

Musical Practice of the Mayflower Minstrels

While the definition and identification of Peranakan is one that is riddled with much difficulty, we would like to simply concentrate on a musical practice that seemed in the Oral History Board to have become associated with the Straits Chinese community. An important point to consider with the Peranakan community in Singapore is their affinity not only with their tradition but also with elements of Anglicisation. In this respect, the Mayflower Association was partly English in its orientation and a stronger part where their brethren in China seemed to be a priority for offering help, creating a curious mixture of affiliation and benevolence, redolent of colonisation.

Phan Ming Yen's thesis draws attention to an increasing presence of Straits Chinese (either greater subscription or a larger number) during the late 19th century who were adopting Western customs, taking on to European sports and past times.¹ In 1885 a Straits Chinese Recreation Club was founded and in 1897, Lim Boon Keng, a third generation Straits Chinese born in Singapore who was the first Chinese Queen's Scholar and legislative councillor from 1895 to 1902, founded the Philomathic Society.² In 1897 also, Lim, together with Song Ong Siang, started the Straits Chinese Magazine, published in English, which "*aimed to promote intellectual activity amongst the Straits-born people*" and will "*afford room for the discussion of useful, interesting and curious matters connected with the customs, social life, folk-lore, history and religion of the varied races who have made their home in this Colony.*"³ The related issue here concerns plans, in 1895, put forward for the formation of a public band to give weekly musical performances "*in one or other of the public grounds of the town.*"⁴ The Singapore Municipal Commissioners had offered a contribution of \$15 for one public performance a week on condition that voluntary subscriptions could be raised up to a similar amount to allow for another performance within the week.⁵

Called the Santa Cecilia Band, the fund raising was taken up by a committee comprising both Europeans and Chinese. That the Chinese community showed interest in this band was evident in the spaces in which the band was proposed to perform: an afternoon performance at Esplanade and a second in either People's Park or on Hong Lim Green, both spaces within Chinatown.⁶ The honorary secretary of the committee was J. F. Craig who was one of the founding committee members of the Philharmonic Society and who in 1896 was its vice-president.

Initial attempts to raise the funds however were difficult. Although the band gave its first performance on 18 April 1896, by 20 April, only half the amount required had been raised and the Chinese community was criticized by a reporter of the Singapore Free Press for its lack of support: *It is very disappointing to find that our numerous wealthy Chinese friends are so very backward. Up to this morning, only four have agreed to subscribe. There must be many hundreds of well to do Chinese who are willing to support the band in its performances for the Chinese in the Public Park and on Hong Lim Green.*⁷

However, on 8th May, when the Band was scheduled to perform at the Chinese Recreation Club at Hong Lim Green, the Singapore Free Press was glad to report that *"a comparatively small sum yet remains to be made up for the amount required to enable the Band Committee to draw the sums voted by the Municipal Commissioners in aid of the public band performances."*⁸ The newspaper also reported that *"it is hoped shortly to get several Chinese airs and have them harmonised by the band for the benefit of Chinese subscribers."* By the end of 1896, the Santa Cecilia Band had been performing at the Esplanade occasionally with the *"Corporation contributing in all \$525 towards the cost."*⁹ Its performances certainly attracted the Asian population of Singapore for *"the want of an elevated band stand is much felt as the Chinese and natives frequenting the Esplanade crowd so on the bandsmen as to detract greatly from the value of the performance."*

The Santa Cecilia Band did indeed provide musical variety to the public, as the Singapore Free Press reported on 18 December 1896:

*Tonight there is the competitive attraction of moonlight music in the Gardens and moonlight music by the Sea. The Santa Cecilia band plays on the Esplanade while in the Gardens sweet music will be discoursed by what might be termed (on this occasion) the band of the Rival Brigade. "You take your choice", though you need not pay your money.*¹⁰

The Santa Cecilia Band programme comprised a selection of dances, including Evette, a waltz by Andre Latouche, L de Wenzel's polka Bonhomie, H. L. Darcy Jaxone's waltz Baby and short works including the intermezzo Shadowland by R. Farban, Sousa's overture Sans Souci and Bleger's Rose Damor. The "Rival Brigade" of course was a play on the name of the Rifle Brigade Band, the Rifle Brigade being the regiment stationed at that time in Singapore.¹¹ There is however no further mention of the Santa Cecilia Band in the Singapore Free Press' weekly listing of events nor in the Singapore Municipality reports from 1897 onwards.

