



# THE PEOPLE'S ORCHESTRA

Singapore Chinese Orchestra  
1996-2016

LEONG WENG KAM







新加坡华乐团 SINGAPORE CHINESE ORCHESTRA

MUSIC DIRECTOR TSUNG YEH  
音乐总监 叶聪

DEWAN

“ SCO has a unique challenge—to both preserve traditional arts, and forge its own distinctive identity. It weaves in elements of South-east Asian culture with traditional Chinese instruments and music. It has in large measure succeeded, reaching music lovers across diverse backgrounds and cultures. ”

—Prime Minister LEE HSIEN LOONG commenting on the orchestra after attending its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary gala dinner in October 2016.

“ SCO has achieved what we have set for it to do, which was to raise the standard of its performance to a professional standard at the national level. The challenge for the orchestra in the next two decades is to continue to raise its standard and attract a wider audience to include those outside Singapore. ”

—Emeritus Senior Minister GOH CHOK TONG who, as then Singapore Prime Minister in 1995, mooted the idea of a national Chinese orchestra.

“ SCO is very young at 20 but it is already a world class Chinese orchestra with a strong following....It is a unique orchestra in that it plays not only Chinese music but also the others, whether they are Western, Indian, Japanese or Korean. It has been very innovative in reaching out to the other audiences. I am very proud of them. ”

—Ambassador-at-Large TOMMY KOH who helped in SCO's formation when he was chairman of the National Arts Council in the 1990s.

“ We invited SCO to perform at the Sennheiser Shanghai Concert Hall as part of the 31<sup>st</sup> Shanghai Spring International Music Festival in 2014 because of its unique blend of Chinese and Western orchestra music and its Nanyang-flavour repertoire. ”

—CHEN MING, Executive Director of Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

“ SCO is a world-class Chinese orchestra which played the traditional pieces superbly too. The orchestra’s strengths lie in its unique repertoire which no other Chinese orchestra can match. ”

—ZHU CHANGYAO, a top Chinese erhu virtuoso and President of the China-Jiangsu Performing Arts Group.

“ When one adds to this inspiring mixture the immaculate virtuosity of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and their 2,000-year survey of traditional Chinese music, the whole enterprise was simply mesmerising. ”

—JONATHAN MILLS, Artistic Director of the 2009 Edinburgh International Festival on SCO’s unique repertoire.

“ Conductor Tsung Yeh leads the musicians through a diverse selection of Chinese music which spans 2,000 years and ranges from mountain songs to contemporary compositions. A dazzling record of cosmopolitanism in the modern world. ”

—Fest Magazine, United Kingdom.

“ It is an honour to be performing my first concert with a Chinese orchestra, even more so given that it’s the Singapore Chinese Orchestra led by Tsung Yeh. ”

—Violinist JOSHUA BELL.



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1996-2016

LEONG WENG KAM

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#### **OUR VISION**

We aspire to be a world renowned Chinese Orchestra with a uniquely Singaporean character

#### **OUR MISSION**

To inspire Singapore and the World with our music

#### **OUR VALUES**

Strive for excellence in our performances

Committed to teamwork

Open to innovation and learning



**SCO TURNED 20!** (from left) Honorary chairman Chew Keng Juea, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, chairman Patrick Lee and Mrs Goh at the cake-cutting ceremony during the gala dinner-cum-fundraising dinner at Marina Bay Sands on October 21, 2016.



## {ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS}

In a short span of 20 years—from 1996 to 2016—the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) has grown from a community orchestra to a national one which is among the best in the world today. This period of the orchestra’s history is worth telling and preserving. Hence this commemorative book, *The People’s Orchestra, Singapore Chinese Orchestra 1996-2016*.

First, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to our patron, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong for his generous support all these years and writing the foreword in the book. We also wish to thank minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu for her message.

We are also grateful to all SCO musicians, past and present, including those from the former People’s Association (PA) Chinese Orchestra, and staff members, for sharing their stories, loan of photographs and other materials, many of which have never been published.

Lastly, we want to put on record the strong support we received from our audience, especially “Friends of SCO”, without whom we would not be who we are today.

**Singapore Chinese Orchestra**

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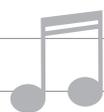
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*(From left)* SCO executive director Terence Ho, chairman Patrick Lee, PM Lee Hsien Loong, then MCCY minister Lawrence Wong and Our People, Our Music (OPOM) organising committee chairman Patrick Goh at the mega concert in 2014.

