

**Singapore Chinese Orchestra (新加坡华乐团): The Spirit of Change**

by **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 24th October 2010

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*The Singapore Chinese Orchestra, the national and only professional Chinese orchestra of the nation, aspires to be an orchestra for everyone with originally created repertoires enriched with elements of a “Nanyang” flavor.*

In September 2010, Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong committed to donate \$250,000 to the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) in support of the Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition (SICCOC) to be held in November the following year. The competition, spearheaded by the SCO, is the first of this series of triennial competitions.

Mr Lee, who is SCO’s patron, will also be giving the same amount in each of the next two competitions, said a statement released by the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO).

Explaining why he chose to donate to the SCO, Mr Lee said the orchestra had grown and matured and established a reputation for itself both in Singapore and internationally.

“I hope the competition will stimulate composers to come up with refreshing repertoires, enriched with ‘Nanyang’ perspectives which can feature in future SCO concerts and become part of our local heritage.”

Formerly a performing unit of the People’s Association Cultural Troupe, which was set up in 1974 by absorbing members from the National Theatre Club Chinese Orchestra (the first semi-professional Chinese orchestra outside of China, established in 1968), the SCO was inaugurated in 1996 at the initiative of the then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, making it Singapore’s national orchestra as well as its only professional Chinese orchestra. The SCO Board of Directors consists of leading entrepreneurs and professionals. A youth wing orchestra was set up in 2003 to nurture budding music talents into professional musicians.

Such high level support for Chinese orchestra music was a far cry from its humble beginnings in the early 1950s. Pioneers remember scraping together savings to buy their own first instruments, which were mostly simple and crude.

Some musical instruments were initially not widely available because importers had not brought them in. Sometimes, new items were brought in and no one knew what they were. In other instances, the late Wang Jia He (王佳和), the only local Chinese musical instrument maker, was asked to create items based on photographs and information about sound quality and structure.

Music scores were few and far between then. Political conditions had rendered them rare commodities. Most orchestra members could not read them even if there were as many members of these amateur groups had little musical knowledge. Often times, these pioneers had to

manually transcribe music recordings from vinyl records or tapes, noting painstakingly the full score for the various musical instruments.

Those at the helm of the amateur music groups often had to play several roles. Aside from taking charge at practice sessions, they have to transcribe music scores, play instrument(s) and teach others how to play. They also have to look for financial support for the group. Yang Hao Ran (杨浩然), who was a leading figure of the Chinese orchestra group under the Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association (陶融儒乐社), which had formed Singapore's first full-scale amateur Chinese orchestra in 1959, once had to pawn his jewelry to pay the rent of the association premises.

Contrast those times with the present. The SCO is now based at the revamped Singapore Conference Hall, a heritage building which officially opened in 1965. The government had spent some S\$14.7 million refurbishing the venue which became SCO's permanent performance and rehearsal space. The 75-strong orchestra includes musicians who were chosen from amongst the best in Singapore and about half (39) were recruited through rigorous auditions of musicians from China.

SCO general manager Terence Ho (何伟山) says, "The musicians we have recruited from China are of very high professional standing who graduated from the best music schools."

The music director of SCO, Yeh Tsung (叶聪), feels that, all things being equal, he would give priority to signing on local musicians, "This is the principle I also abide by as music director in the United States. Because an orchestra must be closely connected to the local circumstances. I am currently observing the performance of quite a number of young musicians here who are in their teens and twenties. I find they have great potential."

Indeed, the SCO considers it one of their key roles to nurture local talent. It is co-organising, with the National Arts Council, the biennial National Chinese Music Competition (NCMC). The added incentive for the winners this time round would be the opportunity to perform together with the SCO.

"The NCMC is a valuable means of nurturing talent," says Mr Ho. "With the involvement of SCO, the competition has been brought to a whole new level. We hope to make some great talent discoveries. We shall then explore ways of cultivating those with potential. This is definitely a role that the SCO should play."

The SCO receives grants from the government to sustain its operations. In addition, it is also able to garner substantial amount of sponsorship from private organizations and public donations to provide it with much-needed funds.

Adopting the Western structure of organizing an orchestra - there is a separation of duties between the music aspect of the orchestra and the marketing and administrative aspects of it –

thus frees the music director and the musicians to concentrate on polishing their music while the management of SCO focuses their efforts on marketing the orchestra to the public as well as handling the other administrative matters pertaining to the orchestra.

