

**SPEECH BY MRS MARY SEAH
PRINCIPAL, SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
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Good day! Thank you for joining us online as we celebrate the achievements of our students!

2020 has been one of the most challenging years of our time, but you, as part of the SOTA community, have shown perseverance, resilience, and a strong SOTA spirit.

Big dreams in a new normal

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we had barely started a new academic year. Soon after, Singapore entered a Circuit Breaker period, and we had to quickly adjust to full Home-Based Learning. Both staff and students had to adapt to remote teaching and learning, and figure out how to continue with our artistic practice safely.

To the Class of 2020 - thank you for completing the IB journey well. It hasn't been easy for you, but the cohort remained optimistic and united, caring and resilient throughout the year. Your grit and determination in completing your studies amidst the challenges is an inspiration to your juniors. You studied hard, but also made an effort to reach out. You experimented with bringing assembly back in a virtual way, by stitching pre-recorded videos and juxtaposing those with newer ones you made from home. You also reached out to the community through the One Hope concert and in so many other ways. Your enterprising spirit, cohort unity, and positive energy enabled each of you to be more and achieve more. Kudos for rising above the challenges!

Other students and alumni have also continued to dream big and achieve excellence. They are Dance students Kynda Ng from Year 5 IBCP (2020), Angeline Veronica Koh Ru Hui and Andrea Mae Y Fernandez, both from Year 3 (2020), whose achievements in the 2020 International Ballet Grand Prix Singapore deserve mention.

- Kynda was placed 2nd in the Senior 1 Ballet category. She was also offered a two-week tuition scholarship at the Australian Ballet School.
- Angeline and Andrea were placed 1st and 2nd respectively in Youth 2 Ballet category. Andrea was awarded a place in Singapore Dance Theatre's Scholar's Programme.

A debt of gratitude to their Dance teachers Mr Ng Teck Voon and Ms Cheah Mei Sing who had worked tirelessly with them!

In the academic domain, SOTA students continue to make their mark. Year 5 (2020) students Justin Wong, Bryan Koh, Megan Yeo, Tay Jing Yun, Lai Mun Hei, Mak Yau Wai, Cherie Chong, and Alicia Ho obtained a Distinction in the International

Mathematical Modelling Challenge. The students learnt that real-world problems could be translated to mathematical models where solutions could be prototyped and improved. A note of thanks to the Mathematics faculty for availing this opportunity and preparing our students to be able to compete with their peers from other schools!

Encouraged by her Mother Tongue Language mentor Mr Allan Ho, Rachel Sim, Music student from the Class of 2020, challenged herself to compose an original *xinyao* (which is a genre of local Chinese songs) in the “Xin Kong Xia” National Schools Xinyao Songwriting competition. Rachel clinched the Merit Award in the Songwriting (Open) category, and she got to record the song with her school mate Ewan MacRae and in the process, learned so much more about Chinese medium songs.

The pandemic has imposed many limitations, from curtailing voice projection activities to restrictions on live performances. However, it has also taught us to create new possibilities, be resourceful and collaborate to achieve common goals.

This took our staff and students on a steep learning curve, to rethink the nature of the arts, of communication, and of regulations surrounding the sharing of music and art online. Our mindsets and practice have been disrupted, but the pandemic has also given us new impetus to learn and produce art differently. We learnt to programme orchestral works re-arranged for strings alone in the Solisti concert supported by our partner OMM (Orchestra of the Music Makers); we have creatively incorporated the compulsory wearing of masks into the costumes and performance of theatre pieces and made do with fewer or no props at all, using light and multimedia projections instead; we have also learnt to choreograph dances without body contact, learnt to do more with less and shoot films according to strict safety guidelines, learning to tell stories through animation instead of live action; and draw inspiration from life during the pandemic for our writing and artmaking; and to hold and curate art exhibitions in common spaces. While these are far from the perfect representation of arts in its purest forms, we sure have learnt to pivot with every disruption, and in the process, discovered something new about ourselves.

