

**Lee Yuk Chuan (李煜传): The Perfect Pitch**by **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

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*Lee Yuk Chuan, The Honourary Chairman of the Association of Composers, tells us how he almost did not become involved in the local music scene if not for a chance encounter almost 60 years ago.*

As the President of the Singapore Choral Association (新加坡合唱总会) and the Honourary Chairman of the Association of Composers, Lee Yuk Chuan, who was awarded the “Meritorious Award” by COMPASS in 2000 and the Public Service Medal in 2001, is very much involved with the development of the local music scene for the past 50 years and more. Yet he almost missed out on it all, if not for one fateful day in the 1950s.

“I was still a teenager then. I was actually on my way to a basketball game but I bumped into a former classmate who was going to Rediffusion to support his girlfriend at a singing audition. Since I have never been to the station, I went along. My life was completely changed because of this crucial moment. Otherwise, I would probably be a successful banker instead.”

Born in 1933 in Hong Kong, Lee came to Singapore with his father when he was about six years old. Senior Lee, a renowned Cantonese opera performer, was engaged to perform here. His contract was extended repeatedly till World War Two struck and the family could not make their way back. They then settled down in Singapore.

As a child, Lee was exposed to the constant singing, rehearsals and performances in the opera troupe, “It was probably here that I developed my sense of rhythm and sensitivity to music.”

Lee was recruited as a member of the Rediffusion choir because of his perfect pitch. It was here that he became closely associated with local musicians like Leong Yoon Pin (梁荣平), Samuel Ting Chu San (丁祝山), etc. It was also because of his involvement with the choir that he became the obvious choice as the conductor for his alumni choir and Chinese orchestra. Lee then felt a pressing need to upgrade his musical skills.

“The piano was way too expensive then. Someone in the opera troupe had left a violin with my family. So I started formal lessons with Wu Wen Ying (吴文英), B. A. Bacsafra and Susheela Devi. I also learned vocal music under Chen Li Qing (陈丽清) and conducting from S. Ronly Riklis. I started reading up and learning about music theory on my own by going through loads of music scores and books. And since the choir needed songs to sing, I started composing and songwriting.”

“Since we are mainly Chinese-educated, we wrote largely Chinese songs. The Singapore Composers’ Circle formed under the National Theatre back then would hold regular concerts showcasing the work of local composers. It was a good scheme because it forced us to compose our own music. There was an accumulation of local works by Leong, Ding, Shen Ping Kwang (沈炳光), Li De Hua (李德华), etc.”

Lee, like other songwriters of his times, would often put melodies to poems that they like. He preferred lyrics that expounded on universal themes and values. He felt that the songs written then were vastly different from the pop songs of the day which were more exuberant in tone and spirit. The local composers' works were "more elegant and literary."

"The themes of our music revolve around home and country, society, the human spirit and similar concepts," he said.

Lee wrote the first local Mandarin opera *Lady Lingzhi* (《灵芝姑娘》) in 1973. He feels, however, that it was not good enough by today's standards, "The orchestra was a very basic one back then. So I had to make accommodations to this limitation while composing."

Lee was already working in a bank then. He would later co-found the Metro Philharmonic Choir (星市合唱团) with Leong in 1959. They would take turns to be the conductor. After the semi-professional choir under the National Theatre Trust, of which Lee was also the conductor, disbanded after more than a decade, the members came together to form the Melo Arts Choir (艺术合唱团). Forty-five years on, it is still active today. Lee considers the group, which has performed in China, Taiwan and Europe, as very much a part of his life.

Lee was active in the efforts to promote music appreciation and experimentation in those early days of nation building. He co-hosted radio programmes on local and classical music on a weekly basis. He composed the two Chinese-Western tunes, *Around the MacRitchie* and *Along the Wharves*, for the drama *Discovery of Singapore*, performed at the 1967 Music and Dance Festival. It was a novel experiment by the then Radio Singapura of combining Western and Chinese musical instruments in local compositions.

He became so busy with his music activities outside his job that he was deemed "not dedicated enough" by his employers at the bank. Lee resigned and joined the Singapore Armed Forces Music and Drama Company as its music director.

"The stint did not last long. The then Minister of Defence Goh Keng Swee was upset that his military men were devoting their time to music activities and not on getting battle ready. So I resigned and became a full-time violin teacher."

For 12 hours every day, Lee would be teaching. At his busiest, he was juggling 150 students a week as well as his other music commitments. These included concert performances by the Lee Yuk Chuan String Orchestra made up of his students and also a book comprising a collection of songs written specifically for children called *Good Children's Songs* (《好孩子》) published in 1998.