Both the Straits Chinese community, or at least a segment of, and Salzmänn had been in contact for in 1898, he had written an article on Chinese music for the magazine as well as harmonised a Chinese melody.¹² He had also been giving violin lessons for two years before the classes were "suddenly abandoned."¹³ However, by 1906, the magazine reported that "*the signs of the times point favourably*" in the direction of Western music being popular among the Straits Chinese, with "*the pianoforte gradually being introduced into Chinese homes and the number of Chinese children who take lessons on it is gradually increasing.*"¹⁴

Apparently 1885 was more than a coincidental date; our research comes up with the first documented instance of a Minstrel presentation announced by *the European Police of a performance that the Curacao's Minstrel Troupe intend giving tonight at 9pm at the Police Bahru, kindly lent for the occasion by the Inspector General of Police and Officers. The programme is comprised of comic songs, breakdowns, stump speeches duetta&c, and looks very attractive. From what we have heard of the Curacao's Minstrels, we believe they are a great success and as admission is free, we would advise everyone who wants to spend a cheap and enjoyable evening to go there.*¹⁵

It is not clear whether the Minstrels featured in that 1885 concert had an impact that enabled the beginnings of the Minstrels of the Peranakan Mayflower Association. According to Matthew Chua, the Mayflower Group was formed in 1927 from a small badminton group the Mayflower Badminton party – Wong Peng Soon and other badminton champions from there, this brother, himself and other friends decided to organize a minstrel party and hence branch out to drama.

Matthew Chua learnt singing chords for vocal training and solfege. By the time he was ten to twelve years old, he performed in front of a live audience in his village. There was only one violinist, Matthew's brother and Matthew sang and played the ukulele. He had a good ear for music. His brother learnt the guitar subsequently and Matthew would accompany him on the ukulele.

Nevertheless, for Matthew Chua, since some of the members could play instruments, they agreed to join in. They learnt to play and practice and eventually the numbers grew larger as more and more musicians joined. If some of the musicians couldn't play well, Matthew's brother would bring them to their home and give them tuition on any day that's convenient to them (the weaker orchestra members) or at night. His brother would train and guide them until they were able to join the minstrels.

All the group members were men; there were no lady-musicians. They come back from school, remain at home and were not allowed to take up music or anything.. Even if someone came to play music at home or practise music at home every week, one didn't see ladies coming out as they would likely be in the kitchen preparing food to entertain the musicians that evening.

Matthew's brother's house was resembled a training school of music. His brother didn't take any money from them as he was willing to help them. It was a form of enjoyment rather than a profession where they would have to collect money for lessons. They would play Malay keronchong and Melayu Asli songs. Later, minstrel parties, consisting of violin, guitar, ukulele, mandolin, blowing instruments and side drums, became the rage. Arrangements of music were made so that the entire ensemble could practice.

While orchestras were relatively unheard of, minstrel parties were the norm. Hence, the **Mayflower Musical and Dramatic Association** was formed and usually performed music or drama items. Music was provided for the Chinese community. For example, if any clan needed fund raising for any school, they would approach the Mayflower Association for the music, while the dancing portion would be put up by students of the school. If there was a function at the Chamber of Commerce or at the Great/ New/ Happy World (where yearly anniversaries were held), every minstrel party (or ensemble/ orchestra) would be invited to entertain the crowd in the amusement parks.

Each party would perform for one night and the celebrations lasted about a month. If other associations called for overseas relief aids (ie: to China – where flooding of the Yang Tze Jiang river, Yellow river (Huang He) or Henan regions and famine besiege the common-folk), minstrel parties would perform to help raise funds. Sometimes, the drama and music dances are performed and the minstrel parties would serve as the 'background'.¹⁶

The Mayflower Association was well known among Chinese Associations and Chinese Schools because they provided support and help by playing music. 'Ling Lang' was the dialect name of Mayflower Association. The Mayflower Association is one of the few parties around. Other Peranakan people would also set up their own parties to provide aid to China. During the Japanese invasion of China, the minstrel parties would help support the Chinese. According to Matthew Chua, although they were born in Singapore, support would still be given to the people in China.¹⁷

With the Mayflower Association, no monies were exchanged for performing dance music, orchestras at parties and functions. In return for performances, usually a silver cup or a memento would be presented to them as a token of appreciation. Sometimes, a shield might be presented, with the name (Mayflower Association) and presented by the Association who invited them. On the 15th day of the Lunar New Year, there would be a procession in Singapore where every minstrel party in Singapore would take part in a procession at night. That is the time when all the ladies were allowed to go outside of their home to celebrate Chinese New Year. Otherwise, they would be kept indoors. Since that is the last day of the New Year, that would be the only time they can enjoy going out of the house; to the town hall or Anson road to watch the procession. Every party would hire a big lorry and decorate the lorry and they would play right up to Guilman House in Telok Garden.

