

THE MPO FORUM FOR MALAYSIAN COMPOSERS

*Dewan Filharmonik Petronas, Kuala Lumpur,
March 30, 2003.*

The concert saw six young Malaysian¹ composers take center stage as the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) ensemble (under the baton of Associate Conductor Mr. Kevin Field) premiered their six-minute compositions after a consultation and mentoring session organized by the MPO. The concert hall was almost fully packed with avid art music followers who came to listen to the new works of the young composers who had strong music training at conservatoire of international standard.

The genre called for by the organizer appeared to have been overlooked by most of these composers. Although all six composers abided by the requirements and wrote for “an ensemble comprising of 16 instruments (no doublings)”, not all of them demonstrated a thorough grasp of composition principles with respect to scoring for an ensemble. With the exception of Chong Kee Yong’s *I Hear the Wind Calling* and Johan Othman’s *ittar*, the other works, notably *Bertabuh Kala Senja*, *Water–Mood and Reflection* and *An Evening in the Myth*, produced orchestral volume which portrayed the ensemble’s continual homophony. On the contrary, *I Hear the Wind Calling* and *ittar* presented textural clarity in keeping with the fundamental characteristics of a chamber ensemble, allowing listeners to experience the kaleidoscopic nuances of harmony and instrumental sonority as intended by their creators.

In *I Hear the Wind Calling*, Chong utilizes ‘soundscape’ to conjure up scenes of the snowy landscape on the mountains in Switzerland. Chong’s interests in the music, literature, painting and Chinese calligraphy of the Tang Dynasty has prompted him to experiment with “the abstract form – *qi* of the Chinese calligraphy and ink painting to present the image of wind”. The composer’s attempt in creating a mobility of sound requires a total rearrangement of the stage layout. The flute and oboe are positioned off stage, up on the second floor balcony on both sides of the concert hall to achieve the surround sound effect. Besides demanding performance techniques, this piece also assigns several instrumentalists to play a percussion instrument each. The movement and stillness of the wind image is vividly perceived in the ‘soundscape’ of the piece. Chong chooses the woodwind family (with its technical connection to breathing) to represent the wind. This is unmistakably audible in the whistling tone of the flute at the end of the piece. Dissonances, microtonal harmony and highest natural harmonics characterize the composer’s harmonic language.






Some might conveniently consider *I Hear the Wind Calling* a piece of “nicely arranged noise”. As a matter of fact, many twentieth century composers have elevated ‘noise’ and ‘silence’ to a higher level of musical abstraction fundamental to their craft. This may be endorsed by Takemitsu’s aesthetic concept of *ma* and *sawari* and John Cage’s interpretation of ‘silence’ as a space abound with ‘sonic events’.

Othman’s *ittar* attempts to embody the “Hindu icon Shiva Nataraja as an idea”. The general notion of “cycle of death and regeneration” and the underlying philosophical structure of the Lord of Dance are the core concepts of the piece. Shiva Nataraja, the Hindu icon representing the Lord of Dance, is resounded abstractly through pure musical means. A perpetual surge of sensuous melodies, played in duo, trio and at times quintet, reflects the erotic attributes of a dancer. Several self-devised four-note modes of Middle Eastern flavour reflect the exotic quality of the work. Besides the tightly woven contrapuntal texture, Othman’s harmonic language and writing style undoubtedly stem from the Austrian-Germanic idiom. *ittar* responds sensitively to the quintessential component of high art music.

Both Vivien Chua’s *Water–Mood and Reflections* and Adeline Wong’s *Synclastic Illuminations* are the most entertaining. The easily recognizable five-note harp motif (essentially the water motif) and tutti section building towards the climax are reminiscent of many Hollywood film themes. Chuah draws an analogy between water and human emotions; the three physical states of the same element — water, vapor and ice are paralleled with the various facets of human emotions that are also ever changing. The work’s sectional structure, with descriptive subtitles (such as ‘As Water Heats Up’, ‘Air’, ‘As Air Returns to Water’, ‘Ice’, ‘Droplets From Ice Create Ripples’, ‘Melting’, ‘Water Flows Again’) indicated at the onset of every section, elucidates Chuah’s peculiar creative process.

