

**Lee Howe (李豪): The Iron Lady**

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

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*Madam Lee Howe devoted more than 50 years of her life to music education and never gave up on her love for music, even conducting a public concert despite difficulty in mobility after suffering a stroke.*

About 500 people, including former Minister for Home Affairs, Ong Pang Boon (王邦文), former Senior Minister of State for Community Development, Ch'ng Jit Koon (庄日昆), former MP and principal of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Ho Kah Leong (何家良), former manager of Singapore Press Holdings and Hong Kong Sing Tao Newspaper Group, Ung Gim Sei (黄锦西), cultural attache with the China Embassy, Zhu Qi (朱琦博士), composer and conductor, Leong Yoon Pin (梁荣平), President of Singapore Choral Association, Lee Yuk Chuan (李煜传), board director of Singapore Chinese Orchestra and Executive Committee member of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Poh Choon Ann (傅春安), attended a memorial service held at the Singapore Conference Hall in October 2009.

No, it was not a gathering in honour of a political leader or a business luminary. Rather, it was a service held in memory of conductor, critic, music educator and composer Madam Maria Lee Howe (李豪), who passed away, on 3 May 2009, at the age of 94.

The eulogies reveal facets of a woman who had lived life to the fullest, devoted to music for the most part of it. She was known for her steadfastness. Zhu Qi called her “the ardent promoter of cultural exchange between Singapore and China”. Ung Gim Sei said she may come across at times as fierce and unfriendly but she was always frank and often spoke her mind.

Lee Howe was born in Wuhan, China in 1915. Showing musical talent at a very young age, she received her first piano lesson at the age of five. By 12, she was training at the Shanghai Conservatoire of Music, the only musical college in the city then. In 1939, she came to Singapore with the intention of proceeding to Italy to further her studies. Then war broke out. She got married and settled down in Singapore, looking after her four children till 1947.

“By 1948, I decided that in music, you can’t go half way – the more you learn, the more you want to know,” she said.

That year, she left for music studies in London, fulfilling her childhood dream of learning music in Europe. She studied piano, singing and conducting for four years before returning home. The year was 1952, and she founded the Lee Howe Choral Society (李豪合唱团), which specialises in traditional Chinese folk songs. She said the members meet to sing “because they find that music is the best expression of beauty, of the harmony of life, and perhaps, of the human soul.”

She also kept herself busy with her family when three more children came along. In 1960, she was off again, this time to Germany, after she was awarded a scholarship to do a course in conducting. Later, she went to England to study further under well-known conductors Sir Eugene

Goossens and Sir John Barbirolli. She followed the visit with another intensive music course in the United States.

Lee always regarded 1961 as the most significant year in her career. That year, she travelled widely in Europe and the United States where she did intensive studies, met a lot of great conductors and listened to many concerts.

For many years, she taught music at various schools, including Chung Cheng High School, Nanyang Girls High School, and later at Chinese High School, till her retirement in 1978. At one time, she had three choirs under her direction but her main interests remained with her own choir. She devoted whatever spare time she had to training her society members who came from all walks of life.

“If you show keen interest to learn, I’ll teach and share with you more. Many of my students know zilch about music when they first started. But they were interested to learn. Some of them were with me for decades. It doesn’t matter whether they pay me or not. I learn from them too when I teach.”

Her choir held concerts almost every year and at times more than once a year to raise funds for charity. Many of her students became musicians active in the Singapore music scene. For her contributions and hard work in promoting music learning, she was awarded *The Public Service Star* in 1978 and the *COMPASS Lifetime Achievement Award* in 1998.

Lee, one of the few local woman conductors and music promoters, credited her success to her mother who had taught her to enjoy and appreciate the wonderful world of music. Ever since the days when she sat playing on her mother’s knees, there was only one memory that stood out clearly for her, “My mother sang beautifully the folk songs which we love.”

Lee, aside from singing, also played an array of musical instruments ranging from the drums to the tiny triangle. All her children had also inherited her musical talents with each one of them playing a different instrument.

Once at an interview, she demonstrated her point that “language is in itself a form of music” by speaking in musical tones, Italian, French, German, Russian, Japanese, English, Mandarin and a host of Chinese dialects.

“All languages and dialects, if spoken properly, are like songs, with rhythm and movements,” she had explained thus her interests in learning languages which equalled her love for music.

The veteran music teacher believed that the primary aim of music education is to instil a sense of discipline in the students. For 40 years, she had abided by this principle throughout her teaching career. To many students, she was an austere figure who was unyielding in her demands where music was concerned, yet caring for them like a mother would.

Poh Choon Ann, who had learnt singing from Lee, remembered her as a caring teacher, “I was a poor student. She not only brought me to a doctor when I fell ill but she also paid the medical

fees.” To him, the moral lessons imparted by her mattered as much as the singing classes with her. She had taught him to be a better person. He said, “She devoted more than 50 years of her life to music education and never once wavered in her enthusiasm and love for the art. I really admired her for that.”

Lianhe Zaobao journalist Woo Mun Ngan (胡文雁), whose father also studied singing under Lee, also had stories to share about how the teacher had given free weekly lessons to the senior Woo and a few others who were too poor to afford her fees. Her car was also used to ferry the bride on his wedding day.

Although her health and mobility suffered after a stroke in the 1980s, she never once gave up on her love for music. When Lee Howe Choral Society celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 1992 with a concert, she once again wielded the conductor’s baton onstage at the age of 78, showing her tenacity and devotion. Since the 1970s, the society had travelled overseas for performances, in particular to China, where it established close ties with many musical groups there.

The memorial service ended with a showcase of songs written by Lee Howe, performed by vocalists and choral groups from Singapore and China. It was a perfect last note in the celebration of the life’s work of this grande dame of local music.

### **Quote**

“Music is an education tool and the ultimate aim of music is education.”

### **Awards**

**1978:** The Singapore National Day Awards, Singapore, *The Public Service Star*

**1998:** 4<sup>th</sup> Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Lifetime Achievement Award*

### **Discography**

《花葩山》(compilation)

《音乐的火焰》(compilation)

### ***Compositions***

《夜思》

《春晓》

《更上一层楼》

《玉珠飞溅》

## *Opera*

《新加坡二十四小时》

## *Choral Works*

《暗香》

《寄语夕阳》

《美丽的错误》

《音乐的火焰》（词曲）

《佛曲》

《我爱》（词）

《呢喃》（词）

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