## | Lee Hsien Loong

*Prime Minister*

*SCO Patron*

**F**ORMED in 1996, the SCO has grown from strength to strength. Starting only with 32 musicians, the orchestra has become Singapore's national Chinese orchestra with 85 members, and one of the top professional music groups in the world.

As its Patron, I am very proud of the orchestra's achievements over the last two decades. The team of musicians has flourished, led by the dynamic and creative music director Maestro Yeh Tsung, and with the strong support of a forward-looking board of directors and an efficient management team.

The orchestra has travelled around the world, performing to critical acclaim. Whether it is in Europe, the Middle-east or Asia, and even in China, audiences appreciate SCO's unique brand of Nanyang music, and the exquisitely blended performances comprising elements from the East and West. SCO has shown the versatility of Chinese music, which can be performed together with other musical genres to produce a unique and moving experience.

Now, SCO performs more than 100 concerts annually, including in schools, in the heartlands and parks, bringing together Singaporeans from all cultures with the music as one community, one nation.

One memorable SCO concert in 2014, Our People, Our Music (OPOM), was among the first events held at the new National Stadium, with a 30,000 audience from all races and walks of life. It broke the Guinness World Record for

the biggest Chinese drum ensemble with 4,557 players, and set a new record for staging the largest Chinese orchestra performance by 3,345 people.

SCO is truly The People's Orchestra!

Looking ahead, SCO must maintain and raise the professional standards of the musicians. Young talent must also be groomed, who can in time become part of SCO and contribute to its success.

SCO's repertoire must always be creative and unique in order to continue attracting a growing audience. That is why I supported the orchestra launching an international music writing competition 10 years ago, to expand the body of musical compositions which reflect the history, culture and lives of Singaporeans as well as those of our neighbours.

For its 20<sup>th</sup> year celebrations, SCO has produced this book to trace its history and mark the milestones and achievements, with pictures and stories many told by the musicians themselves.

With this strong foundation and with your support, I know the SCO is ready and confident to pursue its mission and vision, and go on to greater successes.

Happy reading!

## {MESSAGE}



### | **Grace Fu**

*Minister for Culture, Community and Youth*

**S**INCE its formation in 1996, the SCO has enriched the musical landscape in Singapore with its high quality performances. From concert halls to outdoor spaces, SCO's performances resonate with Singaporeans.

Many will fondly remember SCO's community concerts in the heartlands, lunchtime concerts in the city,

and the record-breaking mass events such as the OPOM concert at the Sports Hub in 2014. These programmes bring music to the people, and make the arts accessible to a wider audience. It brings people together, and shows how the arts can be a part of our everyday lives.

As a national orchestra, SCO has grown to be a cultural icon at home and abroad. Beyond championing the promotion of Chinese orchestral music, SCO is constantly developing new repertoire in collaboration with composers in Singapore and overseas. Since 1998, the orchestra has performed in many cities in Asia and Europe, to critical acclaim. It has earned recognition as one of the top Chinese orchestras in the world today, especially for its uniquely Nanyang-style repertoire that reflects the multicultural make-up of Singapore.

SCO also plays a role in nurturing our country's next generation of musical talents. In 2003, SCO set up the Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra. Young musicians between the ages of 11 and 26 have the opportunity to learn from some of the best artistes and develop their musical skills.

This commemorative book, which chronicles the history and milestones of the orchestra, is a timely one. I would like to express my appreciation to the Board and Management, music director Yeh Tsung, resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong, assistant conductor Moses Gay and each and every musician for their contribution to the orchestra. My congratulations to SCO as it celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I wish SCO every success, and may the orchestra continue to grow from strength to strength.



## {PREFACE}

### | Patrick Lee *SCO Chairman*

**T**WENTY years may not be a long time in the history of an orchestra but the SCO, which marks its 20<sup>th</sup> year as the Republic's national Chinese orchestra in 2016, has certainly come a long way from the humble beginnings of Chinese music in the country since the last century.

From a group of 32 former PA Chinese Orchestra players, we have grown to a full line-up of 85 professional musicians who rank among the top talents in the Chinese orchestral music scene today. Led by the creative, versatile and internationally-known Yeh Tsung, who has been the orchestra's music director and conductor for 14 years, SCO is now a world-class Chinese orchestra.