Wong is able to attract the audience’s attention through the animated and energetic rhythms in the opening of *Synclastic Illuminations*. Based on her idea of “purification of sounds”, Wong begins with sequential descending thirds at a very high register, gradually mutates to a “wider scope of sound colors” and subsequently ends the piece with the opening sequential descending thirds. Wong offsets the opening piercing sonority with the broader nature of the middle section through contrasting articulation, instrumentation and harmonic texture. The piece comprises of five sections with each one at a “deceleration of tempo”. Skillful application of percussion instruments and the exploitation of the extremely high registers by the woodwinds and strings create an extraordinary piercing sonority that sets this piece apart from the rest in terms of appeal.

Formal scheme of *Synclastic Illuminations*

Bar number	Section	Tempo	Material	Instrumentation
1-94	First (obsessive)	 = 126	Cluster-highlighting descending third	high woodwind, strings High register
95-137	Second (shaking and quivering)	 = 112	Tremolo, fluttertongue	brass with mutes, string, woodwind Mid register
138-152	Third (espressivo)	 = 104	Melodic sequence harmonized, glissando highlight- ing 2nds	All except harp, percussion, piano Mid register
153-189	Fourth (cascades)	 = 92	Arpeggio pattern	Tutti Full register
190-end	Fifth (climax) (jubilant)	 = 80	Descending melodic sequence in different harmonization and instrumentation	Tutti

Ahmad Muriz's *Bertabuh Kala Senja* and Tay Poh Gek's *An Evening in the Myth* are the only two compositions which incorporate Malaysian indigenous instruments in the ensemble. Despite their commendable attempts at taking up the challenge of the option, the blending of the *bonang* with the western harp somehow creates a series of unwarranted resonances at the *tutti-forte* sections. An important component of the gamelan orchestra, the *bonang* seems lost in this foreign setting. Contrapuntal texture, cluster harmony and interlocking technique of gamelan music are fundamental elements in *Bertabuh Kala Senja*. Ahmad Muriz combines serial harmony with a synthetic scale derived from his own *syair* (a type of Malay verse). He uses a theme from the *syair* which he weaves throughout this sonata form composition. While the timpani depicts "the *geduk* as played in *wayang kulit* and in the Mosques during prayer times", the *bonang* enjoys equal footing with other instruments of the ensemble.

An Evening in the Myth is a musical imagery of a character's "journey of adventurous encounters". Although the melody is tonal, the harmony, which is saturated with quartal harmony and cluster chords, is rather dissonant. Tay relies on the percussive nature and timbre of the *bonang* to express the "mythical

energy". Various repetitions and inversions of melodic motives vividly paint a musical picture of the emotional state of the character. The syncopated rhythm, emphatic accents and irregular repetition of motivic cells resemble the articulation and rhythmic character of Stravinsky's 'Primitivism'.

The varied styles exemplified in these six original works speak of the talent of the local composers. They are accomplished in terms of compositional skills, particularly in relation to texture, formal structure, harmonic field and scoring techniques.

The way Malaysia ought to be represented in the world art music arena is dependent on the selection at the end of Phase II of the Forum when one composer will be awarded automatic entry to participate in the MPO International Composers' Competition in 2004. Although Mr. Field (in his forward message of the Forum application booklet) encourages Malaysian composers (whether they "write for theatre, jazz, film, rock 'n' roll or for indigenous traditional instrumentation") to participate in the Forum, whether the MPO panel is willing to send a theatre composition, let alone a rock 'n' roll symphonic work, to the said competition is another matter.

It is not unreasonable to assume that being an orchestra of international calibre, MPO is an ambassador of high art. This may be validated by the MPO weekly concert program which performs works by great composers such as Beethoven, Mahler and Brahms and a long guest performer list of world class musicians such as Sir Neville Marriner and Vladimir Ashkenazy (to name a few).

The Forum is certainly a novel idea and MPO's mission "to impart...skills and expertise" is executed with impeccable zealousness. The implementation of the Consultation and Mentoring Session suggests MPO's concern with the composers' writing process. The Forum's "individual tuition" may be beneficial, but exactly how far should MPO impose this condescending practice without affecting the natural creative process of an artist? The fact that the panel of mentors is made up of composers² rather than instrumentalists (the latter are most knowledgeable on the physical and technical aspects of instruments) might have discouraged many established Malaysian composers from participating. Some composers may not feel comfortable working with other composers whose musical styles and aesthetics are different from theirs. Music is a highly personal and profound art form; every component in a composition ranging from a particular performance technique, choice of natural harmonics over artificial ones, to the concluding pitch of the piece, is nearest and dearest to the composer. To subject one's creative process and product to suggestion for revision,³ especially if the suggestion comes from another composer, might indirectly change the original essence of the piece.

