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Composer Chinary Ung to be Inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters

Distinguished Professor of Music is first UC San Diego faculty member in prestigious academy

When the American Academy of Arts and Letters inducts its newest members in May, University of California San Diego composer and Distinguished Professor of Music Chinary Ung will become the first faculty member in the university's 60 year history to receive the prestigious honor.

Ung will be one of 13 inducted into the nation's leading honor society of architects, artists, composers and writers. Inductees are elected for life.



Distinguished Professor of Music Chinary Ung at UC San Diego in February 2020. (Photo by Erik Jepsen/ UC San Diego Publications)

“As professor Ung’s professional home for 25 years, UC San Diego has felt the direct and lasting impact of his tremendous composition and teaching career,” said UC San Diego Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla. “As our campus’s first inductee into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Ung’s recognition spotlights the strong and growing influence of our university’s arts and humanities contributions to the world.”

A member of the Department of Music faculty since 1995, Ung said it was a great honor to be inducted into the academy.

“It’s been a distinct privilege to have been a part of the UC San Diego faculty and to have this institution serve as my home, as I have pursued my creative projects,” he said. “Having the support of my colleagues in the Department of Music has been critical in providing a foundation from which I have been able to extend myself into areas I could not have imagined when I began my tenure here.”

The American Academy of Arts and Letters was founded in 1898 and fosters and sustains an interest in literature, music and the fine arts. Membership is limited to 250 individuals, and vacancies are filled by vote of the membership. Only current academy members may nominate potential inductees.

Ung said Chinese-American composer Chou Wen-chung, Ung's mentor during graduate studies at Columbia University, was a particularly vital source of inspiration and counsel, and served as a member of the academy for 37 years until his death in 2019. Under Chou, Ung earned the doctorate of musical arts in music composition. During a pre-concert address in 2013, Chou said: "It is my belief that Chinary is one of the most exceptional composers of our time — the 21st century, precisely because we are at a time when the only future we have is to integrate all the greatest musical heritages. Chinary Ung now stands in the very forefront of the evolution of music."

A prolific composer, Ung left his native Cambodia in 1964 to study clarinet performance at the Manhattan School of Music. He later turned his attention to composition.

In 1989, Ung became the first American to receive the coveted Grawemeyer Award in music composition for his orchestral piece "Inner Voices," a level of recognition that established his profile on the international stage. Upon hearing this piece, the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu said "[Ung's] music is a combination of Eastern Philosophy and Western innovation. It is not a product of pure technical solution but it is a creation of deep spiritual aspiration."

Published exclusively by C.F. Peters Corporation, Ung's catalog has been commissioned and performed by major orchestras throughout the world. Boston Modern Orchestra Project released a recording of Ung's orchestral music in 2015 and, in February 2020, Bridge Records published "Chinary Ung, Vol. 4: Space Between Heaven and Earth," the company's fourth disc of Ung's music.

His work has been commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts, Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard University and the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress, among others. Ung was honored with an inaugural Joyce Award, in 2004. He is a previous Ford Foundation and Guggenheim Foundation fellow, the 2017 – 2018 Karel Husa Visiting Professor of Composition at Ithaca College, and is currently a Presidential Fellow and Senior Composer in Residence at Chapman University.

In addition to his prolific career, Ung is also recognized as a leader with a commitment to preserving Cambodian culture and forging cultural exchanges between Asia and the United States. For a decade starting in the mid-1970s, Ung halted compositional work to become a

noted conservator of the folk and court musical traditions of Cambodia — at the same moment his native country was being systematically destroyed during the Cambodian Genocide.

Through collecting numerous recordings, forming a traditional Cambodian Pinpeat ensemble and touring the U.S. to raise awareness about this art form, Ung helped preserve aspects of the traditional music he had known as a child. When he began composing again, his work incorporated aspects of Southeast Asian traditional music practice.

In recognition of his ongoing commitment to his native country's cultural legacy, Ung has been honored by the National Cambodian Heritage Museum and Killing Fields Memorial, where he has been an advisor since its inception. In 2014, he was awarded the John. D. Rockefeller 3rd Award by the New York based Asian Cultural Council, and he and Susan Ung, his wife, are cofounders of the Nirmita Composers Institute, with the mission to nurture the next generation of Cambodian composers.

“There is no doubt professor Ung’s life-work in music and composition is both committed to the preservation of endangered musical languages and traditions, and incredibly innovative and forward-looking at the same time. This is a rare combination, and Chinary is so deserving of this incredible honor,” said Cristina Della Coletta, Division of Arts and Humanities dean. “What is perhaps more important is his strong commitment to the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion. This commitment is deeply important to our campus and our students.”

Housed in the Division of Arts and Humanities, the UC San Diego Department of Music was founded in 1966 by innovative composers Will Ogdon and Robert Erickson, who believed in bringing together the finest faculty with the most gifted students, encouraging each to find their own path in a supportive, effective environment. Today, the department awards graduate degrees in composition, computer music, integrative studies and performance, and three distinct undergraduate degrees.

“This singular honor provides a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the distinguished career, demanding music and delightful wit of Professor Ung. His sublime compositions, graceful teaching and ebullient spirit are exemplars in these challenging times,” said department chair David Borgo.

Ung will be formally inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters May 20 at their annual ceremony, held in New York City. Immediately following, the academy will open an exhibition of work by all new members and award recipients.

“Professionally, I’m looking forward to meeting the illustrious colleagues at the academy,” Ung said, “and to continue to honor the artistic landscape at the national level.”

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