

# Challenging the Boundaries of Convention: Sirius Quartet in Concert

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On 27 October 2015, Panggung Pelengkap Cahaya in the School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) resonated with a vibrant and energetic cross-genre string quartet performance. An alluring array of sounds filled the hall as four musicians from New York City dazzled the audience for two hours with their new age *avant garde* music. The quartet comprising of Fung Chern Hwei (1st violin), Gregor Huebner (violin), Ron Lawrence (viola) and Jeremy Harman (cello) challenged our conventional ideas of what a string quartet is, and what it is capable of. As session musicians, members of the quartet have performed alongside highly acclaimed artists like Lady Gaga, Sting, Metallica, Quincy Jones, Peter Gabriel, Elton John, Mary J. Blige and Tony Bennett. The four conservatory-trained musicians are highly accomplished improvisers known to push beyond the conformed boundaries of classical music genres to explore and create a musical fusion between the contemporary classical genre and other contemporary genres like post-rock, metal and *avant garde* music.

Such notions of "nonconformity" among Western classical musicians, which challenges the boundaries of convention, is a practice that has been widely exercised within various other disciplines, for example in abstract art, literature, social studies, gender studies and Punk Music. Incidentally, the music of Sirius Quartet can be positioned within the terrains of social conformity and nonconformity (Cohen and Lee 1975) as these musicians

introduce and offer a new musical soundscape to string ensembles, which in turn challenges our perceptions of a classical string quartet.

During the sound check on the day of the performance, the musicians chose to perform with minimal electronic amplification, as they felt that the hall had the right acoustics to highlight the various tonal gradations of their instruments. This decision worked to the musicians' advantage, as during the performance, the acoustics in Pelenggam Cahaya presented a fitting environment for the musicians to build on each other's energy and demonstrate their highly advanced technical ability in controlling the sonority and various tonal colours of their respective instruments.

Siruis Quartet performed a total of eleven compositions that night, with the majority of them being original pieces composed by members of the quartet. They began their performance with a melancholic and intense composition by Jeremy Herman titled *Paths Become Lines*. The title of this piece was skillfully adopted into the melodic and rhythmic sections, as the driving rhythms and intricate arpeggio patterns on the cello were cleverly interwoven with long melodic phrases that were gradually thinned down into single melodic "lines". The second piece was an atonal composition by Gregor Huebner that took the audience on a winding journey through the dissonant sounds of *avant garde* music. At certain junctures of this piece, the skillful techniques of the musicians gave the illusion that there were more than just four instruments on stage, as the low timbre of the cello that accompanied the bright sounds of the two violins created a soundscape of differing acoustic and percussive tones. A number of the compositions that night were atonal in nature, as they lacked definite tonal centres. Such compositions were an interesting introduction for many music enthusiasts in the audience, many of whom had only heard atonal compositions in recordings and almost never at a live performance. Throughout the night, the musicians pushed beyond the traditional vocabulary of a string ensemble and performed genre-defying compositions which encompassed post-rock, avant-jazz and electronic music.

**SIRIUS QUARTET**

**in Concert** | **in Workshop**  
**27 OCTOBER 2015** | **28 OCTOBER 2015**  
**8:00pm-10:00pm** | **10:00am-1:00pm**  
**Pelenggam Cahaya,** | **Pelenggam Cahaya,**  
**School of the Arts, USM** | **School of the Arts, USM**

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Performing mainly in the *avant garde* and new age musical genres, the quartet introduced a number of different bowing and string techniques that were not always familiar to the audience. Col legno also known as a bow chop, is a popular bowing technique commonly found in 21st century compositions. It requires the string player to use the end of the bow and hit the strings near the bridge at an angle, an action that produces a pitched percussive sound. This technique was present in many of the compositions that night and proved to be very popular among the audience, as it was requested to be taught during the workshop, the following day. Such unconventional techniques on a classical instrument challenged

the conventional boundaries of what is often regarded as "permissible" and "exceptable" of a classically trained musician. Throughout the night, the musicians kept the audience in awe, as they introduced other techniques such as different bowing approaches and how to produce different percussive timbres on string instruments. In some compositions, while the musicians themselves were very aware of the compositions' tempo, at times the highly syncopated melodic phrases juxtaposed with polyrhythms created an illusionary space of an unsteady tempo. The mastery of such intricate technical skills and the ease at which they were employed, not only revealed the musicians' virtuosity, but validated their acclaimed stature as highly sought after musicians.

As the encore, Sirius Quartet chose to entertain the now already exuberant audience with Pharrell William's Happy. This was a fitting conclusion to a night that surpassed the expectations of the audience as many of them had initially walked into the hall expecting to be entertained by chamber music. Conversations with members of the audience post performance revealed that although a number of them found the music "a little strange", most likely due to the lack of a definite tonal center and the heavy presence of consonant-dissonant harmonies, they did however acknowledge that the performance that night had expanded their understanding of a string quartet performance. They alluded to the fact that they had a renewed understanding and appreciation for a musical genre that has received little attention within the popular music landscape in the state of Penang let alone Malaysia. This new sonic vocabulary that pushes beyond our understanding of classical repertoires introduced by these musicians from New York City has inevitably permeated through conventional boundaries of other musical events on campus. It has opened up greater avenues for more of such performances to be hosted by the Music Department in Universiti Sains Malaysia.

## **REFERENCE**

Cohen, B. P. and Lee, H. 1975. *Conflict, conformity, and social status*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Ltd.