"I was a judge at a children's singing contest. I was appalled that most of the children chose to sing love songs about heartbreak and unrequited affections. I feel that they are simply too young to be singing about these feelings. I also think they would somehow be affected adversely by the lyrics and become mawkish and overly sentimental. That's not healthy. So I thought something should be done. I mobilised like-minded composers to pen songs that reflect the innocence of the young."

Lee's relentless schedule continued till about six years ago, when he had to undergo treatment for cancer in the large intestines. He relinquished his post as Chairman of the Association of Composers to spend more time recuperating. But within three months after an operation in 2005, Lee was on the road again, travelling to Tibet for a choir performance involving a thousand singers.

In March 2006, the "Wishing You Good Health" fundraising concert for the Singapore Cancer Society, which showcased selected musical pieces of Lee's, was held at the Victoria Concert Hall, raising nearly S\$70,000 for the Society. The doctor has since then given Lee a clean bill of health.

Lee has been to China on several other occasions to perform with Singapore choral groups, including conducting a performance of the *Yellow River Cantata* (《黄河大合唱》), first in Guangzhou, then in Yan'an. He was impressed with the progress the Chinese choral groups have made in the past decade.

"When I was young, the Singapore choral scene was very vibrant. Our local groups were probably one of the best in Asia. Now, after just barely ten years, the East Asian groups have improved by leaps and bounds. Just by looking at the salary that the choir conductors there command would give an indication of the high demand for their services and the popularity of the groups. Their members comprise both old and young which show a renewal process is in place."

In comparison, most of the Singapore choral groups are now made up of retirees and the odd one or two middle-aged members. Although there are many school choirs of very high standards, most of the students hardly sing in choirs anymore after graduation.

"The middle-aged voice sounds the best yet that is exactly what we are lacking right now. Our choirs have aged and there's no renewal. So our standards have stagnated whereas the scene in China and Taiwan is very vibrant. Even the standards of their amateur choirs are better than ours."

Lee feels that perhaps more could be done to promote music education and appreciation in Singapore.

"Although the standard of our school choirs and bands are very high and they often win awards in overseas competitions, it doesn't mean we have a vibrant music scene. Only a limited number of students are involved. There is a general lack of appreciation for music and so there is no audience for it."

But Lee sees a silver lining to the situation with the numerous music courses and schools opening up here. Many of his students have also made great strides in the music field. The Choral Association is also very closely knit and dedicated towards the promotion of local music. Lee hopes to do more for the local music scene when he gets down to work with the newly registered Association of Singapore Musicians (新加坡音乐家协会). The primary aim of the

Association is to get all local musicians to work together to promote Singapore music. He also hopes they could raise funds to benefit local society.

He is hopeful about the future of Singapore music, “My wish is to hold a concert when I’m 80 years old with the Lee Yuk Chuan String Orchestra and Melo Arts Choir to mark my retirement...No, that’s just a joke. It would mark a new beginning!”

### **Quote**

“Music is a journey that brings both joy and pain. You feel a sense of achievement after every performance. It’s worth all the hard work. Hence, music lovers derive much pleasure from participating in music activities. Music brings us happiness. Whether you are a professional or amateur, play a musical instrument or just love the karaoke, you would derive a lifetime of benefits. Music is simply wonderful!”

### **Awards**

**2000:** 6<sup>th</sup> Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Meritorious Award*

**2001:** The Singapore National Day Awards, Singapore, *The Public Service Medal*

### **Discography**

《李煜传作品专场》 (Selected Songs of Lee Yuk Chuan)

《狮城之声传北京》 (compilation)

《好歌美曲献国庆（二）》 (compilation)

《好歌美曲献国庆（三）》 (compilation)

《我们的歌》 (compilation)

《远方归来的小舟》 (compilation)

《春天的歌声》 (compilation)

《花葩山》 (compilation)

## **Selected Works**

### *A Big Step Forward*

#### *Adagio*

《窗外玫瑰花儿怒放》（词曲）

《今日我又看见了你》（曲）

《胡姬花》（曲）

《太阳啊！你为何不歇歇》（词曲）

《我却死在同胞的手上》（词曲）

《彩虹》（词曲）

《星星、朋友》（曲）

《相约未来》（曲）

《不能唤醒你》（曲）

《我是谁》（曲）

《悲喜情调》（曲）

《歌如海，曲如河》（曲）

《春天来了》（词曲）

《祝你健康》（词曲）

《新加坡河！母亲的河》（曲）

《踏车乐》（曲）

《相约未来》（曲）

《和平的呼声最强》（词曲）

《海狮》（曲）

《友谊象海洋般的深远》（曲）

《我爱》（曲）

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