Our musicians have continued to improve professionally and excel in their performances, while reaching out to a wider audience, both at home and abroad. Today, we present more than 100 shows a year, including our regular concerts and community out-reach programmes in the heartlands and public parks.

We travelled regularly overseas in groups or as an orchestra, to perform in some of the world's top destinations such as London, Paris, Beijing, Shanghai, and closer home in Kuala Lumpur only last year.

We have expanded our repertoire considerably, especially in the past 10 years, to include Nanyang-flavour music which is ethnically diverse and incorporates elements of the different racial groups as well as their history in South-east Asia. The result is a really unique musical genre which is readily identifiable by all Singaporeans. The repertoire also includes works which blend Chinese and Western, and other Asian music to enhance audience appeal.

Our mega concert, OPOM, at the new National Stadium two years ago made musical history when we broke one Guinness World Record and set another—for forming the largest Chinese drum ensemble of 4,557 players and holding the biggest Chinese orchestra performance by 3,345 musicians respectively before a crowd of 30,000 people of different races and from all walks of life. Indeed, thanks to the heart-warming reception and these accolades, we have truly become The People's Orchestra.

The publication of this commemorative book, *The People's Orchestra, Singapore Chinese Orchestra 1996-2016*, is therefore a timely record of the 20-year journey we—musicians and non-musicians alike—undertook from the formation of SCO Company Limited in 1996 to becoming the leading national Chinese orchestra it is today.

The stories and photographs trace the history, milestones and achievements of the orchestra within the short span of two decades, many of them untold and never-before-published.

We want to share them with our audience, supporters and the public, especially the younger ones, so that they can appreciate the making of the SCO and have a better understanding of Chinese orchestral music in Singapore as we move into the future.

{OVERTURE}

# The night SCO set two world records







Zheng Weiliang proposing to Jasmine Peh the night before OPOM in 2014.

**D**ATE: June 27, 2014. Scene: Newly opened National Stadium. Occasion: Rehearsal on the night before the biggest concert ever presented by the SCO billed as OPOM. Present: Some 5,000 musicians and participants.

As a recording of the heart-tugging strains of Teresa Teng’s romantic evergreen *The Moon Represents My Heart*, was being played, the spotlight swung to erhu player Zheng Weiliang dropping to his knees before double bass player Jasmine Peh.

Cradling a diamond ring in one hand, the then-26-year-old popped the question: “Will you marry me?”

To which his stunned sweetheart, just a year younger, replied nervously in a slip of the tongue: “I do!” instead of “Yes”—to the rapturous cheers of the crowd. They tied the knot in January 2016.



Resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong led 4,557 drummers, including a two-year old boy, to a record-breaking feat.

It was a match made in musical heaven. The couple, both school teachers and who were among the event's participants, first met as students representing their respective schools in SCO's first OPOM and National Day concert at the Singapore Indoor Stadium on July 30, 2004.



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**ERHU**

*Bowed String Instrument*

As Peh reminisced: “I was expecting his proposal but never knew it came at the concert’s rehearsal before so many people.” Zheng said: “OPOM will always have a special place in our hearts because it was where we first met and decided to spend the rest of our lives together.”

It was SCO’s then young assistant conductor-in-residence Moses Gay who helped to arrange the marriage

proposal on centre-stage. It meant hiding the plan from Peh until she was invited up on stage. “They went through many ups and downs but I am very happy for the couple now. They finally made it and it must be a very unforgettable moment for them,” said Gay who studied music with Peh at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa).

The romantic interlude was one of many memorable



Moses Gay with the erhu led a 1,000-strong group to play the all-time favourite written for the instrument, *Horse Racing*.



**A RECORD SHATTERING MOMENT:** (from left) Moses Gay, Quek Ling Kiong, Guinness World Records official Jack Brockbank, chairman Patrick Lee, OPOM organising committee chairman Patrick Goh, then MCCY minister Lawrence Wong, Yeh Tsung and executive director Terence Ho.

moments for Singapore's national Chinese orchestra as it prepared for and staged its mega event at the spanking new stadium in the Singapore Sports Hub the following night on June 28.

Zheng, Peh and Gay became part of musical history when the SCO-led event broke one and set a new Guinness World Record before an audience of 30,000 people of different races and from all walks of life.