Matthew Chua formed a band with his teacher, playing the ukulele. They practiced every week and because they were a dance band, much time was spent at the cabarets of Great World, New World and Happy World. While they played non-stop dance music, as amateurs, they didn't get paid nor asked for money except transport costs.

Matthew's minstrel party was asked to try broadcasting at the local station. From a small station in Orchard road, Cathay Building, they moved to the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation. Sometimes they were invited to play for birthday parties. Transport would be paid for and the band would go to play for whatever parties, largely because they enjoyed the experience. The band was usually given a silver plated cup for the music rendered. Even in the cabaret, \$25 was the money used to cover for transport.

When they were at the cabarets, there were 3 bands. *After we played 2 or 3 tunes, another band would continue straight away...dance orchestras usually consisted of clarinets, trombones, saxophones, among many other instruments, including bass, contrabass and piano. Dance band performances usually ended at midnight. Cabarets paid for each song and when another piece was played, people paid again. This is how the cabaret girls made money and the cabaret made money...people often paid for drink and other food while they danced. We were invited to the broadcasting station to broadcast once a month. Quite a lot of parties happened once a month, not only in English but in Mandarin. The Chinese musical associations would also hold parties.*¹⁸

There were about 40-50 members in the Mayflower group. Out of the 40-50 members, half of them were active musicians. There were not only the Singapore

born Chinese Peranakans joined but also those from the Chinese school – good musicians from the Cantonese clan. **Yeung Ching High School** had a brass band, so they would join in. Even the band master would come along when his students were in the band and they played dance music. Orchestral sheets were obtained from London, if not from local music suppliers. They would get the latest hits and before they sell, they would ask the band to sample some of them. The instrumental configuration was violin, guitar, trumpet, cornet, drum, side drum, jazz set, piano, trombone. Matthew's brother would arrange the music and conduct the band. Matthew's duty was to help print the music. *My brother would arrange and write the music and I would print the music for the members to practice. So we had chemical earth. We would put a pen knife, pull cap size and wet the earth. The music is written with a stiff nib and we would use the edible/copy ink (for endorsing) for the ink pad. When it was dried up, it would be laid in the pad for sometime, and the original copy is removed. A plain fresh copy would be laid on the pad and any number of copies would be printed.*¹⁹ When the music was copied at home, music was distributed to the members weekly. Every week, at practice, new music would be distributed there was an abundance of music scores. Different types of music were practiced before they performed at other people's home for a function. Expenses were collected from members based on a monthly subscription of a dollar. Members would have their own instruments. Dance music included the foxtrot, waltz, tango, chacha, rhumba, to name a few.

Chinese tunes and Malay pantuns were only performed when there are requests from Straits Chinese at parties. Matthew's brother could sing pantuns very well and he liked pantuns. They played Chinese songs, especially when Chinese schools invited them to perform for fund raising. The band would practice and then go for performance, encouraging dancing to the Chinese tempo, or singing. The band served as accompaniment whenever people wanted to sing. The band would be supportive of all kinds of music including Chinese music, whereas other parties may not be willing to perform Chinese songs. No money was exchanged for performances or services rendered. The association would go to the shop to buy a silver cup/ trophy and after that, they engrave their names on it with words of appreciation for services rendered to them, in the event of relief fund, like school building funds or flood relief funds....Every year, whenever there was news of disaster in China, every minstrel party and drama section would perform in the Peranakan language like 'The Merry Lad' and the 'Wills' Minstrel party. *Usually the association came to know about the party through friends or they come across the address and they would write to us...or if the President (of another association) or officials wrote to us. So when they received the letter, the event was brought*

*across in meetings and then a discussion about what token [donations] to help China. People were very understanding at that time; all the clans. We would never turn them away.*²⁰

*Other minstrel parties too, when given chances to perform, would practice and play, even for shows. In the early days, there were Dondang Sayang Peranakan parties where they would sing the pantun when members passed away they would come with the gong and the violin to sing pantun at night. They would sing pantun for the departed soul for a few hours and then on the funeral day, they will be in the lorry, they would also play the dondang sayang song for the departed ones also, building on the life of the deceased and the love for them, something like that.*²¹