Mr Ho feels that the application of western management style would change the traditional oriental way of operating which was more instinctive and thus less scientific. Through the use of analysis and planning, resources could then be better harnessed for the benefit and development of the SCO. As a reflection of the management philosophy, the SCO recently launched an iPhone app, making it the first Chinese orchestra to do so. Mr Ho explains that since different potential audience groups have differing tastes, lifestyle and habits, he is open to using different or even unconventional platforms to connect with them.

He is envious of the level of support that sports development has received from the public and the media alike. In particular, arts and culture development, to him, could do with more in depth reporting and reviews to help raise the bar in the audience's aesthetic appreciation and exposure. This would in turn play a part in widening the audience base that could grow along with the SCO's music development.

Under music director Yeh Tsung, who joined the SCO in 2002, the orchestra's repertoire has undergone rapid expansion. Hailing from Shanghai, China, Yeh is also the music director of the South Bend Symphony Orchestra in the United States, making him the first conductor to be appointed music director of both the Chinese orchestra and symphonic orchestra simultaneously. As a true orchestra builder, Yeh's persistence and hard work on the orchestra's performance quality has produced audible results in rhythm, tone quality, dynamic range and musicality.

Yeh explained, "Initially, Chinese orchestra music was not intended to be an ensemble form of music. Experimentation was done in the 1920s and gradually took shape in the 1950s. It has a very short history of development."

Hence, achieving a uniform ensemble sound for SCO became one of his more pressing tasks when he took over the baton. And this was where his training and exposure to western symphonic orchestra music came in handy. "I applied the training methods with the symphonic orchestras to the SCO. I'm not trying to westernize the orchestra, but rather I want to help the musicians play as an ensemble."

He also fine tuned the instruments, keeping its unique sound yet reducing its jarring qualities so that the whole orchestra could sound more uniform and harmonious, without some instruments standing out from the rest.

The early Chinese instrumental musicians had a more improvisational tendency which Yeh also tried to change. "I had etudes created for our rehearsals. In the past, Chinese instrumental music was a purely oral tradition, passed on by master to disciple. There were also no music scores,

which contributed to its casualness. With these specially written etudes, we introduce a system and instill discipline.”

Maestro Yeh has also been credited with pushing the frontiers of Chinese classical music. With SCO’s leading role, it is able to innovate and set trends in the industry. It possesses the avenue to try out experimental music, which includes contemporary compositions and Western compositions. Also, as a relatively young Chinese orchestra when compared to other more established ones in the region, SCO has the flexibility to integrate Western or contemporary music with Chinese musical instruments, thus creating a niche for itself.

Robin Hu, Chairman of the SCO Board of Directors, said in his message for the annual report 2008/2009, “We celebrate this rich heritage (of Singapore) with a unique blend of Chinese orchestral music that harmonises traditional Chinese classics with Southeast Asian inspired elements as well as western influences. We are proud to offer our audience a sound with a multi-racial, multi-cultural DNA.”

Since its inception, the SCO has constantly impressed its ever-broadening audience base with a number of blockbuster presentations. In 2002, it staged a symphonic fantasy epic *Marco Polo and Princess Blue*, as part of the opening festival programme of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. In the following year, it engaged in a musical and visual conversation with Singapore’s most eminent multi-disciplinary artist, Tan Swie Hian, in the Singapore Arts Festival 2003. The Orchestra then celebrated Singapore’s 39<sup>th</sup> National Day with a concert – *Our People, Our Music* – at the Singapore Indoor Stadium which featured more than 2,300 local Chinese orchestral music enthusiasts – an unprecedented event in the region.

As part of the Singapore Arts Festival 2005 and 2006, the SCO produced a mega musical production, *Admiral of the Seven Seas* and collaborated with the Singapore Dance Theatre in the opening gala performance *Quest* respectively. In 2007, the SCO was seen performing as part of the 240-strong combined orchestra at the Singapore National Day Parade. At the Singapore Arts Festival 2008, the SCO worked with local theatre group, Theatreworks, to present the groundbreaking production *Awakening*, which brought together *kunqu* opera music and Elizabethan music. In 2009, the SCO once again collaborated with Theatreworks to present *Diaspora*, which makes its European premiere at the Edinburgh International Festival. Maestro Yeh is behind these innovative programming, often playing a part in initiating and designing many of these productions, which helped bring Chinese orchestral music to a whole new level.

