

Rufino Soliano: Conductor, composer and rhythm man

by Stephanie Ho, written on 16 January 2014

Rufino Soliano is an accomplished musician, composer and conductor. He is best known as a former leader of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) orchestra. From a young age, he has been active in the local music scene as a violinist, drummer and percussionist. Subsequently, he took on music arrangement, composing and conducting. In 2013, at the age of 81, he released his debut album of 12 original songs.

Rufino Soliano was born in Singapore on 10 January 1932 to a Eurasian mother and Filipino father. He was the eldest of nine children.¹ The Soliano family was a musical family. Rufino's paternal grandfather had moved his family from the Philippines to Singapore to work as a pianist for silent movies.² Rufino's father, Concordio Alibong (Con) Soliano, was a talented musician who played in clubs and cabarets.³ His uncles, Gerinomo Alibong (Gerry) and Alfonso were also well-known bandleaders and musicians.⁴

Musical training

Rufino's father, Concordio, was a versatile musician. He arranged music, and played the piano, trumpet, and accordion. When Rufino was about 8 years old, his father began teaching him how to read music and play the violin. Rufino remembered his father being strict and insisting that he and his brother practice their instruments every day. Rufino said that they were supposed to practice four to six hours a day. Subsequently, Rufino also took lessons from renowned violin teacher, Goh Soon Tioe.⁵

Early gigs

As a result of his practice, Rufino was able to pick up music very quickly. In his early teens, his father sent him to work in a Malay *bangsawan* band at New World Park. That exposed Rufino to Malay music and he learnt how to play music from listening and improvisation. Subsequently, his father sent him to work in a band playing at a Chinese restaurant to expose him to Chinese music.⁶ These experiences increased his understanding and appreciation of different musical styles and instruments.⁷

When Rufino was 15, he formed his first band known as the *Marvel Boys*. The band was heralded in the newspaper as the youngest jazz band in Malaya as its members were all under 16 years old.⁸ The band performed in various clubs and cabarets.

¹ Soliano, Rufino. (2013). *Endlessly*. Singapore: Universal Music Singapore, pp. 5-6.

² In the 1920s to the 1940s, silent movies were screen at cinemas. These films required a pianist and violinist to provide music to match the atmosphere and action on screen. See Abisheganaden, P. (2005). *Notes across the years: Anecdotes from a musical life*. Singapore: Unipress, p. 5.

³ Rufino Soliano. Oral History Interview. Accession no. 3704, Reel 1. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

⁴ Soliano, the new secretary. (1951, August 1). *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 4.

⁵ Rufino Soliano. Oral History Interview. Accession no. 3704, Reel 1. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

⁶ Rufino Soliano. Oral History Interview. Accession no. 3704, Reel 1. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

⁷ Soliano, Rufino. (2013). *Endlessly*. Singapore: Universal Music Singapore, p. 8.

⁸ Youngest jazz band. (1948, August 8). *Straits Times*, p. 3.

Rufino remembered that at the time, the band members did not care much about how much they were paid. They were just happy to perform in public.⁹

Dance clubs

Rufino's first permanent job was in Heinz Alexander's band that performed at the Singapore Swimming Club. In order to get the job Rufino had to play the drums as that was the only vacant slot in the band. As a result, Rufino taught himself to play the instrument and practiced on his brother's drum set. He stayed at the club for only about six months as he found it hard to work with the other musicians who were all European.^{10 11}

From 1950 to 1956, Rufino worked with his uncle, Gerry, at the Raffles Hotel in an eight-piece band known as *Gerry Soliano and the Boys*.¹² Rufino was assigned to play the drums and his uncle pushed him to practice hard to improve his skills. Latin dance floorshows were then the rage, and these required intricate drum work. During that stint, Rufino fell in love with Latin music. He said the rhythm "makes you feel, makes you want to move".¹³

When Rufino's uncle retired from the Raffles, Rufino went to work at a six-piece band led by his cousin, Jose Daroya. The band performed at Cathay Restaurant with Rufino playing Latin percussion, cementing his passion for the Latin rhythms.¹⁴