There were possibly several minstrels and minstrel parties; around the Geylang and Katong area. The minstrels were not confined to the Peranakans. According to Matthew Chua, *Indians, the Tamil party, Malays, they have their own. That's why I say you cannot count how many parties there were...even the Chinese have their own minstrel party. They played Chinese music. The Cantonese know all the Cantonese music. They played modern music at minstrel parties. They had to bring [their own] instrument also. Tamil the same, Tamil community, Malay community, they join together. Not only the Peranakan or the English-speaking group. As long as they know how to play, they form their own, their own minstrel party. They gather all friends from...in the area where they stay, then they form and they have their own minstrel party...somebody would volunteer to play music, to learn to play music...we give them free music lesson.*²²

Tony Danker not only corroborates Matthew's observation but also believed that most of the minstrels were Eurasians. They formed their own groups and were identifiable because of their ability to play the repertoire and play the same instruments. They were called minstrel parties because of the black and white minstrels from Europe/ London/America...They played violin, guitar, ukulele, tambourine. *That's why they were called minstrels...old marches...they were part of those pieces that those black and white people used to play...Black and White Minstrel shows in Singapore...locals used to go around with their faces painted with charcoal...for birthday parties...and things like that...groups of entertainers...and there were quite a few of them...they visited homes during Christmas playing tunes.... could be the English who brought this music to Singapore.*²³

The Mayflower minstrel parties did not ask for professional payment for their services since it was believed to be largely voluntary and were in it for the sense of fulfillment and pleasure gained in the experience. Perhaps it stemmed from the entire experience being enrichment rather than a full-time endeavour as well as the desire to be recognized as amateur musicians of very best quality of performance. This would go some way to explain why they were keen to test themselves out in entertainment zones. There were no thoughts of professionalism or money demanded for services rendered: *We have never such in our mind you know? We play for the sake of joy – we want to be very happy, “I like to go to the party, to join somebody’s function and play a bit, so that they can join us...” That is what we have in mind all the time. Not like you call for the brass band you’ve got to pay. Some professional band, they have – the “Ong Cheng Piu” Brass Band. When you call them you have to pay. We, we amateurs... we’re not professionals. So we never think of demanding money. As long as we go, we play for you, entertain you people, you provide us with makan, fill our tummies, that means we are happy already. We enjoy. We think they are inviting us to your party. So we, every time we provide you money... give and take. So sometimes people in appreciation for the service, ok pay the transport “How much is the transport to and from the journey?” we will charter a bus, ok \$15, \$25 whatever, they give in red paper, with that money we pay to the transport. We went to all the amusement parks, we never demand anything. We’re happy to be there. Then the radio station, the same thing. They have transport, we want to get the experience, we want to see how the radio station like. That is how I spent my time, with those musicians out with all these musical parties...there was no dress, [just] a plain suit...earlier [we had] a white suit, tunic, trousers with shirt, white coat as one looked neat and tidy...later on somebody started...we put on the lapel of our open coat, the other party will have badges...For us [to perform for the occasion] it was free but for professional one had to pay...like during the early days, marriage processions needed brass band. So they call for professional brass band to play for them all the way and they had to pay.*²⁴

According to Matthew Chua, the Mayflower group lasted until after the beginning of 1937 which marked the Sino-Japanese war and in a sense that ended the group’s aspirations and motivation. With the Japanese occupation, Matthew remembers being sent to the concentration camp. *After that everyone was too busy. So we never played anymore. Some of them died. Most of the party were like that. Some fortunate one they revive. Some of the parties they revive for a short while only then they died.*²⁵

Matthew's preoccupation was not only with the minstrel party. His skills at playing the violin enabled him to join the **Young People's Orchestra** at Victoria Theatre near the Memorial Hall where practices were held. Rehearsals were held by Mr E. A. Brown. Matthew was a junior at that time. *Every Monday, we would have a classical music practice. Every quarter of the year, they (the orchestra) would provide entertainment for the school children. Every three months to encourage them and to appreciate classical music. We make them take part. They would join the School choir and they would sing as we played...there were all kinds of nationality in Singapore. A lot of European people came to join in the activities...good musicians... even their ladies. The French, the Italian, the German, the Dutch... they all came to join us in the orchestra. It was time well spent. Every evening for about two hours, practicing from 6 o'clock to about 8 or 7... about one and a half hours or two hours like that.*²⁶

From its ambiguous beginnings to its flowering and fading away, this musical practice is one that continues to puzzle. If the Association began in 1927, it could not have emerged from a vacuum. Perhaps this is where future scholarship will help provide the links. It is probably that Song Ong Siang's efforts towards the Straits Chinese Magazine in Singapore around the turn of the 19th century to provide sufficient impetus for a later group to appropriate the activities of the Minstrel party. The issue of the Peranakan community being so well versed with keronchong, asli, pantun and dondang saying are also puzzling because it would seem so much second nature for them to pursue these activities instead of a Minstrel party.