Mr Ho sees these multimedia collaborations as expressions of the orchestra’s creative potential because if SCO aspires to be a world renowned Chinese orchestra with a uniquely Singaporean character, then “we can’t be contented with just performing the classics.”

As part of the initiative to develop a repertoire with “Nanyang” style and create its own distinctive music, the SCO commissions new works regularly. To Yeh, the unique features of these “Nanyang” flavoured compositions are crucial for Chinese orchestra music to be accepted

and recognized by the West. Yet Yeh also feels that “developing a regional sound does not mean we would give up the traditional repertoire. It’s part of the heritage of Chinese orchestra music, so we must hang on to that.”

But, at the same time, Yeh reminds us that being experimental and engaging in reform is nothing new to the development of Chinese instrumental music. It has come this far precisely because of its willingness to move away from tradition.

According to Yeh, before the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional Chinese instrumental music was organized along music troupes made up of woodwind with either stringed or percussion instruments. It was not till early last century that Chinese who were familiar with western symphonic music began incorporating western elements into the music. And later in the 1950s, Chinese orchestras began to be set up based on the structure of symphonic orchestras.

“So this tradition of change must continue for Chinese orchestra music to further develop,” Yeh said.

In line with this spirit, the SCO organized its first music composition competition in 2006 that focused on incorporating music elements from Southeast Asia. It received more than 70 entries from all over the world, an encouraging first step towards activating the change process Yeh spoke about and moving towards a more regionalized and even global sound.

The eight winning compositions have become part of the SCO’s repertoire. At a recent concert held in Paris, the third prize winner by composer Yi Kah Hoe, *Buka Panggung*, a contemporary piece inspired by the music in *wayang kulit*, was part of the programme presented.

The search for the “Nanyang” sound continues even after the competition. Mr Ho reveals that the SCO has kept in touch with the composers, inviting them to SCO concerts where they could become familiar with the orchestra’s character and sound. They also go on field trips to parts of Southeast Asia as well as South China to be exposed to and develop further understanding of the music of these regions.

The PM’s donation towards this search for a representative sound for the orchestra is therefore of particular significance. It marks a strategic milestone in the artistic development of SCO – when it is looking to stand out from other Chinese orchestras and distinguish itself through its repertoire and sound.

Mr Ho is optimistic about achieving the targets the SCO has set for itself, “The timing is right and the conditions are favourable. So if everyone puts in the effort and work together with each other, I’m sure we could do even better.”

### **Quote**

“We need not belittle ourselves. Although other orchestras may have enjoyed a head start, the SCO has caught up in a very short time. We have had great reviews when performing overseas. With the perseverance of all the musicians in the orchestra, we have established our own distinct sound and given recognition for our performance as an ensemble.” - Yeh Tsung, Music Director, SCO

“We are dedicated to our vision and mission of becoming an orchestra for everyone in Singapore. And we shall continue to tap on our multiracial, multicultural and multilingual heritage to develop a truly unique Singaporean voice expressed through Chinese orchestra music.” – Terence Ho, General Manager, SCO

### **Discography**

The Celestial Web (《天网》)(Singapore Chinese Orchestra)

Chinese Music For All Seasons: A Novice Guide to the Chinese Orchestra  
(《春华秋乐》)(Singapore Chinese Orchestra Co. Ltd)

The Red Wall (长城)(Singapore Chinese Orchestra Co. Ltd)

The Silk Road (丝绸之路)(Singapore Chinese Orchestra Co. Ltd)

Legend of the Merlion (鱼尾狮传奇)(Singapore Chinese Orchestra Co. Ltd)

The Return (回归)(Singapore Chinese Orchestra Co. Ltd)

The Majestic Charm (天影)(Singapore Chinese Orchestra Co. Ltd)

The Legend of Nanyang II (南洋风2)(Singapore Chinese Orchestra Co. Ltd)

Confucius (化雨)(UTN Productions 002-006)

Story of the River (《江河水的故事》)(Yellow River CD/82055)

Legends and Myths (《神话与传说》)(Yellow River CD/82064)

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