a whole new world.”

She roped in her best friend, a Lithuanian composer, to help create some of the pieces for Bhumi.

She says: “He doesn’t know anything about Malay music. But he told me ‘there is a certain sound when you play that cannot be achieved by anyone else’. It’s a ‘lenggok’, a type of lyricism that Malay music has.”

The collective is also part of Ikan Girl, a work featuring original music by composer Syafiqah Adha Sallehin which premieres next month. It includes elements of traditional Malay, contemporary and Bharatanatyam dance. Nabillah is the music director of the work.

When she returns, she will teach piano, especially to those from lower-income groups who may not have access to classical music.

Back in 2012, her parents could not afford to send her overseas, but she had help from scholarships and bursaries. Her father works in shipping and her mother is a housewife.

“I received a lot of help from people and now I want to help in any way possible. My dream is for a society that allows individuals to realise their potential.”



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