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ECLECTIC AVENUES

Electric cellist Dana Leong has arrived in Shanghai and wants to open an integrated music centre in China and heal people through music, writes **Jing Zhang**

With two Grammy awards to his name, composer, electric cellist and trombonist Dana Leong says it's time to take on China.

"The country is growing so fast that, if you don't have the vision to plant something here now, in 10 to 20 years' time it's going to be completely different. Everything's changing—it's all going to be light years ahead in the future," he says.

Leong's move to Shanghai has been in the works for about a year. When we meet for pizza at an Italian restaurant in Shanghai's Xintiandi district, he is sporting a shaved head (standard since he chopped off a wild, bushy hairdo), beads around his neck and is wearing a subwoofer on his back.

The Asian-American musician played at the UN's 2016 Global Compact Leaders Summit in New York in June. Impressive, but his goal for China is even more ambitious—"to create a community that circles around all these disparate musical elements into one connected space."

"I saw a studio in London that did that. There's a gentleman called Paul Kempe, who bought an entire block and converted it into over 70 recording studios called Tileyard Studios. I visited last year and Lady Gaga was leaving as I was getting there."

The invitation-only, top-to-tail studio model impressed him. "He [Kempe] said to me that it used to take [Gaga] 10 months to make an album, but now it took about a month because of the supply chain; the studios were all fully booked and you couldn't pay your way in. He fortified the chain with top songwriters, top producers, people like Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars, the top editors and even a legal team that works [on] licensing [for] TV shows and films. So people like Lady Gaga could do one album, in one place, in 30 days, instead of 10 months travelling around the world."

Widely recognised as the world's top electric cellist, Leong has been playing his futuristic sounds solo or with groups such as the Dana Leong Trio and band Milk & Jade, mixing classical and instrumental music with electronica. There's his other instrument, too, the trombone. Mastering both a string and a wind instrument is rare but, as he says, they have one curious thing in common: "They are the only two instruments that read every type of sheet music from the bass clef to the treble clef."

Leong, who is half Japanese and half Chinese, was raised on the west coast of the US in the San Francisco Bay area, and has spent the past 15 years in New York. His plan to shake up the Chinese music scene with a flurry of fresh collaborations seems to signal a new chapter in an already colourful life.

areas; one is this philanthropic foundation called Tektonik, the other being a newer avenue with scientists, inventors and cutting-edge tech which will involve 3D projection artists, drones, brain scanners... you name it, all under my futuristic project called OEO—where I play solo onstage but collaborate in other ways."

OEO stands for One Eyed Orange, Leong says with a smile. It's a goofy cartoon mascot he developed—"he's the Hello Kitty of electronic music", he says.

While he is a classically trained musician, Leong is a self-confessed technology nerd whose style has been defined by the way he entwines electronic music with experimental jazz, funk, pop, rock and hip hop. It has earned him collaborations with music's biggest names, including Kanye West and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, DJ A-Trak and DJ Qbert—and those two Grammys, both in the Latin jazz category, for collaborations with Paquito D'Rivera.

Leong says China is ripe for a quality-controlled, vertically integrated centre for music. The country's rapid progress bears some comparison with Japan's journey from industrialisation to an era of technological innovation.

Despite Chinese pop music's relative immaturity, its huge domestic market means that capturing even a small slice of the pie is worth the investment. But can Leong, who doesn't speak Chinese, break through?

"Luckily," he says, "I'm very familiar with the language of

music, whether I'm sitting in the mountains of South America or the traditional orchestral world of Europe, the jazz world of New Orleans or even here in China... The alphabet is the same but there's just different dialects. I'm really interested in all the dialects... I'm very experimental, as you can tell."

Whether he's listening to Taiwanese indigenous folk music, the '90s west coast hip hop that so inspired him in his youth, or electronic dance music, Leong feels at home in the world of sound. He was a child prodigy, attending classes at Stanford University from the age of 11. At 16, Leong was teaching university-age students jazz there under a position created especially for him. One of his first teachers was a contractor who hired musicians for big acts performing in the Bay Area.

"So I was very lucky that from 13 to 17, I was on stage with some of the biggest names in music, people like Earth Wind and Fire, Barry White, Björk, Ray Charles."

One of Leong's passions is collaborating with people in the spiritual and academic worlds. Musical entertainment for its own sake is no longer

quite enough. So when did this begin, and why?

For Leong, the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011 that set off the Fukushima nuclear disaster was the turning point. His mother's side of the family lived near the quake's epicentre.

"By the hand of Zeus, or whatever, they were OK," he says, but it prompted him to look beyond music as a conduit purely for entertainment. Leong

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DANA LEONG (BELOW)

started Tektonik, which brought together artists from all over the world whose families had been affected by natural disasters or climate change.

"Our first cast was a percussionist from Pakistan, a sitarist from India, a cellist from China/Japan [me]—and a DJ from Haiti," he says.

The group performed last year at a gala for Save the Children in Hong Kong. With only 300 donors in the room, the charity raised HK\$7 million, which was donated to help children affected by the 2015 earthquake in Nepal.

"When I saw the impact of what that money was able to do for the people on the ground in Nepal, I felt this could be a calling for me long term," he says.

Leong sounds a bit like U2 frontman Bono when he talks. A chat about the music business diverges into a philosophical discourse about humanity, climate change or economic disparity.

"We are constantly readjusting our

relationship to nature," he says, "and the disparity between rich and poor is not going to change in our lifetime, so there is a need to support harmony between people and the land and their spiritual wellness."

What he's seeking through Tektonik is to isolate the elements of music that make people heal and feel better. He wants to know if there are any lessons to be learned from tai chi, martial arts or ayurveda—"whole systems of living, both physical and mental."

"Healing music" sounds a little bit *Kumbaya*, Leong admits, but he has been researching with medical professionals such as neuroscientists. Leong says he was "interested to find that neuroscience and Far Eastern spiritual practices believe high frequencies can harmonise with your brainwaves and can influence thought patterns, dreams and states of mind—those are called binaural beats".

There's talk of how "the symmetry of classical music is supposed to help you brain organise thoughts", of the high frequencies of Faotist and Buddhist bells and the low-frequency sounds of the bass or the "om" of yoga, both of which vibrate the organs, as well as how much neuroscience is lending empirical weight to the benefits of ancient Eastern practices—all of which have captivated him.

"Even what I'm wearing right here, this subwoofer on my back, simulates the feeling from the sounds of these low frequencies," he says.

To delve into this research takes dedication, but Leong is full of passion for Tektonik. He's an artist brimming with new ideas and hopes, and one excited about his move to Shanghai and seeing the speed at which China comes at you. And why wouldn't he be? The projects are still coming, wide-ranging and varied.

At the same time, Leong's playing still wows audiences. He needs the variety, he says. "I live in societies where polygamy is not necessarily supported," Leong says, jokingly, "so this is the closest I am going to get—[my different projects] are just many musical wives." jing.zhang@scmp.com



Photo: B.J. Kessler