

## Quek Yong Siu (郭永秀): The Compassionate Critic

by **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

National Library Board, Singapore

*Quek Yong Siu, the President of the Association of Composers, is a self-taught musician who pursued his passion for music despite his parents' disapproval.*

He is a man of many talents. A well-known poet, published author and versatile musician, Quek Yong Siu (郭永秀), born in 1951, is currently the president of the Association of Composers, vice-president of the Chinese Instrumental Music Association, music director and conductor of the Bel Canto Philharmonic Male Choir (东艺男声合唱团) and Cha Yang Male Choir (茶阳合唱团), committee member of the Singapore Writers Association, consultant of Arts Sphere Chinese Chamber Ensemble (鼎艺室内乐团), advisor of the Ding Xiao Yan Ruan Ensemble (丁晓燕阮族乐团) and the Honourable President of the Fen Yang Guo Clan Association (汾阳郭氏公会). Quek is a full-time lecturer at the Electronics Department of the Institute of Technical Education. He has also served on many judging panels for local and overseas literary and music competitions. He contributes music reviews to the local Chinese newspapers on a regular basis and is a guest DJ on radio music programmes.

How does he find time to do so many things?

“Everybody keeps complaining that they have no time. But everyone has time on his/her hands. The question is what they do with their time. Some would watch movies for a few hours. I don’t watch television, so I spent my time on the things that interest me.”

“If you want some kind of recipe to successful time management, I guess I would say you just have to focus on everything you do. Don’t be distracted. It’s the only way to get anything done.”

Lee Yuk Chuan, the former president of the Association of Composers, sees Quek as a talented, energetic and creative man, “He is very serious minded about all the artistic pursuits he gets involved in. He is also a perfectionist. That’s why he could be so accomplished in everything he does. He is simply totally obsessed with arts and culture. His success is due to his diligence and persistence in learning.”

This sense of purpose and single-mindedness has served Quek well in his music pursuits, especially since his family was not well-off. His father was a clerk working in Singapore in the 1950s. Quek had travelled from China to join his father when he was six years old. His earliest memories connected with music were of how they used to make drums out of sundried frog skins and milk cans in summer in the Chinese village where he lived. He also recalled a similar encounter in Singapore, where his neighbour made an *erhu* using a milk can, a broom stick and some cables.

He was in secondary three when, inspired by his classmate who loved to sing and play the harmonica, Quek began dappling with the instrument too and found himself a fast learner. He was also curious about the music played on Rediffusion at home, which included Chinese operas sung in the different dialects as well as all kinds of songs. He would spend time finding out their

original sources and genres. He also found the music programmes on television, which were in black and white then, very inspiring. That was probably how his fascination with music got further stoked.

However, his parents were less than thrilled. All they wanted was for him to concentrate on his studies. So the young Quek would sneak off to his friend's place where he would learn about music through listening to cassette tapes and watching concerts. The self-taught musician revealed, "My interests in writing and music began in childhood. I was not able to actively pursue my interests then. But I kept up by reading. I learnt a lot through reading. I only took up writing and music seriously after I started working. Later, I would buy my first piano when I was 30 years old."

He picked up some basic skills in playing the harmonica and *dizi* (Chinese bamboo flute) on his own. Since he was keen to learn more, he joined the People's Association Chinese Orchestra. There, he met Ma Wen (马文), a composer and conductor from Hong Kong, who told him something that would dramatically alter his life.

"He told me I had started out too late in my life learning to be a musician specialising in playing an instrument. He encouraged me to turn my attention towards composing and conducting because these require brainwork instead. It was really a turning point in my life."

He proceeded to learn composing from famous composer Shen Ping Kwang (沈炳光) and conducting from Lee Howe (李豪). He also learnt about contemporary music from Leong Yoon Pin and Phoon Yew Tien. Quek began conducting when he was 19 years old. For the next 20 years, he would in turn be the conductor for Jue Xin Orchestra (掘新管弦乐团), Red Cross Chinese Orchestra (红十字会华乐团), National Theatre Trust Mixed Orchestra (国家剧场信托局中西乐队), etc.

Quek is credited with introducing a few instruments into the local Chinese instrumental music scene, like the *koudi* (口笛), *bawu* (巴乌) and the baritone *suona* (次中音唢呐).

