

Leong Yoon Pin (梁荣平): The Shy Composerby **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

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Cultural medallion winner Leong Yoon Pin talks about his illustrious and impressive music career that has lasted for more than 50 years.

Over the course of his more than 50-year career, he has accumulated a portfolio of over 100 compositions, including instrumental and voice works, overtures, concertos, cantatas, chamber works, symphonies, and even opera. He is best known for his choral works. These include the popular *Street Calls*, *Dragon Dance*, *Peddlars and the Soprano*, *Like a Rapid Stream*, and *Love Quatrains*.

The pioneer of Singapore music, 79-year-old Leong Yoon Pin, is as proud of his works as a father is of his children. “They are like my offsprings. They all have their shortcomings and positive aspects. I love all of them and have no favourites.”

And he still possesses the enthusiasm of an artist who’s just starting out, “I try to make each work different from the others. My early works were modest pieces for choir with straightforward classical harmonies. But as I go along, I ventured into more adventurous sound effects.”

He also values all reviews and criticism. He makes sure he reads all the media reports. “I appreciate the time spent by the critics and reviewers on writing about my work. I have written reviews before, so I know it’s no easy job. One has to think through the whole performance and mull over the right words to use. I take their views very seriously and will make improvements wherever possible.”

Leong, who was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1982 and a COMPASS Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007, started out by writing songs for the Rediffusion Youth Choir and then the Metro Philharmonic Choir. Both choirs were founded by him and his friends. *The Story of Mulan* (《木兰辞》) was his first choral work composed in 1953. Before that he had volunteered to compose the school song for Winstedt Primary School where he was teaching.

“I began composing because of circumstances. When we formed the Metro Philharmonic Choir in 1959, we found very few songs suitable for us to sing. Many songs were banned because of political or other reasons, and there were songs we didn’t bother to sing. So, we needed to compose.”

Leong is also an educator who has taught numerous students. Many are now in Singapore or abroad. Among them are Maestro Lim Yau, Resident Conductor of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra; composer Phoon Yew Tien; composer and music lecturer at the National Institute of Education Kelly Tang; vocal musician Eng Meng Chia; well-known violin teacher Chan Yong Shing; Chinese orchestra conductor and audio specialist Tham Chaik Kong; famous *erhu* performer and recording engineer Aik Yew Goh who is active in Hong Kong; pianist Melvyn Tan who is now based in England; composer Zechariah Goh Toh Chai and Tan Chan Boon. The

different specializations of these students are a testament to the intensity and breadth of Leong's enduring influence.

Despite his impressive oeuvre and illustrious achievements, the shy composer, who prefers to let his music speak for him, shuns loud parties and is happiest when he is imparting the skills of music composition and performances to people.

The late famous piano teacher Mrs Lucien Wang (黄晚成) once described Leong as “a man of humility. He is very shy. Not one to flaunt his achievements, he would rather stay behind the scene if given a choice.”

Vocal teacher Joy Chen Yu Shen (陈毓申) has this to add, “He is very talented, upright and knowledgeable. He is also very sincere, someone worthy of respect.”

Leong's student Phoon Yew Tien has this to say about his mentor, “He is never in dispute with anyone. Apart from being exceedingly kind and caring to musicians of the younger generation, he is able to identify with and appreciate the professional achievements of his peers. He is not known to have uttered a single unkind word about anybody. However, when the occasion calls for it, he will readily come forward and speak up for a just cause. He is one of those rare, highly principled individuals.”

The well-regarded doyen of Singapore composers started off as a self-taught musician. His passion for music was cultivated from a young age, when he used to spend hours listening to his father's classical music records, which included artistes from both the East and West. He learnt how to play the bassoon from Freddy Crimble, a Hungarian who played in the local orchestra, with a scholarship from the Singapore Music Society. He picked up the basics of the violin from his uncle. He then fell in love with the beauty of the sound of the piano during music lessons in school. He taught himself to play the piano, obtaining scores from his father's records and piano books owned by his aunt.

“I became really mad about the piano but my family could not afford to buy one until I was 19. It was not until I started working at 22 that I could afford formal lessons.”

His first piano teacher was renowned South African pianist Noreen Stokes, who had initially turned him away because she had regarded Leong as a beginner. But she changed her mind after listening to him play.

In 1955, after one and a half years with Stokes, Leong applied for a Ministry of Education scholarship to study music education and piano at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. He wrote to the Ministry and asked to take on two more majors - conducting and composition.

