

Majulah Singapura: A Composition of History

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Singapore's National Anthem began as a song penned for a different purpose. It resonated so strongly with those who heard it that it was chosen to be the country's most important piece of music that would signify to the world that Singapore was an independent nation.

Majulah Singapura

*Mari kita rakyat Singapura
Sama-sama menuju bahagia
Cita-cita kita yang mulia
Berjaya Singapura
Marilah kita bersatu
Dengan semangat yang baru
Semua kita berseru
Majulah Singapura
Majulah Singapura*

English Translation

*Come, fellow Singaporeans
Let us progress towards happiness together
May our noble aspiration bring
Singapore success
Come, let us unite
In a new spirit
Let our voices soar as one
Onward Singapore
Onward Singapore*

Composer Zubir Said was inspired in this work by a powerful and emotive Malay proverb: *Di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung* (You should hold up the sky of the land where you live).

The first time *Majulah Singapura* was heard by the public was on December 3, 1959. At City Hall, a 17-gun salute introduced the newly inaugurated Yusof bin Ishak as Singapore's first *Yang di-Pertuan Negara* (Head of State). He emerged before the 2,500-strong crowd assembled at The Padang, to the rousing strains of *Majulah Singapura*. He was introduced by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as "the symbol of unity for the people".

His inauguration was also the occasion for the unveiling of the National Flag and State Crest, and marked the launch of National Loyalty Week, which took place from December 3–10, 1959. S. Rajaratnam, then Minister for Culture, said that the "national flag, crest and anthem express symbolically the hopes and ideals of a people". During Loyalty Week, the public could dial 2 or

3 to listen to the National Anthem. This proved to be so popular that the service had to be discontinued during peak hours to avoid overloading the system.

Just months earlier, on May 31, Singapore had been granted self-government. Singaporeans became citizens, no longer British subjects, and the People's Action Party (PAP) came into power as the first fully elected government. It was a heady time of transformation, development, decisions, and history.

What many do not know is that the National Anthem began its life as a song for a different occasion. In 1956, then Deputy Mayor Ong Pang Boon had sought out Sumatran-born Encik Zubir Said, who was already highly regarded in the region, to compose a song for Singapore's City Council. Zubir was a prolific composer who, throughout his career, had more than 1,000 songs to his name. Despite his impressive credentials, Zubir was a man devoted to music more than to success or money; originality and artistic integrity were high priorities throughout his career, and many hailed him as a “pure” musician. These qualities no doubt contributed to the timeless quality of *Majulah Singapura*.

First presented as an instrumental outline played on a piano, *Majulah Singapura* was subsequently revised to become the Council's official song. The song, whose title means “Onward Singapore”, calls on Singaporeans to unite and venture together towards success and happiness. Written in Malay with the intention of instilling a sense of belonging to Malaya – a crucial step in the government's plan for merger at that time – the song was crafted to be powerful yet simple enough to be understood by all. In a 1984 interview, Zubir said, “[The] difficulty is in such a short melody, I have to put in all the words...”

The original composition was first performed at Victoria Theatre by the Singapore Chamber Ensemble – which was to remain Singapore’s most active orchestra for the next 30 years – during the grand finale of a concert on September 6, 1958. The concert was held to commemorate the re-opening of the newly renovated theatre, which also held the motto, *Majulah Singapura*.

The Singapore Chamber Ensemble, formed in 1949 by conductor Paul Abisheganaden, was Singapore’s first home-grown orchestral. Its conductor, fondly known as Singapore’s Grand Old Man of Music, adapted and revised the composition in consultation with Zubir Said before it was adopted as the National Anthem.

A National Hit

Upon achieving self-governance, the City Council was dissolved. Zubir's song, however, was deemed an apt choice for the nation's new anthem. Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew also declared that the anthem should evoke in people “feelings of loyalty and unity towards the state of which they are constituent members”.

After being further developed, modified, and contributed to by various musicians and orchestras, including the Radio Singapore Orchestra, Military Forces Band, and the visiting Berlin Chamber Orchestra, *Majulah Singapura* was approved and adopted by the Legislative Assembly.

Independence

On September 16, 1963, Singapore merged with Malaya, which was then renamed Malaysia. The union only lasted until 9 August 1965, when the two territories separated, leaving Singapore as an independent nation.

Since Independence, *Majulah Singapura* has continued to feature prominently in everyday life – from assemblies every morning in schools to the annual National Day Parade to sporting events, to the opening and closing of Singapore TV stations every night.

Originally sung in G Major, an optional recording featuring the anthem in the more accessible F Major was distributed to schools in 1983 to encourage more students to sing it at school assemblies. To make the anthem even more accessible, it was, in 1993, made shorter; this version became recognised as the official one. In May 2000, several local composers were invited to rearrange *Majulah Singapura* in F Major. Classical composer Phoon Yew Tien's rearrangement, set to a slower tempo and with more instruments to add to the grandeur, was the one chosen.

The then Ministry of Information and the Arts, MITA (now called the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, MICA), tasked local producer Ken Lim with producing a recording by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. This was carried out in Victoria Concert Hall on November 20, 2000. Seven versions of this new arrangement were recorded, each with varying lengths and instrumentation suitable for different occasions. It was officially re-launched on January 19, 2001.

More than 50 years after it was first heard by Singaporeans dizzy with newfound independence and hope for the future, Zubir Said's legacy of a powerful call to national pride remains as vibrant and moving as it was then.

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