

Bana Bissat, "Muting Expectations, Samson Young's Love of Classical Music and Sound Effects,"
Sound of Life, January 13, 2023.

SOUND OF LIFE

DATE
January 13 2023

DIVERGENT DESIGNS

MUTING EXPECTATIONS: SAMSON YOUNG'S LOVE OF CLASSICAL MUSIC AND SOUND EFFECTS



Can classical music and sound effects be reinvented? Hong Kong composer and multidisciplinary artist Samson Young certainly seems to think so.

Primarily known for his acoustic investigations, sound drawings and muted concert experiences, Young (born 1979) grew up in Hong Kong and headed towards Sydney, Australia, for his high school education and Bachelor of Arts in music, philosophy, and gender studies at the University of Sydney.

He later returned to his hometown and completed a Master of Philosophy in music composition from the University of Hong Kong.

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During his time in the city, he began meeting new media artists and eventually formed the collective Emergency Lab along with his friend Christopher Lau and poet Ron Lam – after which the three collaboratively created multimedia works and experimented with technology.

Although he began to deviate from his formal training as a composer by 2002, he moved to the US and completed a PhD in music composition at Princeton University.

This likely helped him nurture the research-based and often academic approach he takes on in his practice, which often touches upon the acoustics of war and violence.

In 2007, he launched Contemporary Musiking Hong Kong (CMHK), a non-profit organisation focused on the promotion of cross-disciplinary practices in sound. A year later, in 2008, he became Hong Kong Sinfonietta’s Artist Associate for the concert season, where he helmed various productions.

Young represented Hong Kong at a collateral event during the 57th edition of the Venice Biennale in 2017 with the solo show “Songs for Disaster Relief”.

He was also part of Documenta 14’s radio programme with the 56-minute composition “Such Sweet Thunder”.

He has exhibited his work internationally and has had solo shows at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art in Manchester, and the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, among many others.

Young is especially famous for his “Muted Situations” series, concert experiences that he first began in 2014.

A multi-award-winning artist, he was awarded BMW and Art Basel’s first Art Journey award, which allowed him to develop the 60-day journey investigating and archiving bell recordings in *For Whom The Bell Tolls: A Journey Into the Sonic History Of Conflict*.

In 2019, he received the Ars Electronica Award of Distinction in the Digital Musics and Sound Art category for his work *Muted Situation #22: Muted Tchaikovsky’s 5th*, and in 2020, the inaugural Sigg Prize, an award established by the M+ Museum in Hong Kong.

“With an element of humour, Young prompts audiences to focus on what is often overlooked or ignored and to question the essence of the music and the collective ambition,” read the statement by the M+ jury in their prize announcement.

He has cited Nam June Paik, Janet Cardiff, and John Cage as artists that inspire him.

Along with sound artists like Susan Philipsz, Christine Sun Kim, and Carsten Nicolai, Young is one of the most famous living sound artists and is a leading figure in both the Hong Kong contemporary art scene and the global one.

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The artist is currently based in Hong Kong and is represented by Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne, Germany, Edouard Malingue Gallery in Hong Kong, Petzel Gallery in New York, and Experimenter in Kolkata, India.

FAMOUS WORKS AND SHOWS BY SAMSON YOUNG

Young's works span a breadth of disciplines – from sound installations to live performances and even a short film. It shows his versatility in using auditory elements to explore different creative worlds.

'MUTED SITUATION #22: MUTED TCHAIKOVSKY'S 5TH' (2018)



Part of *Sound Of Life*'s feature on iconic works of sound art to explore, *Muted Situation #22: Muted Tchaikovsky's 5th* is a 12-channel sound installation and a concert experience where the artist invited the Flora Symphony Orchestra Cologne to play Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony silently and without activating their instruments, thus silencing the foreground.

By doing so, attendees experienced the sounds that typically pass unnoticed in the background, like the shuffling of the sheet music and the musicians' breathing.

The work is part of the ongoing project, and it was the 22nd – and most famous – iteration.

The artist won the 2019 Prix Ars Electronica Award of Distinction for it.

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"Young does not send a message but raises questions on which we start to reflect while listening to this unusual, beautiful performance of classical music," the award jury's statement read.

'NOCTURNE' (2015)



Nocturne, 2015. © Samson Young. Image courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

For this 2015 sound piece and live performance first presented as part of the solo exhibition "Pastoral Music" at Team Gallery in New York, Young investigates the acoustics of warfare by collecting video recordings of various worldwide night bombings and compiling them into a six-hour-long video.

The video plays on the laptop that he was seated in front of at Team Gallery, but without any audio.

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Instead, Young used a medley of household objects like electric shavers and a glass bottle and instruments like an ocean drum to reenact the audio with his own musical score.

He then broadcasted the sound effects – which turned out to be an eerie but enjoyable symphony – via FM radio transmission.

‘FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS’ (2015)



Samson Young, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 2015, fieldwork documentation. © Samson Young. Image courtesy the artist. Photo Credit: Rekorder & BMW.

As the inaugural recipient of BMW and Art Basel’s BMW Art Journey, Samson Young took a two-month journey across five continents in a field research trip to record an archive of bell sounds.

His stops included bells in Mandalay in Myanmar, Fez in Morocco, Cantal in France, and more.

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According to the artist, "the auditory coverage of bells defines territories, separating one community from another along cultural, religious, or ideological fault lines."

'SONGS FOR DISASTER RELIEF' (2017)



Palazzo Gundane (homage to the myth-maker who fell to earth), 2017. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Simon Vogel, Cologne.

The artist represented Hong Kong during the 57th edition of the Venice Biennale in 2017 with "Songs for Disaster Relief".

This is a four-room show that included drawings, objects, video, spatial sound installations, and site-specific works investigating the legitimacy of the charity single – that is pop songs released for disaster fundraising like Band Aid's *Do They Know It's Christmas?*.

After Venice, the show travelled towards the M+ Pavilion in Hong Kong for a second edition.

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‘SONATA FOR SMOKE’ (2021)



Kyoto Sonata, production still, 2020. © Samson Young. Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Dennis Man Wing Leung.

Young developed the 15:49 min short film *Sonata For Smoke* (2020, revised 2021) during his residency at the Ryosoku-in Temple in Kyoto, Japan, a short film that focuses on recording the “noise” of smoke and capturing its ephemeral nature.

The film was part of the Official Selection at the 2022 International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) and the 2021 Image Forum Festival Japan.

Ready to learn more about the history of sound art? Explore our comprehensive guide.

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Cover Credit: *Nocturne*, 2015. © Samson Young. Image courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

Writer | *Bana Bissat*

Bana Bissat is a Milan-based writer who reports on sound art for Sound of Life. She has written for Flash Art, Lampoon, and Cultured. [@banabissat](https://www.instagram.com/banabissat)

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