A full-length article on Malay Opera by Shaik Othman bin Sallim draws on its similarity with Bangsawan in the Straits Chinese Magazine of 1898 which may provide some clues.²⁷ *The Malay opera is, so far as I know, the only kind of dramatic performance for the large section of the community speaking the Malay tongue. It is as popular among the Straits Chinese as among the Malay people: and it is no uncommon thing to see the ladies galleries filled en masse by the Straits Chinese women. I used to wonder why the Straits-born Chinese themselves have never taken to acting, even in the shape of private theatricals. On enquiry, I was informed that the stage was regarded as a low and degrading profession, and that the actors on the Chinese stage come from the lowest and poorest ranks of the people. I suppose therefore that so long as such is the current opinion, there is no likelihood of the Straits Chinese going on stage. And yet I think it cannot be denied that even the stage may be utilized for the purposes of educating the people towards higher views of life, domestic happiness and morality. One fault which an European or a native with a proper sense of delicacy will instantly detect in the*

*Bangsawan plays is the exhibition of rude and filthy manners as well as the use of coarse, if not indecent language. It is not unfair to say that some of the plays would lose much of their popularity were these objectionable portions to be left out.*²⁸

*I must confess however that I am not altogether satisfied with the explanation given to me by my Chinese friends as to the reason why the stage is shunned by their people. Not only the “Bangsawan: but the Chinese theatres or “wayangs” are largely patronized by the Straits-born Chinese who do not thoroughly understand the language of the actors. I take it therefore that the passion of the Straits-born Chinese for the drama is just as strong as that of any other class of our community. Why should not some of them form themselves into a dramatic company and act popular English pieces, translated into fairly good and intelligible Malay to start with? They will not do so, because they are too independent and dislike anything that demands a constant mental strain. I may be wrong in venturing this statement, but that is my honest impression.*²⁹

It is entirely possible that the dramatic company and acting of popular English pieces were translated at some opportune moment to emerge in the practice of the Minstrel Party among many other possible directions. Perhaps in the present context, the Minstrel party might be frowned upon for its potentially racist and demeaning content in a perceptibly odious form. Its use in practice by the Peranakan society functioned as a ‘gift’ to the non-English conversant Chinese community as well as fund-raising and charity events. In his work *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Jurgen Osterhammel identified three basic elements of colonialist thought: the construction of inferior “otherness”; the belief in mission and guardianship and the utopia of non-politics.³⁰ Charitable aims and acts notwithstanding, activities presented by the Peranakan community would have to consider that these music making activities first lent their services, upon invitation, towards fund-raising activities for the non-Anglicised Chinese community and assistance towards a home called China; secondly, marked the line quite clearly between Anglicised and non-Anglicised Chinese communities; and thirdly, all too easily lent the impressions of utopian non-political motivation, considering that for services rendered, appreciation could arrive in the form of trophies, momentos, food and transportation. The extent to which benevolent colonialism was being practiced will need a more critical examination in relation to the innocuous practice of musicians of the Minstrel parties. Insufficient material at this stage makes this once most popular practice among many communities in Singapore the subject of future research and scholarship.

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- 2 Turnbull. A History of Singapore 1819 - 1988 Second Edition. p. 103, in Phan, Ming Yen, op.cit, pp.165-167.
- 3 "Our Programme." in The Straits Chinese Magazine (SCM) March 1897 Vol. 1 No. 1 p. 2, in Phan, Ming Yen, op.cit, pp.165-167.
- 4 Administration Report of the Singapore Municipality for the year 1895, p. 18. Again, as with the ensembles formed during the 19th century in Singapore mentioned in this thesis, the course of this research has not revealed any other reference to the Santa Cecilia Band aside from its mention in the newspapers and the Administration Report of the Singapore Municipality., in Phan, Ming Yen, op.cit, pp.165-167.
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