It broke the record for the largest Chinese drum ensemble of 4,557 players, including a two-year-old boy playing a small pallet drum. The old record was held by the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra which organised a drum festival at Tsim Sha Tsui with 3,000 participants in 2003. It set a new record for staging the largest Chinese orchestra performance by 3,345 people led by SCO members and other musicians. The latter comprised both professionals

and amateurs with several in their 80s hailing from some 127 musical groups representing Chinese clan associations, community clubs, schools and even those from across the Causeway.

The first feat, led and conducted by SCO resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong beating a huge standing round drum on stage, was played to a six-minute piece he wrote for drums titled *Power Singapura!* together with young local composer Phang Kok Jun. The performance saw the appearance of drums in all shapes and sizes—Western ones such as the timpani, tambourine and snare drums, and Chinese ones such as the pallet drums kids play and those used for lion dances.

“It was a challenge to lead and co-ordinate so many drummers in the performance, but we did it!” recalled Quek who became SCO associate conductor in 2008, and was promoted to resident conductor in 2013.

The rest of the 90-minute-long concert was conducted by SCO music director Yeh Tsung who led all the musicians in the stadium and a 1,200-member choir led by SCO chorus director Nelson Kwei to perform musical pieces including the opening number by Richard Strauss, *Also Sprach Zarathustra Op 30*, made popular by the 2001 movie, *Space Odyssey*. It was followed immediately by a medley of golden hits of the late Taiwanese songbird, Teresa Teng.

The evening’s other highlights included actor-turned-



Vincent Ng’s martial art display was also a highlight at the mega concert.



Dick Lee singing his 1998 National Day theme song, *Home*.

gongfu master Vincent Ng's martial art display set to the tune of *A Man Should Stand Strong*, the popular theme song from a Tsui Hark movie and a solo performance on the pipa by 10-year-old Chen Xinyu, a member of the Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra and first prize winner in the Junior Pipa Category of the National Chinese Music Competition in 2012.

Gay, who was appointed SCO assistant conductor after the OPOM in August 2014, led a 1,000-strong erhu group to play the all-time favourite written for the instrument, *Horse Racing*.

The concert ended on a rousing note with Singapore composer-singer Dick Lee singing his 1998 National Day theme song, *Home*.

In the audience were guests of honour PM Lee Hsien Loong and his wife Ho Ching, then minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong and then minister in the Prime Minister's Office Grace Fu.

PM Lee had described the event as one for all Singaporeans and a feast for the senses.

He said: "Its performers represent all races, nationalities, and ages, including a two-year old drummer and a visually-handicapped erhu player. Its repertoire reflects the diverse cultures and musical heritage of the Singapore Chinese community."

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong who mooted the idea of upgrading the Chinese orchestra in the PA—a statutory body formed in 1960 to foster better ties among the different ethnic groups—into Singapore's national Chinese



Yeh Tsung with 10-year-old Chen Xinyu playing the pipa.

orchestra some two decades ago was also there with his wife, Madam Tan Choo Leng, an active SCO board member and fundraiser.

He said: "It was a stunning act to put so many performers and musicians from the different orchestras together. It required a lot of co-ordination work. Its sheer size was equivalent to a National Day Parade but of a musical nature. I enjoyed the experience and the music, especially the martial art display."

SCO chairman Patrick Lee said: "The mega event took us six months of preparation and cost \$3 million to stage but it is all worth it when we see so many people of different races coming to make or enjoy music together."



SCO performing at Gardens by the Bay in January 2015 as part of its free community concerts.

The event's major sponsors included the Tote Board and the National Arts Council (NAC).

With the mega event, the orchestra also wanted to strengthen awareness and appreciation of Chinese culture through music and sustain participants' interest in Chinese arts and culture while reaching out to new audiences.

SCO's history can be traced to an amateur performing group within the PA Cultural Troupe in 1968. It became a professional orchestra called the PA Chinese Orchestra with 32 full-time musicians in 1974.

Since it became Singapore's second national orchestra

20 years ago following the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) in 1979, SCO has grown in strength as well as expanded its repertoire which, besides the traditional Chinese pieces, includes works with strong local or Nanyang flavour, identified easily by Singaporeans of all races.