Radio and Television Orchestra

In 1960, Rufino joined the Singapore's Radio Orchestra as a percussionist.¹⁵ At the time the orchestra played at state functions and for radio programmes in all languages. Their repertoire included Western classical and light music, popular dance music as well as Chinese, Hindustani and Malay music.¹⁶ Television was launched in Singapore in 1963 and the orchestra became known as the Radio Television Singapore (RTS) orchestra.¹⁷

In the orchestra, Rufino had the opportunity to perform with musical greats such as P. Ramlee, Saloma and Kartina Dahari. In addition, he also started arranging and composing music. One of his compositions, *Esmeralda*, was sung by the late Ahmad Daud and later by Katina Dahari. In 1971, Rufino was appointed Deputy Leader of the orchestra.¹⁸

⁹ Rufino Soliano. Oral History Interview. Accession no. 3704, Reel 2. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

¹⁰ Rufino Soliano. Oral History Interview. Accession no. 3704, Reel 2. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

¹¹ Soliano, Rufino. (2013). *Endlessly*. Singapore: Universal Music Singapore, p. 9.

¹² Soliano, Rufino. (2013). *Endlessly*. Singapore: Universal Music Singapore, p. 9.

¹³ Phua, A. (2013, September 2). *Rufino Soliano: Life is nothing but music*. Retrieved from <http://www.iremember.sg/index.php/2013/09/02/rufino-life-is-nothing-but-music/>

¹⁴ Soliano, Rufino. (2013). *Endlessly*. Singapore: Universal Music Singapore, p. 11.

¹⁵ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2013, June 5). Composer Soliano debuts album at 81. *Straits Times*.

¹⁶ *Radio Singapore: a story of progress 1945-1959*. (1959). Singapore: Government Printing Office.

¹⁷ Mun, C. S. (2013, August 3). Radio Singapore Orchestra 1945 – 1991. Retrieved from <http://singapore60smusic.blogspot.sg/2013/08/national-day-2013-special-posting-radio.html>

¹⁸ Soliano, Rufino. (2013). *Endlessly*. Singapore: Universal Music Singapore, pp. 12-15.

Even though he was part of the orchestra, Rufino continued to be active in the music scene. In 1967, he formed a group known as the *Latin Six Combo* that played big band music but with a Latin beat. Comprising mainly of Singaporean-Filipino musicians from the nightclub scene, the group had their own 15-minute radio programme. This programme was later extended to 30 minutes.¹⁹

Rufino was also a member of the Musician's Union and played in bands to support foreign acts that came to Singapore such as Shirley Bassey and Sammy Davis Junior. He was also in a band organized by Charles Lazaroo who provided backing music for several editions of *Talentine*.²⁰

Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) orchestra

In 1980, the functions of RTS were taken over by a statutory board known as the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC).²¹ Accordingly the orchestra was renamed the SBC orchestra. Ahmad Jaffar was then leader of the orchestra and Rufino the deputy leader. As deputy, Rufino was involved in music arrangement and led the orchestra when the leader was away. When Jaffar retired, Rufino was asked to lead the orchestra.²²

The SBC orchestra was larger than its predecessors. The *SBC 1980/81 Annual Report* stated that the orchestra was “enlarged from 9 to 34 members to enable it to better meet the demands of the station’s increased musical productions”.²³ Rufino noted that he added a string section when he became the leader to create “a new sound”. The orchestra could then be known as a “concert orchestra”.²⁴

As a leader, Rufino insisted that the orchestra played the score exactly as it was written. In this way, they would “sound like one”. They could only improvise in planned solo sections. Although musicians had to be disciplined, Rufino also said that they should be able to improvise. This was important in instances when singers started on the wrong key, and the whole orchestra needed to quickly improvise to support the singers.²⁵

During his stint in SBC, the orchestra also played outdoor concerts for the public²⁶ and participated in musical events such as the annual jazz festival.²⁷ The orchestra also participated in regional musical events such as annual cultural exchange performances with the Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) orchestra.^{28 29}

¹⁹ Rufino Soliano. *Oral History Interview*. Accession no. 3704, Reel 3. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

²⁰ Rufino Soliano. *Oral History Interview*. Accession no. 3704, Reels 4 & 5. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

²¹ SBC directors. (1980, January 20). *Straits Times*, p. 6.

