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"THE longest route is also the shortest way to success."

These are the words of Malaysian pianist, Shereen Cheong Hui Ting who, at 23, literally has success at the tips of her fingers.

Cheong, who began playing the piano at the age of three, is now part of US singer-songwriter Victory Boyd's all-female band. It has taken many years of consistent hard work and great perseverance to get where she is.

"The only way to make it is to stay grounded and humble, true and honest – not only to yourself but also to the people around you – and constantly striving to be the best that you can be, without ever giving up.

"Attitude is everything. Having a good work ethic is going to get you far in this industry," shares the KL-born, New York-based Cheong in an e-mail interview.

### Hunger for learning

She adds that, as a child, she was curious about everything and had a very strong desire to learn.

She credits her parents for having had the foresight to start her on piano lessons, as they understood the benefits of music instruction for a child's brain development. She also learnt to play the violin.

Cheong was a classically trained



The band members (from left): Taylor Moore, Victory Boyd, Thalia Boyd and Shereen Cheong, on the TV show, *Good Morning America*. — Photos: SHEREEN CHEONG

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# Success across borders

Malaysian artiste finds fame making music in the United States.

pianist before transitioning to contemporary music.

Before she left for further studies in the United States, Cheong had attended the International College of Music (ICOM) in Kuala Lumpur, where she did the Berklee transfer programme. Well-known local jazz pianist Michael Veerapen was her instructor, whom she describes as “a most supportive mentor.”

In those early days, some of her most notable influences were Wang Lee Hom, Angela Zhang, the Bee Gees and local artistes Siti Nurhaliza and P. Ramlee.

When she started out in her music career, Cheong performed within Malaysia. She played the piano at Yamaha Music School concerts and festivals, and the keyboard at ICOM's *Tribute To Classic Rock* concerts.

As her love for music grew, so did the number of artistes who inspired her, such as Bill Evans, Chick Corea, Brian McKnight and Antonio Carlos Jobim.

Last May, she received her Bachelor of Arts in Contemporary Writing And Production, as well as Music Business And Management, from Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts.

After her graduation last May, Cheong moved to New York.

“Well, I don't drive in New York (*haha*), I just commute on the trains and buses,” she says. On her travels, she listens to music. “You can find a lot of orchestral, jazz, soul and gospel music on my current playlist,” she adds.

## Wandering musicians

She met Boyd in December last year when Boyd performed at the Blue Note Jazz Club in New York.

“I remember attending the performance with my sister, and giving her (Boyd) my card. Little did I know that it would lead to (becoming part of her band),” shares the KL-born artiste.

Boyd, who turned 24 on Sept 1, had so impressed American rapper Jay-Z in 2016 with her



The rose among the thorns, Cheong, and the band members for the production of *The Cross And The Switchblade*.

incredible voice that he recently signed her to his label RocNation.

Boyd, the frontman and acoustic guitarist, then reached out to Cheong with an invite to join her jazz/soul/folk band as the keyboardist.

The other members are Boyd's sister Thalia aka Momo, 19, who plays the bass, and drummer Taylor Moore, 29.

“It's been so amazing and rewarding working with Victory. We've made so many unforgettable memories on each tour, and are constantly growing and bonding as a band,” says Cheong.

Together, they have set out on many tours in the United States, and played at notable music festivals, including the Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival in Tennessee in June, and in the Essence Music Festival in New Orleans, Louisiana, in July.

The band has also performed with actor/singer Jussie Smollett (of TV drama *Empire*) on his *Sum Of My Music* tour, and co-headlined with Grammy award-winning jazz

artiste Gregory Porter for a performance in New York's Central Park SummerStage.

In June, they appeared on ABC's popular TV show *Good Morning America*, for which they performed *Open Your Eyes* and *The Weatherman* from Boyd's debut album *The Broken Instrument*.

## Making Malaysia proud

In the United States, Cheong made her debut as an arranger and orchestrator of *Volver* and *El Dia Que Me Quieras* at Latin Grammy winner Pablo Ziegler's concert at Berklee Performance Center, in Boston.

“I remember being the only Malaysian onboard. I had to arrange the music for a 45-piece live orchestra. I was nervous because it was my first time in a live setting but it was also a very proud moment to represent my country in a Grammy artiste's concert,” expresses Cheong.

Later, she also had the privilege of performing alongside

Mandopop star Wang Lee Hom on his classic song *Big City Small Love* in a concert held at the Boston Symphony Hall.

In May last year, she took the stage in Agganis Arena, also in Boston, conducting her own arrangement of Lionel Richie's *Three Times A Lady*. It was the Berklee Commencement Concert, which her parents and sister attended.

When she moved to New York, Cheong joined the Times Square Church. Within a few months, she was invited to play the keyboard for the church's 30th anniversary celebration production of *The Cross And The Switchblade*, which opened for six performances in October last year.

## Home is where the heart is

Although she has become a successful musician in the United States, Cheong's heart is very much with her homeland.

Most recently, she has been collaborating with local singer Jamilah Abu Bakar on the musical arrangements and orchestration for her soon-to-be-released single *Imaginasi*.

“It all started out with a genuine friendship at Berklee. I'd drop by her place and we'd hang out together. She would always make me chicken curry. We started playing music together, and realised (we had) a natural chemistry.

“One day, I sent her this piano intro idea, and later she sent me a melody with lyrics, so I started building the arrangements from there.”

The exuberant Cheong, who enjoys watching cartoons and hopes to one day orchestrate for Walt Disney Productions, says: “I am very proud of my country – it is multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural, yet so united and peaceful, and that's what I portray through my artistry.

“My ultimate goal is to give back to society. I want to help the Malaysian music industry grow.”