Its 85 musicians now comprise both local and foreign talents, many recruited from China. Since 1998, the orchestra has been travelling overseas to perform, to as far as London and Paris and closer home in cities in China, Taiwan and Malaysia, often to rave reviews. It was the first Chinese orchestra to perform at the Edinburgh International



SCO led by Moses Gay (*with baton*) at West Grove Primary School in January 2016 as part of its programme for schools in collaboration with NAC.

Festival in 2009.

According to SCO executive director Terence Ho, the orchestra runs on an annual budget of \$15 million, and holds more than 100 performances a year. Apart from its regular shows at the concert halls, its calendar covers outreach programmes in schools, free concerts at public parks, hospitals and the heartlands. It is truly The People's Orchestra.

“Our mission is to inspire Singapore and the world with our music and our vision is to be a renowned Chinese orchestra with a uniquely Singaporean character,” he said.

SCO has indeed come a long, long way from the humble beginnings of Chinese instrumental music in Singapore since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**DAGU**  
*Percussion Instrument*

{CHAPTER 1}

# The early days of Chinese orchestral music







Ouyang Liang Rong, the 1969 Chinese Talentime champion who was still performing and teaching the guzheng in 2016.



Goh Ek Meng, the runner-up, is a second-generation pioneer in Chinese orchestral music.

It was a musical duel that riveted a nation.

The face-off featured 20-year-old Ouyang Liang Rong fingering the guzheng, a Chinese plucked string instrument played horizontally on a stand, and Goh Ek Meng, a year younger, strumming the pipa, another plucked string instrument but lute-shaped and played vertically in the arms.

Ouyang played a lilting tune titled *Qing Feng Nian* which represented a year of bountiful harvest. In contrast, Goh strummed the dramatically intense piece titled *Shi Mian Mai Fu* which meant ambush from all sides, written specially for the pipa, and often heard in Chinese war and gongfu movies.

The occasion was the grand final of the first Chinese Talentime hosted by the then Radio and Television Singapore (RTS), the forerunner of Singapore's national broadcaster MediaCorp, on 16 February 1969, the eve of Chinese New Year.

Watched by a capacity crowd in the open-air 3,420-seat National Theatre, the event was beamed live via black-and-white television to a home audience who had been following the journey of the finalists through the preliminary rounds, quarter- and semi-finals over the past months. Colour television was introduced in Singapore only in 1974.

The much-loved iconic theatre sited at the junction of Clemenceau Avenue and River Valley Road witnessed many national events such as founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's first National Day Rally speech on August 8, 1966, the year after Singapore's independence. The theatre, dubbed the "People's Theatre", because funds for its construction came mainly from the public, was demolished to make way for the underground stretch of the Central Expressway in 1986.

The verdict of the talentime final: Ouyang pipped Goh to take top honours in the Chinese instrumental category. In the popular song category, Lena Lim, then 19, made her triumphant debut and went on to be a popular recording artiste in the 1970s and 1980s. She made regular appearances on radio and television and cut many hit albums before retiring in the late 1980s.

Thanks to the weekly televised coverage and widespread publicity, the two young men, together with Lena, became household names. But the impact lasted longer than ephemeral fame—little did they realise then that their talentime performances were to contribute immeasurably to the growth and development of Chinese orchestral music

in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It renewed and heightened interest in the Chinese art form and inspired a new generation of musicians. In its wake, many amateur and informal orchestral groups sprouted in old boys' associations, community centres, tertiary institutions and schools.

Goh, aged 67, when he was interviewed for this book in 2016, could count himself as one of the pioneering members of the SCO since its inauguration in 1996. After a brief stint as a pipa player, he became the orchestra's librarian until he retired in 2009. Later he became a member on SCO's artistic resource panel.

He attributed the popularity of Chinese orchestral and instrumental music in those early years to the live coverage of Chinese Talentime.

"Chinese instrumental music was broadcast to every home because of the talentime's live TV coverage and many young people became interested in learning the instruments, especially the guzheng and pipa," he said.

Goh was trained by his father Goh Eng Chang, a musician from China. He passed away in 2001, aged 82, after a lifetime of promoting and teaching Chinese music to



**PIPA**

*Plucked String Instrument*

the young. His students included his elder son's talentime rival Ouyang, and younger son Yew Guan who, in 2016, was still playing the pipa with the SCO.

Inspired by his talentime success, Goh followed in his father's footsteps and devoted his lifetime work to Chinese orchestra music as a leading musician, conductor and teacher for over the past four decades.