Although MPO's intentions are highly commendable, one may pose the following questions. What is MPO's rationale behind this mentoring session? Could it be possible that MPO hopes to identify the future MPO resident composer through the Forum? Could mentoring be a mere formality which provides a catalyst in the post-mortem sessions during the three-day Forum Clinic where every piece is reviewed immediately after rehearsal? It would be thought provoking to speculate the organizer's apprehension for the local composer's capability as a possible reason for assigning every composer a mentor. Is cultivating a Malaysian identity part of MPO's long-range plan? Are Malaysian composers too elementary and amateurish to participate in the international Western art music arena? Are they only capable of writing compositions of mediocrity that depend solely on "automatic entry" to compete at world level competitions? Are they really incapable of standing on their own two feet? Tazul Izan Tajuddin's success at the 2002 Toru Takemitsu Composition Award⁴ certainly proves otherwise.

While Malaysia is still at the initial stage in its quest of discovering local talents, ironically many established Malaysian composers are left in the lurch waiting to have their music performed. MPO claims the Forum's "prime initiative" is "discovering new talent and new music in Malaysia by Malaysians". Could this objective be realized by introducing works by established local composers in MPO's weekly concert programmes instead of encouraging them to take part in the Forum? Would MPO consider introducing another program that grants established Malaysian composers a professional position on a rotational basis? The Forum (which has pedagogical functions) could be reserved for student composers to practice and perfect their skills. The credibility of professional Malaysian composers should definitely be given due respect, their talent ought to be acknowledged and their music certainly needs to be included in MPO's repertoire. The MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers: is it a mission to nurture or not to nurture?

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REFERENCES

Chong, Kee Yong. *"I Hear the Wind Calling"* for ensemble (13 players). Brussels: 2003.

MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers Application Booklet.

MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers: A Special Performance featuring New Works by Local Composers (30 March 2003).

NOTES

- ¹ Adeline Wong (1975) received her M.Mus. in composition from the Royal College of Music (2002) and Bachelor of Music from Eastman School of Music (1998). Ahmad Muriz Che Rose (1969) is currently pursuing an M.A. in composition at Boston Conservatory. He was a Film Score major at Berklee College of Music (2000) and received his undergraduate degree from Universiti Teknologi Mara.

Chong Kee Yong (1971) is currently studying composition at Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles. He received a Master of Composition from Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel (2001), a B.A. in composition from Xi'an Conservatory of Music (1995), and studied theory and composition at the Malaysian Institute of Performing Arts in Kuala Lumpur (1990-93).

Johan Othman (1969) received a M.Mus. in composition from Yale University (1999) and B. Mus. in theory and composition from Oberlin Conservatory (1997).

Tay Poh Gek (1969) received a B.Mus. in Film Scoring from Berklee College of Music (2002). She is currently completing her education in Music Synthesis at Berklee College of Music. She was a student at the International College of Music Kuala Lumpur.

Vivian Chuah (1974) received a B.Mus. from the Royal Academy of Music (1998).

- ² Gerard Brophy is an Australian composer; he has been commissioned by some of the world's leading orchestras; his works are regularly performed and broadcast in Europe, Japan, United States and Australia.
Sunetra Fernando is a Malaysian ethnomusicologist; she works in contemporary and traditional gamelan music. She has numerous composition projects to her credit and is an accomplished singer and gamelan performer.
Fraser Trainer is a British composer, winner of the 1992 Lutoslawski Prize and was awarded the Huddersfield University Composition Prize in 1989. Besides composition, he has been actively involved in music training projects in several European countries, Japan and now Malaysia.
- ³ Upon the panel's suggestions, Othman wrote two other versions for the viola solo ending in *ittar*; the third version was performed in the Forum special performance. All the other works with the exception of Chong's *I Hear the Wind Calling*, went through several revisions before the performance. Chong's insistence on achieving certain sound colour has protected its original content.
- ⁴ The 1st Prize of the 2002 Toru Takemitsu Composition Award was shared by Hiroyuki Yamamoto's *Canticum Tremulum II* and Tazul Izan Tajuddin's *Tenunan II*.