²² Rufino Soliano. *Oral History Interview*. Accession no. 3704, Reel 5. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

²³ Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). *Annual report 1980/81*. Singapore: SBC, p. 16.

²⁴ Rufino Soliano. *Oral History Interview*. Accession no. 3704, Reel 3. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

²⁵ Rufino Soliano. *Oral History Interview*. Accession no. 3704, Reel 3 & 4. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

²⁶ Lam, J. (1988, June 27). SBC orchestra to provide alternative to SSO. *Straits Times*, p. 30.

²⁷ Cheah, P. (1983, August 18). September jazz. *Singapore Monitor*, p. 19.

²⁸ Tan, B. (1984, March 24). *Dondang Sayang* updated. *Straits Times*, p. 9.

²⁹ Orchestras cement cultural links. (1986, July 6). *Straits Times*, p. 12.

For his service at SBC, Rufino was awarded the National Day Efficiency Medal in 1988.³⁰ Rufino retired from the orchestra in 1995.³¹

Arranging and composing music

Throughout his musical career, Rufino composed and arranged music. One of his early successes was a winning composition for the ASEAN theme music competition in 1971. A joint composition with fellow RTS orchestra musician Valentine (Val) Ortega, the piece was inspired by the letters in the acronym, ASEAN, as well as the rhythmic heritage of the ASEAN member nations.^{32 33}

Some of his other notable compositions included a march for the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) as well as the opening song for the inaugural Asian Broadcasting Union (ABU) song contest. The piece was entitled “Let’s celebrate”.³⁴
³⁵ In 1998, Rufino was awarded an Artistic Excellence Award by the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) in recognition of his contribution to local music.³⁶

Retirement

After his retirement from SBC, Rufino continued to play at the clubs but stopped after a year due to poor health. After a stroke in 2010, he fell into depression. In an effort to help him, his daughter, Kathleen, suggested he start composing music again. Rufino said, “The doctor told me that he did not have any medication for me for the depression. But when I started writing, I forgot about everything else and I got cured. I finished composing and rearranging all the songs in a week.”³⁷

In 2013, Rufino launched his debut album, *Endlessly*, of 12 Latin-inspired compositions. The compositions were named after his daughter and grandchildren who continue to inspire him.³⁸

Quote

*“Nothing I know, except music. I play music, I write music and I love music. And I am very glad that I am a musician.”*³⁹

Awards

1988 National Day Efficiency Medal

1998 COMPASS Artistic Excellence Award

³⁰ National Day honours: Efficiency Medal recipients. (1988, August 10). *Straits Times*.

³¹ Soliano, Rufino. (2013). *Endlessly*. Singapore: Universal Music Singapore, p. 11.

³² Rufino Soliano. *Oral History Interview*. Accession no. 3704, Reel 4. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

³³ Chew, L. C. (1971, September 16). Mystery winners of ASEAN music contest. *Straits Times*, p. 10.

³⁴ Man with music in his blood. (1972, September 2). *New Nation*.

³⁵ Rufino Soliano. *Oral History Interview*. Accession no. 3704, Reel 4 & 5. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

³⁶ COMPASS. *4th COMPASS Awards Presentation*. Retrieved from <http://www.compass.org.sg/cIndex56.aspx>

³⁷ Eddino Abdul Hadi. (2013, June 5). Composer Soliano debuts album at 81. *Straits Times*.

³⁸ Phua, A. (2013, September 2). *Rufino Soliano: Life is nothing but music*. Retrieved from <http://www.iremember.sg/index.php/2013/09/02/rufino-life-is-nothing-but-music/>

³⁹ Phua, A. (2013, September 2). *Rufino Soliano: Life is nothing but music*. Retrieved from <http://www.iremember.sg/index.php/2013/09/02/rufino-life-is-nothing-but-music/>

Albums

Endlessly (2013)

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Youngest jazz band. (1948, August 8). *Straits Times*.