It all started in Secondary 2 in Hua Yi Secondary School in 1965 when he led its Chinese orchestra group. He was barely 15. Since then, he had gone on to found one music group after another for schools and community clubs.



**FATHER AND SONS:** (from left) Goh Ek Meng, his father Goh Eng Chang and younger brother Goh Yew Guan who still plays with the SCO.

Goh's most valuable contribution though was in writing and publishing the book in Chinese titled *History of Chinese Music Development in Singapore* in 1998. It traced the growth of Chinese music here between 1953 and 1979.

In his foreword to the book, then NAC chief executive and SCO board member Choo Thiam Siew wrote: "Goh's book introduced systematically, all the important musicians, orchestras and major events which took place during the period. The struggles of the musicians expressed in between the narratives were very touching to the readers."

Talentime champion Ouyang, who was busy teaching the guzheng with a long waiting list of students after his victory, said: "Yes, the talentime was instrumental in popularising Chinese instrumental music, resulting in many people learning to play it as well. I was overwhelmed." In 2016, Ouyang, who was taught the pipa by pioneer Teochew Chinese instrumentalist Tan Siah Chua when he was 15, was still performing regularly overseas and teaching the guzheng at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Goh's and Ouyang's views were shared by their contemporary Tay Teow Kiat, another active Chinese musician who founded several Chinese orchestras in the 1970s. He agreed that the 1969 Chinese Talentime was a key event which triggered off great public interest in Chinese orchestral music in Singapore more than four decades ago.

He recalled that the talentime finalists and other Chinese instrumentalists were often invited to perform on television in popular variety shows such as Sharp Night.

Tay Teow Kiat, another second-generation pioneer Chinese musician who led several orchestras from the late 1960s till today.



“Ouyang and Goh were so popular that many people wanted to learn the guzheng and pipa from them, but they could not cope and had to turn students away,” said Tay, who received the Cultural Medallion for music in 1994.

Tay learned to play Chinese musical instruments as a student at Chung Cheng High School in the early 1960s. Like Goh, Tay also helped to lead several amateur Chinese orchestra groups which were formed before and after the Chinese Talentime in 1969.

One was the Quan Sheng Chinese Orchestra which numbered nearly 80 members, mostly blue-collar workers eager to learn a Chinese musical instrument or two, which he started in 1961. Classes and rehearsals before concerts were held in a shophouse in the Lavender Road area.

The 1960s witnessed a continuing political struggle

between the People’s Action Party (PAP) government and pro-communist and socialist groups. Like many Chinese community organisations then, the Quan Sheng Chinese Orchestra supported the leftist cause. When Tay founded the Radio Broadcasting Chinese Orchestra under RTS in 1974, he asked the leftist members from Quan Sheng to join him but none wanted to do so saying that it was a government set-up. So he had to start from scratch with very inexperienced or student members.

Most Quan Sheng members left to join Kangle’s Chinese orchestra, an active leftist music group then, resulting in the leftist group’s closure.

The orchestra conducted by Tay in RTS then promoted Chinese instrumental music on radio and appeared frequently on TV. It was renamed Singapore Broadcasting



Lian Yoong Ser (*hidden, fourth from left*) playing the guzheng with his Chinese High classmates in what he claimed to be the first Chinese music concert at the Victoria Theatre in June 1954.

Corporation Chinese Orchestra in 1980 when RTS became a statutory board. In the early 1990s, it left SBC to be an independent amateur group and changed its name a second time to City Chinese Orchestra. With more than 80 members, it is still performing today with Tay as its music director.

In 1980, Tay joined the Dunman High School Chinese Orchestra as its conductor and was associated with it for the

next 36 years. He was the school's performing arts centre music director overseeing the school's Chinese orchestra when he was interviewed for this book in 2016. He identified and trained SCO resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong, first as a percussionist and later in conducting when he was a student there in the early 1980s. SCO current erhu associate principal Ling Hock Siang was also his student.

In 2014, Tay and a group of leading Chinese musicians

founded the Singapore Chinese Music Federation with the support of SCO. It represents the more than 200 local Chinese music groups and many professional musicians.

Another prominent Chinese musician who emerged in the same period was Lian Yoong Ser who, at age 16, played the guzheng with six of his schoolmates from Chinese High School in what he claimed was Singapore's first Chinese instrumental music concert at the Victoria Theatre in June 1954.