"Back then, Chinese orchestras are not as professionally organised as it is now, where there are specialised musicians to teach newcomers how to play the instruments. The conductors basically had to be able to do that. So I taught myself how to play most, if not all, kinds of Chinese musical instruments."

"Since Singapore had no diplomatic relations with China back then, there was also a shortage of music scores. So we had to transcribe the full score, which includes music for all the different instruments, through listening to them on cassette tapes. It was an informal but also very practical training process, especially for our sensitivity to musical notes," Quek reminisced.

Their generation of musicians soon discovered that they needed to move beyond self-transcribed scores - they needed to compose their own music. It was then that they began to learn music theory and write their own music. Quek started composing at the age of 17, inspired mostly by his gut feeling.

In 1975, Quek's composition *Star Fruits Fill the Hills* (《杨桃结果满山岗》) won second prize in the Our Songs Competition. It remains a perennial favourite till this day. Two years later, another one of his songs, *Singapore Smiling At You* (《新加坡向你微笑》), won too. Quek would continue to compose many musical pieces which included solos, choral music, instrumentals, dance dramas, etc.

To Quek, technique alone does not make a good piece of instrumental music. The human element is fundamental to good music. As for a good song, he feels that it "must encompass all kinds of emotions, like that in Western opera. Emotions must not only be expressed through the lyrics, but through the singing technique, timbre and music. The music must be able to stand on its own, expressing the thematic emotions even without the use of words."

As for music with a distinctive local sound, Quek feels we should just let things run its natural course, "We may be an immigrant society, but it doesn't mean that a piece of music will become 'local' just by mixing various cultural elements. Experimentation has been done before and it has proven that it simply does not work. It has no depth, and is neither here nor there. It may take a while for us to develop our own style. Other cultures have taken thousands of years, so we are in no hurry. Just write what you feel most deeply about. Just create good music."

From 1995 onwards, Quek was also invited to co-host a series of radio music programmes where he shared his knowledge with the listeners on all kinds of topics related to music, including genres, history, theory, hi-fi technology, etc. His professional training in electronics proved useful in his music work.

"Computers and electronics are related to numbers. People have found close connections between music and mathematics, especially in terms of the calculation of scales. Electronics and repair work involve the sense of hearing. It will help you determine how and what to repair. In a way, it was good training for my hearing. It has certainly helped me in my music conducting. I don't think anything is diabolically opposed to each other. It's a matter of applying what you know in different areas."

In 1992, Quek stopped all his music activities to spend more time with his family, in particular his young children. But the man still kept his interest in music very much alive through his writing – he contributed music reviews to the local Chinese press on a regular basis. Incidentally, his first music writing was about the inaugural *shiyue* (诗乐, music poems)(the precursor of the *xinyao* movement) concert held by the Nanyang University students in 1978.

"When I first started writing, it was to express my views and provide local musicians with a record of their performance. But gradually, I developed a sense of mission," Quek revealed.

To Lee Yuk Chuan, Quek's objective reviews urged professional orchestras to seek breakthroughs in the quality of their music. To amateur groups, Quek would give constructive criticism and encouragement which boosted their confidence. His writings over the years had provided constructive opinions for the local music scene.

Music director cum conductor for City Chinese Orchestra, Tay Teow Kiat (郑朝吉), has this to say about Quek as a music critic, “A music critic has to be familiar with the different music styles, interpretation of musical pieces, the background and motivation behind the music, and so on. He must be well-read and well-versed with the art form. He must also be impartial and objective. Since the development of the Chinese instrumental music scene here has not reached a professional level comparable to that in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, a music critic working in Singapore must be courageous as well. Quek has been doing this for more than a decade, becoming better at it over the years. We must acknowledge his contributions to the development of Chinese instrumental music in Singapore.”

Perhaps as a conductor and composer, Quek is able to empathize with fellow musicians. According to He Zhanhao (何占豪), famous Chinese composer and conductor, and the composer of the *Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto* (《梁祝小提琴协奏曲》), this contributed a positive quality to Quek’s music criticism, “He is realistic and truthful. You can also see his passion and sincerity. He is full of praise for the artistic achievements of the musicians, yet he would also frankly point out their inadequacies. This is especially true in the case of young musicians. When you read his reviews, you could feel a passionate voice that really cares for you and would like to help you.”

