

# SINGAPORE ELLE

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EXCLUSIVE:  
**DONATELLA  
VERSACE**  
ON FEMINISM & FREEDOM

**HELLO, MY  
NAMÉ IS  
MARGARET  
ZHANG**

**OH, GET A ROOM**  
WHERE THE **STARS** CHECK  
INTO FOR SOME **LOVE**

FASHION'S MOST  
INFLUENTIAL  
MULTI-TALENT

**WIN**  
A 4N STAY IN  
THE MALDIVES



Lamé mandarin-collar dress, by **BURBERRY**.  
Gold-tone earring, by **SARAH & SEBASTIAN**.  
Pearl choker, by **1064 STUDIO**.



ELLEcover story

# PUSHING BOUNDARIES

She's best known as a model, fashion blogger and photographer. But Aussie influencer Margaret Zhang's vision and love for her creative journey is taking her to new heights. By Tan Min Yan

PHOTOGRAPHY & STYLING: **MARGARET ZHANG** FASHION COORDINATION: **DARYL ALEXIUS YEO**

In today's hyper-visual and attention-deficient digital space, it's easy to think we've cracked the code to instant influencer success: a pretty girl with a passable fashion sense, plus a good-enough photographer, multiplied by VSCO filters and a highly curated feed of fashion- or travel-related pictures. In fact, anyone with a healthy dose of self-confidence and self-love (narcissism, some call it) can be an influencer too, right?

Perhaps, if the sole aim is to garner as many Instagram likes and sponsored posts as possible. Not a bad career choice per se, but it's hardly a guarantee of longevity as consumers and brands become savvier and seek out authenticity and originality.

Margaret Zhang, who has carved out a creative niche of her own since bursting onto the scene as a fresh-faced 16-year-old fashion blogger

eight years ago and is famously steadfast in her refusal to be part of the whole "Instagram sponsored posts" game, would know. She maintains a blog and an Instagram account, but doesn't make money on either of them, choosing instead to consult and collaborate with brands.

She's not a big fan of the "influencer" label either, which leaves us in a bit of a conundrum. She, with her near-one-million followers on Instagram and star-studded portfolio of clients (including Swarovski, Louis Vuitton and Chanel), is influential in all senses of the word.

Her body of work — from directing a whimsical perfume ad for Chanel and photographing Miranda Kerr for Swarovski, to modelling and styling herself for magazine covers (including this one!) — is so astounding in its breadth and scope, yet distinct in its irreverent yet sophisticated style, it'd be

remiss to group her together with the thousands of forgettable flashes-in-the-pan on Instagram.

"Your career cannot be to have influence," she tells ELLE Australia in a recent interview. In another conversation she had with model Sofia Richie about the "warped" obsession of being "Instagram-famous", she shares the frustration of being known as "that Instagram model": "Are you actually boiling my whole career and work down to a number on an app? [...] It's so offensive."

A more appropriate label for Zhang is that of the digital-age Renaissance woman, especially when you consider her education as a law student, childhood training in piano and ballet (which she calls her "first great loves"), and a brazen self-confidence that belies her age.

And as with the Renaissance woman's everlasting thirst for greater

Embellished silk-chiffon blouse, by **COACH**. Polyester sheer organza dress, by **ZARA**. Denim jeans with frayed hemline, by **EIGHT DREAMS**. Acetate double-breasted trench coat, by **BURBERRY**.

“MUSIC INFORMS MY CREATIVE WORK, AND IS THE FIRST THING I NOTICE ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE'S WORK.”

knowledge, Zhang's voracious appetite to continuously push creative boundaries, always guided by an unabashed love for her work, is what sets her heads and shoulders above everyone else in the digital sphere.

Her latest creation *There's No Space Left In C# Minor*, a short film where she “[dissects her favourite Chopin piano work] on every possible technical, psychological and abstract level”, is perhaps the greatest artistic embodiment of this very label, and a culmination of her achievements thus far.

“[It's] essentially about the accessibility of classical music in our modern, digital age, and how the medium itself can be communicated in ways that offer much more authentic and holistic experiences for the listener,” she explains.