Lian noted that before the students' concert there, the theatre was the venue mainly for entertainment by the British colonial officials and European business community, rarely for the local Chinese community.

He remembered that the pieces they played included classic Chinese instrumental pieces such as *Xun Yang Ye Yue* and *Yue Zhou Chang Wan*.

He started learning to play traditional Chinese musical instruments such as the erhu, pipa, yangqin in addition to the guzheng at the Nanyang Khek Community Guild, an umbrella body for the Kheks or Hakkas in Singapore, when he was barely 10.

He said before 1954, Chinese music groups in Singapore including those formed in the 1930s and those after World War II were small ensembles playing ancient Chinese folk tunes of the various dialect groups, such as hanyue from the Kheks, waijiang from the Teochews and nanyin from the Hokkiens, which had its origins in the Tang Dynasty more than 1,000 years ago.

He formed Chong Yee Traditional Chinese Orchestra with a group of enthusiasts in 1973, playing a leading role in promoting Chinese orchestra music until the mid 1980s when the orchestra was de-registered. He later joined the PA Chinese orchestra as a cellist between 1982 and 1990.

At a time when Western instruments such as the cello and double bass were not used in Chinese orchestras, he created a stir in the Chinese music scene in Singapore when he became the first to create the dahu here to simulate the lower sound range for the orchestra with the help of a



Lian Yoong Ser with the dahu he created in 1962.

musical instrument maker in Clarke Quay in 1962.

The instrument, with stretched snake skin on a drum like a giant erhu, stood as tall as the double bass.

To simulate the sounds of the cello, Chinese orchestras also created the gehu earlier in the 1930s which are still seen in some orchestras in China and Hong Kong.

Lian pointed out that originally Chinese music was played by small musical ensembles with no more than 10 traditional instruments including dizi (flute) and sheng (a woodwind instrument) and plucked string ones like the pipa and huqin and percussion instruments such as bells and clappers.

It was only in the early 1950s when Chinese musicians in China realised the limitation of their instruments in providing a fuller sound range that they began to model themselves after Western symphony orchestras by adding instruments such as cellos and double bass and dividing them into the pluck, strings, percussion and wind sections.

Most Chinese orchestras outside China, like SCO, now follow suit.

But to trace the origins of orchestral music in Singapore, we have to go back to the generation before Lian, Tay, Goh and Ouyong—the teachers and pioneers who were active in the Singapore Chinese music scene from the 1930s. That was when small Chinese instrumental groups were formed mainly to play traditional Chinese folk music and to accompany Chinese opera performances.

Noting that there was no formal Chinese music schools

even in the 1970s, Tay said: “We learned to play music privately from teachers who came from China or by listening to recordings on tapes or gramophone records.”

Tay’s teacher was Yeo Sow Jiang who taught him to play the sanxian, a plucked three-string instrument when he was a student in Chung Cheng High. Yeo, who came here from China when he was 10, learned from his father who was a musical prodigy and scholar in China before he moved to Singapore in the late 1920s.

In 1959, Yeo led a group of Chinese music enthusiasts to form what was to be the first full-fledged Chinese orchestra in Singapore at Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association, a 100-year-old Teochew opera group in Geylang. It was at its old premises in River Valley Road where he learned the pipa, yangqin and opera performances at a young age from his father, who was killed during the Japanese Occupation in Singapore.

Among the 47 members was the young and talented Lim Guan Hoo, who played several Chinese instruments including guzheng, pipa, dizi and yangqin. He later became a PAP Member of Parliament for Bukit Merah in 1966 and Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs in 1972. He suffered from a stroke due to work pressure and was in coma for 172 days before he passed away in August, 1977, aged 38.



The late Lim Guan Hoo, a former PAP MP and leading Chinese musician.

Yeo, who was 87 when he was interviewed for this book in 2016, said: “His death was a great loss to Chinese orchestral music then. He was a leader among us because he was the most highly educated having graduated from Nanyang University then.”

Two other notable members were Phua Him Ko who was still leading the Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association as its president in 2016 at the age of 76, and Boh Chit Hee who was the orchestra’s founding music director and conductor. He was an active member in the Chinese music scene between the 1960s and 1970s but later became a bonsai expert. He died in 2009 aged 84.

