



(From left) John Tay Juan E, 15, drum major from Bukit Panjang Government High's display band; Mohammad Redzwan Ramli, 14, vibraphonist from Crest Secondary's pop band; Cynthia Goh Ting Xuan, 15, band major from Bukit Panjang Government High's display band; and Esther Teo Si En, 15, percussionist from Tanglin School's percussion ensemble.

# A special rhythm of the heart

Together, mainstream and Sped students bring music to life

Aaron Chan

Thumping away on their cajons – a box-shaped Peruvian percussion instrument – they are getting the audience into the groove.

In a high-energy musical showcase, these 13 students from the Association For Persons With Special Needs Tanglin School's percussion ensemble play a critical part in bringing the music to life.

"Playing the drums helps me to release stress," said cajon player Esther Teo, 15, who has mild intellectual disability.

"I also really like seeing the smiles on the audience's faces when I'm performing on stage."

Alongside students from Bukit Panjang Government High School's (BPGHS) display band and Crest Secondary School's pop band, the students dazzled the stage at the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) 2017 Festival Concert, which took place over the weekend.

This year, more than 100 students from 10 special education

(Sped) schools participated in the annual SYF celebrations – the largest number yet.

Over numerous rehearsals, students, teachers, and instructors worked to bridge the links between schools, to achieve a single sound.

This required a different approach, said Mr Kenrick Poh, 32, director of BPGHS' display band. "We just needed a little bit more repetition and a bit more structure."

While the school had partnered with other display bands, those were formal and focused on musical technicalities, said baritone player John Tay, 15, who is also the band's drum major.

"The students from Crest and Tanglin were a lot friendlier and approachable, you could feel their energy," he said.

More importantly, rehearsals created opportunities for values, such as mutual respect and inclusivity, to be learnt, said Ms Yvonne Ong, teacher-in-charge of the Methodist Girls' School (Primary) choir.

The choir collaborated with the handbells group from Rainbow Centre – Margaret Drive School, for a musical performance, singing familiar folk songs, such as Di Tanjong Katong and Burong Kakak Tua, while members of the handbells group ac-

companied with the melody.

"While the differences between the two groups of students were apparent to all of us, that initial sense of awkwardness that arose from the outward observations almost instantaneously melted away when both groups started making music together," said Ms Ong.

"It was as if both groups of pupils were communicating with one another with a most natural common language."

It is not often that such opportunities arise, said Sue-Ann Ho, 10, a choir member. "You don't get a lot of chances to meet children with disabilities, so it's nice seeing them doing what they love," she said.

Handbell player Hassanah Kazali, 15, who has autism spectrum disorder, was also excited to meet new friends. "I love playing music together with them," she said.

After all, music is a universal language. "They may seem different on the outside. But inside, we're all the same," said Sue-Ann. "We share a love for music."

John added: "We're doing the same thing, following that one rhythm – that's how, I think, music brings (us) together."