“My work is always informed by my music training, and I'm increasingly drawn to projects and creative concepts that allow my fairly separate universes of passion — art, fashion, music, film — to coexist and feed into one another. Film seemed like the perfect medium.”

***There's No Space Left In C# Minor* is made up of three acts. Can you walk us through its creative process and artistic vision?**

The arc of the three acts begins in the studio, uncomfortable, intimate and claustrophobic, prying into the unseen rehearsal process that is never really shown in the classical music universe. [There's] an undercurrent of frustration, a mathematical approach to decoding notes, a tedium in repetition. Act II is the big show: The nonsensical grandeur and feigned understanding of a homogenous audience. Act III is the truest iteration of the piece. Hip-hop and rap producer Acycle and I worked on a remix of my concert hall recording

to accompany quite aggressively abstract visuals of what the original piece conjures in my mind. I also worked with artists Khloris, Vicki Lee and Ted O'Donnell, and Lani Mitchell on realising vivid imagery with my recording as their only stimulus. The goal was for the audience to see inside my mind and understand the breadth of Chopin's emotional impact.

**In what ways has your love for the piano guided creative processes in your other works?**

Music informs my creative work. It's the first thing I notice about other people's work. It was always so much a part of my upbringing, and really defined my spectrum of emotion. It doesn't necessarily need to be so literal either. Sound is a communicative tool that has such an impact on, for example, a subject's energy on set, which is really apparent in imagery — moving or otherwise.

**What was your relationship like with the piano growing up?**

I've been playing since I was about three or four years old. Learning to play and rehearsing a piece, for any musical instrument, is not pleasant. It's tedious, exhausting and a test of patience and commitment. I was only really able to fully appreciate the impact of music on my emotional state when I matured and could think beyond the notes and the boxes I had to tick for exams.

**Putting yourself as the subject of a film must be terrifying, and surely requires self-confidence and belief.**

During the shoot, it wasn't something I thought a lot about — from a stills photography perspective, I'm quite



Jersey turtlenecked pullover dress, by LOUIS VUITTON. Gold-tone earring, by SARAH & SEBASTIAN.

accustomed to being both in front of and behind the camera. However, in post-production, it became really daunting. Baring yourself in such an uncontrived way is a difficult hurdle. The closer I got in time to an imaginable audience watching my work, the more difficult the editing became. Before my first director's cut screening in Los Angeles, I'd barely slept. But in the end, nobody can judge your true self. As a creative, external opinion is just something you just have to let go of, and go with your gut.

**You are one of the industry's most hardworking creatives. How do you prevent burnout?**

Diversification by working across disciplines definitely assists with avoiding feeling stale or "burnt out" creatively. No two days ever are the same for me — I jump from photographing on set, to meeting a client in a consultant capacity, to

retouching endless stills, to Skype-calling our composer about the track for an upcoming film. Each uses different parts of my brain and if I'm losing focus on one thing, or struggling to conceptualise, it helps to move on to something completely different and return with fresh eyes or ears. I'm lucky to work across enough fields that I can do that with ease and often.

**Despite your impressive portfolio, some people did not want to listen to your pitches because of your age. How do you manage such difficulties?**

No matter how well-versed you are in your field, our society is built to value years of experience over quality of experience. This is not a paradigm that is about to change in a hurry. Stick to your guns, and be comfortable with the fact that those who won't give you the time of day or choose not to respect your opinions are not

the people you want to be working with anyway.

**What one moment of your career do you always look back with immense love?**

This film was certainly a labour of love. As my first short film, it will always hold a significant place in my mind and body of work. I was able to work with such a range of fantastic creatives on this work, and learnt so much about myself and the medium.

**Who do you look up to in the creative world?**

I've long admired [ballet dancers] Sergei Polunin and Svetlana Zakharova's stamina, grace, charm and passion for their craft. I aspire to be as expressive in my work.

**What does love mean to you?**

Feeling so strongly about something, you allow it to overwhelm you to the point of losing sense of time and space. ELLE

MODEL: MARGARET ZHANG PRODUCER: SAMANTHA BENNETTS HAIR: PALOMA ROSE GARCIA MAKEUP: MOLLY WARKENTIN PHOTO ASSISTANT: NICK SHAW SECOND ASSISTANT: ANA SUNTAY-TAÑEDO