“Music education was the purpose of the scholarship. I was expected to come back and make contributions; I was already conducting for the Rediffusion Youth Choir, so I wanted to pick up real conducting techniques; as for composition, it was because I wanted to create a wider repertoire for the Choir; being able to play the piano would allow me to fulfil all of the above.”

He would leave again in 1966 to study composition with Nadia Boulanger in Paris and in 1975 to further his studies in music education at the Newcastle University.

Boulanger was an influential French composer and music educator. Her students included Aaron Copland, Walter Piston, Philip Glass, etc. She would have a profound effect on Leong's work.

"The most important lesson I learnt from her is to be very stringent with music composition. She would ask me to make repeated amendments to my work till she is absolutely satisfied with it. She sets very high standards for her students. And she expects composers to look for inspiration within his or her own culture, history and background."

Perhaps then it comes as no surprise when Leong's works were described by the Singapore Chinese press as "compositions with a strong and unique local character". Many of his works incorporate distinct Singaporean sounds and accents. Fusing local culture and 20th century compositional styles, Leong has managed to compose traditional songs with a striking sense of modernity.

Lan Shui, director of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, says, "When you think of Singapore's music scene, the first name that comes to mind is Leong Yoon Pin. He's not only a wonderful composer...his music is so connected with the people in Singapore. He helped take the local music scene to great heights."

Leong's work, *Dayong Sampan* (Rowing Boat), was the first Singapore composition performed by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in 1980. It was based on a Malay folk melody. His first symphony has a chorus singing an Indian work chant. The chant was something he heard as a boy and which he is still fascinated by. Chinese culture, in particular its rich literature, figures prominently too. Opera *Bunga Mawar* was about Peranakans in love. *Symphony Temasekian* describes the tough life of the early immigrants in Singapore. *Street Calls* feature hawkers peddling their wares on the streets, a common sight in the past. Our life and times, our culture and history, have all been incorporated into Leong Yoon Pin's works, showing off the multicultural and multilingual sounds of the Singaporean society.

Leong also uses a fair share of texts by local writers like Angeline Yap, Dan Ying (淡莹), Du Hong (杜红) and Cheng Wenkai (程文恺) and some by famous poets such as Rabindranath Tagore and Robert Burns.

"Many of the songs tell of a peaceful and prosperous life in Singapore. But I won't hesitate to compose when I come across a touching poem, which may reflect the gloomier side of life," he said.

"I did not contrive to inject local flavour in my compositions, but elements like Malay folk songs and the Indian labourers' chants came naturally to my mind."

Leong often composes by noting down any musical idea that comes to his head, “A composer has no fixed work pattern. Sometimes I jot down ideas as they come along and collate them into a single work. Other times, I let a single idea grow in my mind.”

The reticent man has no regrets about dedicating his life to an art that had for many years been overlooked and undervalued.

“I write music for the love of it and not for money. There’s the satisfaction of seeing your work performed. Every premiere of my work is a highlight in my career.”

“There is no such thing as retirement in composing. As long as I’m physically fit, and my works are appreciated, I shall continue composing, till the day I’m forced to stop.”

Quote

“I did not choose composition. I had no choice. It is more like a passionate calling from the heart.”

Awards

1982: National Arts Council, Singapore, *The Cultural Medallion Award (Music)*

2005: The Singapore National Day Awards, Singapore, *The Public Service Star (BBM)*

2007: 12th Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Lifetime Achievement Award*

Discography

Choral Works

《好歌美曲献国庆（三）》 (compilation) (for song 《正是如此》, composer)

《花葩山》 (compilation) (for song 《马林百列》, composer)

《春天的歌声》 (compilation)(for song 《歌唱高山和大海》, composer)

《远方归来的小舟》 (compilation)(for song 《倘使》, composer)

《我们的歌》 (compilation)(for song 《伞内的春天》, composer)

Aspiration [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic Choir]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

Azure Sky [Recorded by Jennifer Tham and Singapore Youth Choir]. On “Asian Choral Works” I[CD], 2000, Singapore: Singapore Youth Choir.

Counting the Stars [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic Choir]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

Dragon Dance [Recorded by Lim Yau and Philharmonic Chorus]. On “A Cappella” [CD], 1996, Singapore: Philharmonic Chamber Chorus, The Philharmonic Chamber Chorus collection.

