

He eats, sings and travels

From penning his own book to producing an opera, talented Danny Chen is driven by challenges, writes Aneeta Sundararaj

“CARMEN was first performed on March 3, 1875 at Salle Favart by the Paris Opera-Comique. March 3 is also my birthday,” explains Danny Chen, the founder of Eat, Sing and Travel Enterprise (EST). “Opera is challenging. You have to sing unamplified, project your voice and remember the text. You must also understand what you’re singing and act as well.”

From Oct 29 to Nov 3, EST will present Georges Bizet’s opera, *Carmen Sung In French*, with English and Chinese subtitles at Black Box, MAP @ Publika Solaris Dutamas, Kuala Lumpur. This production will feature 10 principal singers, nine instrumentalists, the EST adult chorus (approximately 35 members), Young Choral Academy children’s choir (20 members) and children from the Opera for Kids workshop.

Carmen is an opera by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy based on Prosper Merimee’s novel. Set in Seville in 1830, the story is about Don Jose, who is lured from his duty as a soldier, and his beloved Micaela by the gypsy, *Carmen*.

By his own admission, the 40-year-old, whose day job is as area sales manager for a multi-national oil, is driven by challenges. Prior to working on *Carmen*, he managed to get his literary attempt, *Train 2e@t*, published. “I’m passionate about food.

When my friends from overseas came to visit, I took them to all these places we have. They loved it and said, ‘Without you, we wouldn’t have known about these.’”

Recognising that there are interesting places to eat, but people don’t know how to get there, he asked the question: “Is it possible to get to all these places by train?”



So Danny set about doing his research and the result was the book, which is a compilation of what Danny calls “heritage food destinations”.

“I’m not reviewing the food because taste is very subjective. I introduce readers to the place and they enjoy the ambience. For example, Nasi Lemak Antarbanga. It’s in Kampung Baru. With the backdrop of the Twin Towers, tourists get to enjoy something unique.”

The response to the book surprised Danny. “It’s the KL-born and bred people who say they find my book very useful.”

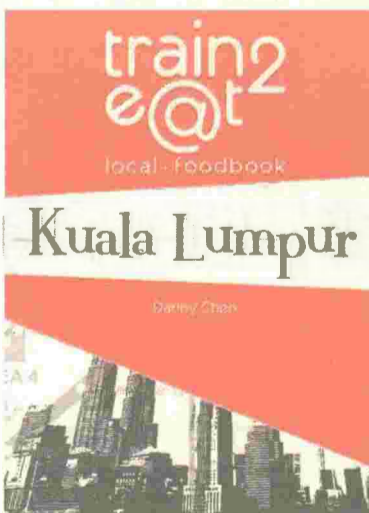
Now, he’s creating a series of YouTube videos for Malaysia Airlines to cater to food enthusiasts.

As Danny tells his stories, it’s obvious he thrives on the challenge of pursuing several things at once. The basis of this began when he was still in school. “I studied at Victoria Institution. Our school motto is Scholar, Sportsman, Gentleman. I live by those principles. School is not just about academia. I’m not a great scholar, but I completed all my exams. I was the State taekwondo champion, though,” he adds.

One of the most amusing experiences he’s had performing happened some two years ago. “I’m a classically trained singer and my friend asked me to sing at an event. I didn’t know much about it. So, my friend and I turned up in Pavilion thinking this



“Start and just keep going.”
Danny Chen



was a small thing. Soon, there were models and interviews and walking the red carpet and all. We finished singing, the audience asked for an encore. It was a strange experience as we were singing Italian arias in a pub,” he says.

With “my education was nearly ruined”, Danny starts to narrate

a painful part of his history. “I was recruited into a programme that the university had with a third party company. The idea was that we would do things like market research for them. One day, I had bought a ticket to go on a holiday to Gold Coast. Then I received an email saying that I had to do some work for this company. I said I needed a little time to cancel my holiday, which I did. Yes, I was late in handing the work to the company, but I didn’t expect what happened. When I rang the woman up in Sydney—I was in Melbourne—she told me, ‘We decided to kick you out of the programme.’”

“No amount of begging for her to reconsider worked. I was devastated because this was part of my internship programme and I would fail. If I failed this, I could fail my degree. I still remember feeling very alone at the time.”

He remains grateful to his Marketing Department head who allowed him to work on a separate assign-

ment and, thereby, complete his degree. Shaking his head, he adds: “To this day, I still don’t know why she kicked me out of the programme.”

That said, Danny is determined to find the positive intention in all his challenges. For instance, the lessons he learnt from a previous opera production that EST undertook, include never to underestimate the requirements of such a production. One really does need enough time to produce an opera. He says: “Certainly, the three weeks we allocated last year was not enough.”

Also, producing an opera here is not impossible. “With rented costumes and minimal props, it’s still possible. This is because what we’re focusing on is the singing and telling the story.”

For the upcoming production of *Carmen*, Danny says: “We have to try. I’m sure there’ll be imperfections. In years, we can get to a stage where we’re really good. Start and just keep going.”