Small steps towards arts and cultural leadership

I am especially proud of students who instinctively know that they can use their talents and gifts to benefit the community in these uncertain times. In fact, many have stepped up to offer their time, others have organised their own ground-up initiatives to assist and uplift those in need.

Within school, the Leadership Academy, LeAd for short, and other students stepped up as safe distancing ambassadors. With our long-term partner Muscular Dystrophy Association of Singapore, our students have collaborated with friends from SOTA and MDAS to raise funds for both organisations. They did so through the Sunburst performance as well as an online art auction.

Another Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) group DysCASia wrote and illustrated a children's book to raise awareness and promote acceptance and support for children with learning difficulties such as Dyslexia and ADHD. Initially intended for use in live storytelling sessions, the students instead launched a softcopy book, came up with an animated video, and posted activities online in light of the pandemic.

These are admirable efforts by SOTA students, who, in turn gleaned valuable learning experiences through their engagement in contemporary issues, in service of the wider community.

We are also heartened to see our alumni making their mark as the next generation of artists and creative professionals! Victoria Chen (from the Theatre cohort of 2012) was one of four directors selected from Wild Rice's Directors' Residency Programme in April 2020. Over six months, she had the opportunity to hone her craft in collaboration with Mr Ivan Heng, Founding Artistic Director of Wild Rice, to bring her creative visions to life. She presented her sold-out production, "*BULL*" earlier in January this year.

Koh Cheng Jin (from the Music cohort of 2014) had her composition Before Daybreak 《孤燈挑盡》 selected as the commissioned work for the Singapore International Violin Competition (SIVC) held in January this year. A violinist and a yang qin player herself, Cheng Jin's composition is infused with elements of Chinese music. Slowly but surely, we are starting to see the artistic visions of students and alumni go beyond themselves, adding to the richness of the local arts scene, and making a difference in our community through their artistic skills.

Fuel to reach the stars

We take this opportunity on this special occasion to thank the mentors, family, and supporters, who are with us on this quest to reach the dreams and aspirations of our students.

We recognise the teachers who have worked tirelessly to impart knowledge and support the socio-emotional development of our students. Colleagues, you went out of your way to care for our students, adapt school routines, and turn teaching and learning around as we rode through every turn in the pandemic. Thank you for leading by example and teaching students how to be disciplined, self-directed and resilient.

Congratulations to Dr Vincent Leow (from the Visual Arts Faculty) for being conferred the Cultural Medallion! The Cultural Medallion is Singapore's highest arts accolade, celebrating the pursuit of artistic excellence. It is conferred to local artists who demonstrate professional maturity in their practice through a distinctive body of work, with good local and international standing and a strong display of leadership.

Congratulations also to Ms Mariette Ong (Head, Community Service) who was conferred the National Day Commendation Medal in 2020.

We are always appreciative of the parents who work closely with the school to nurture creative and artistic learners. I would like to specially thank the SOTA Parent Support Group for their generous support of the SOTA Endowment Fund through initiatives such as Mask for Good and SOTA Got Talent. Your efforts will ensure that arts education remains accessible for students from all backgrounds.

To our donors including Ngee Ann Kongsi, Temasek Foundation, Dr Lee Boon Yang, CapitaLand Hope Foundation, Standard Chartered Bank, OCBC Bank and many more, your contributions will go a long way in ensuring that Singapore's next generation of creative thinkers are nurtured and developed regardless of their starting points.

I also look forward to strengthening our partnerships in education with Checkpoint Theatre, the Orchestra of the Music Makers, The Esplanade, National Gallery Singapore and many more organisations. The opportunities you provide for authentic learning beyond the school are especially precious. Thank you for coming alongside us in developing in our students a broad, deep understanding of the socio-political and cultural contexts of our times.

Conclusion

The SOTA community is a sum of all of you! You have helped to fuel the dreams of our youths and shown them that they can reach for the stars with our concerted support.

To all the award recipients, remember that you are where you are not by your own effort alone. Remember that you are never too small to pay it forward, to be the creative citizen and the cultural leader that we have always wanted you to be! Congratulations and may you always remember to fly the SOTA flag high!

Thank you!