Good Morning Motherland [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic Choir]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

Life is Like the Ocean [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic and Echo Philharmonic Choirs]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

Like a Rapid Stream [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic and Echo Philharmonic Choirs]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

Marine Parade [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic Choir]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

Mendulang [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic Choir]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

Nightmare [Recorded by Jennifer Tham and Singapore Youth Choir]. On “Asian Choral Works I” [CD], 2000, Singapore: Singapore Youth Choir.

Of Mountains and Seas [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic Choir]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

The Sea is Blue [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic Choir]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

Singing for My Lads and Lasses [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic Choir]. On “Like a Rapid Stream and Ten Light Choral Works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

Sweep Clean the Earth [Recorded by Leong and Metro Philharmonic Choir]. On “Like a rapid stream and ten light choral works” [CD], 1998, Singapore: Metro Philharmonic Society.

When will the Flowers Bloom [Recorded by Lim Yau and Philharmonic Chorus]. On “Asian A Cappella: the new spirit of Asian folksongs” [CD], 1999, Singapore: Philharmonic Chamber Chorus, The Philharmonic Chamber Chorus collection.

Orchestral Works

Episodes in Journey to the West [Recorded by Choo Hoey, Lim Yau, and Singapore Symphony Orchestra]. On “Leong Yoon Pin: Symphonic Works of Singapore” [CD], 1993, Singapore: National Arts Council

Giocoso – Largamente [Recorded by Choo Hoey, Lim Yau, and Singapore Symphony Orchestra]. On “Leong Yoon Pin: Symphonic Works of Singapore” [CD], 1993, Singapore: National Arts Council.

Jubilation [Recorded by Lim Yau and Singapore Youth Orchestra]. On “Singapore Youth Orchestra” [CD], 1995, Singapore: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Education’s collection

Largo – Vivace [Recorded by Choo Hoey, Lim Yau, and Singapore Symphony Orchestra]. On “Leong Yoon Pin: Symphonic Works of Singapore” [CD], 1993, Singapore: National Arts Council.

Metamorphosis [Recorded by Choo Hoey, Lim Yau, and Singapore Symphony Orchestra]. On “Leong Yoon Pin: Symphonic Works of Singapore” [CD], 1993, Singapore: National Arts Council.

Metamorphosis [Recorded by Lim Yau and Singapore National Youth Orchestra]. On “Singapore National Youth Orchestra: 21st Anniversary” [CD], 2001, Singapore: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Education’s collection.

Overture “Dayong Sampan” [Recorded by Choo Hoey, Lim Yau, and Singapore Symphony Orchestra]. On “Leong Yoon Pin: Symphonic Works of Singapore” [CD], 1993, Singapore: National Arts Council.

Temasekian [Recorded by Choo Hoey, Lim Yau, and Singapore Symphony Orchestra]. On “Leong Yoon Pin: Symphonic Works of Singapore” [CD], 1993, Singapore: National Arts Council.

Major Compositions/Choral Works

1953 : *Story of Mulan*, his first choral work

1954 : *Ode to the Sea*

1959 : *In memory of Qu Yuan*

1962 : *The Peacock's East-Southerly Flight*

1969 : *Holiday Camp*

1980 : *Overture; Dayong Sampan*

1981 : *Like a Rapid Stream*

1983 : *Episodes in Journey to the West*

1986 : *Nine Cantos*

1988 : *Dragon Dance*

1991 : Symphonic Poem: *Temasekian*

1993 : *Street Calls; Love Quatrains; and Metamorphosis*

1996 : *Blessing the Seas*

1997 : *Bunga Mawar*

1999 : *Pedlars and the Soprano*

2001 : Symphonic Poem: *Gegentala*

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Tan, S. L. (1980, 18 April). “How to make a child really enjoy music”. The Straits Times, p. 3.

(1981, 4 July). “Attention all composers”. The Straits Times, p. 2.

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Chong, W. H. (1986, 16 January). “An evening of local music”. The Straits Times, p. 6.

Khor, C. (1987, 14 May). “Czech Music Takes Centrestage”. The Straits Times, p. 25.

Chong, W. H. (1987, 20 October). “Showcase of songs from 30 years”. The Straits Times, p. 4.

Chia, H. (1987, 13 November). “From Our Own Composers”. The Straits Times, p. 1.

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