And what is Quek’s attitude towards music criticism? “One could be acute and incisive when discussing the problems or issues at hand, but towards the performer, one should be moderate and gentle. Some people like to discount everything about a performance. But I think this is lacking in honesty and kindness. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. It’s the same thing in music or art. We must learn to appreciate the strengths, then try to analyse the weaknesses and give constructive suggestions about how to make improvements.”

On the qualities of a good music critic, Quek, who was awarded the *Artistic Excellence Award* by the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore in January 2003, said, “He/she should have a keen sense of hearing and artistic sensitivity. They must also possess an innate artistic intuition, willing to be frank and tell it as it is. They must not be swayed by their emotions or the reputation and status of the musician. Only then could the critic give an objective and truthful account of the concert and the musicians’ performance.”

In 2005, Quek held a concert Harvest Time here where his signature songs were sung by renowned singers. The next year, another concert was held at the Beijing National Library Concert Hall. It was reportedly the first time the Chinese instrumental works of a Singapore composer was performed in China. Both concerts were highly acclaimed and well received by the music community and audience alike. There were plans for more musical exchanges between the two countries.

Quek feels that despite a more conducive environment now for the young to learn music, most give up as soon as they have passed the examinations at the highest grade because it was never their passion to begin with.

“It’s different for our generation. If we love something, we go completely crazy and it often becomes a lifetime pursuit. I’ve never given up on learning more about music. I can’t give it up. It has become a part of me. If I give it up, life would cease to have any meaning for me!”

### Quote

“I believe the greatest art is a combination of both sense and sensibility. Music that is not moving is meaningless. Art exists for people. So humanity is its most important element. And humans are made up of sense and sensibility. Art, be it music or literature, must comprise these two aspects before it could be considered good.”

### Awards

**1975:** 《杨桃结果满山岗》 won *Second Prize* at the “Our Songs Competition”

**1977:** 《新加坡向你微笑》 won *Second Prize* at the “Our Songs Competition”

**2003:** 8<sup>th</sup> Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards,  
*Artistic Excellence Award*

### Discography

《音乐的火焰》 (compilation)

《我们的歌》 (compilation)

《远方归来的小舟》 (compilation)

《春天的歌声》 (compilation)

《花葩山》 (compilation)

《好歌美曲献国庆（二）》 (compilation)

《好歌美曲献国庆（三）》 (compilation)

《狮城之声传北京》 (compilation)

## *Selected Works*

### *Vocals*

#### **独唱曲**

《不知道为了什么》（曲）

《听、听、月琴》（曲）

《无名的星》

《请你带个音讯》（曲）

《杨桃结果满山岗》

《流吧！小河》（词曲）

《月夜泛舟》（曲）

《乌节路上》（词）

《屋外》（山茶）（编曲）

《白色之恋》（曲）

《心底娃》（曲）

《任你缥缈远去》（曲）

《夏日的小雨》（曲）

**Walking My Baby Back Home**（music）

## **合唱曲**

《啊！新加坡》（曲）

《渭城曲》

《生命之歌》

《草》

## **唐诗宋词谱成歌曲**

《长相思》（曲）

《过故人庄》（曲）

## **舞剧**

《画皮》

《龙牙星》

《哪吒闹海》

《秋翁遇仙记》

《猫与鼠》

《雨的联想》（曲）

《乡村之歌》

《波涛》

《节日的欢腾》

《马来舞曲》

《给我一个美丽的世界》

《写给丽江的歌》

## 华乐

《波涛》

《乡村之歌》

《在营火旁》

## References

Tang, G. (1978, 14 June). “Unexciting, but it was not a bad start”. The Straits Times, p. 15.

(1983, 2 February). “An evening of local music”. The Straits Times, p. 15.

Tan, B. H. (1983, 9 December). “Tang poems come alive on television”, The Straits Times, p. 1.

(1987, 10 July). “Poetry on tv for secondary school pupils”. The Straits Times, p. 11.

郭永秀著 (2002). 《余韵 – 郭永秀音乐评论集》. 新加坡: 创意圈工作室.

Quek Yong Siu (2008). Retrieved 26 June 2010, from <http://www.alittlevoice.org/2008/12/mr-quek-yong-siu/>

中国、新加坡音乐家合力推广新华网 (2006). Retrieved 26 June 2010, from <http://wine.cii.com.cn/news/show.asp?InfoName=&ShowID=121650>