One of the earliest performances by the group was a fundraising concert for the National Theatre Building Fund at the Victoria Theatre on August 4, 1960 in which Yeo also acted and sang in a Teochew opera, besides playing the pipa.

Yeo, as the orchestra’s founder, recalled having to buy all the musical instruments for the members out of his own pocket amounting to \$1,340.

“For erhu alone, I bought 25 pieces each slightly more than \$10, but the expensive ones were the yangqin at \$80 and the pipas at \$100 each,” he said.

In the early days, Chinese orchestras were all started and financed by the community with no government help.

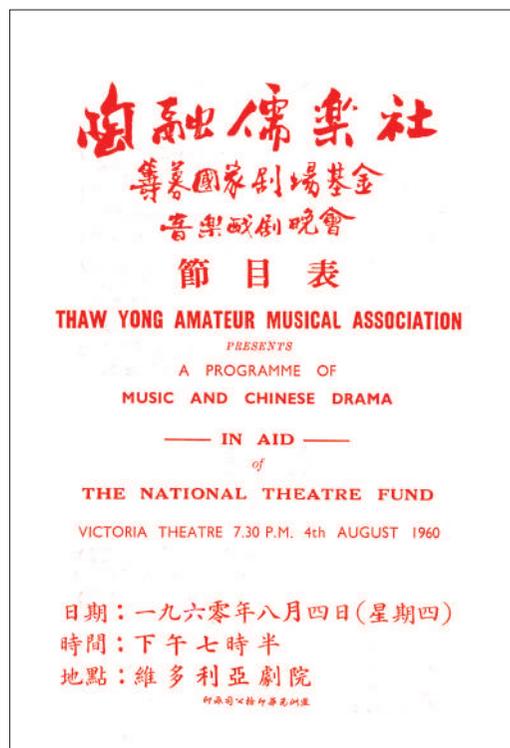
If state support was non-existent in the 1950s-60s, according to Thau Yong president Phua, it was because Chinese orchestras and instrumental music were associated with the leftists and pro-communists.



Pioneer generation Chinese musician Yeo Sow Jiang still playing the pipa in 2016. Seated behind is Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association’s current president Phua Him Ko.

In those days, the situation was so politicised that the Chinese orchestra in Thau Yong could last only three years and be reduced to only an ensemble for Teochew opera performances, he said.

“I wasn’t interested in politics at the time but still I had Internal Security Department’s officers calling me to stop playing Chinese music,” Yeo said.



Programme flyer of a Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association's concert in aid of the National Theatre Building Fund dated August 4, 1960.

The last straw came in 1962 when the PAP invited the orchestra to play at the party's anniversary celebrations at the Gay World Stadium in Geylang and many of the members refused to turn up. "I had no choice but to disband the orchestra and say we have no more orchestra to perform at the anniversary," he said.

Official involvement in Chinese orchestral music came only in 1960 when the then-Parliamentary Secretary for Culture Lee Khoo Choy, a Chinese music enthusiast

himself who played the guzheng and pipa, formed the Central Cultural Board Chinese Orchestra under the then Culture Ministry.

Conducted by another Chinese music pioneer Lee Yuk Chuan, the orchestra performed at many official functions. K C Lee, as he was better known, even played the guzheng and pipa at some of its performances.

K C Lee continued to play an important role in promoting Chinese orchestral music after Singapore's independence in 1965, when he was Minister of State in the Culture Ministry during the late 1960s, and when he became PA deputy chairman in the late 1970s.

PA was set up as a statutory body in 1960 to counter racial and political tensions rife in Singapore at that time. It organised social events and promoted cultural activities with its network of community centres and clubs all over the island, which has grown to more than 200 today.

K C Lee retired from politics in 1984 and died in February 2016, aged 92, after an illustrious career as a journalist-turned-politician, diplomat, writer, artist and musician.

The year 1965 also saw the establishment of the National Theatre Trust under the newly-built National Theatre to promote the arts. The National Theatre Chinese Orchestra was formed under its umbrella in 1968. The same year the PA Chinese Orchestra was also set up. Both orchestras were made up of amateur musicians.

The existence of the two groups led to much rivalry and competition for musicians. In the early 1970s, the

government decided that the National Theatre group should be dissolved, leaving the responsibility to promote Chinese orchestral music in the Republic solely to PA.

In 1974, PA hired one of the most sought-after Chinese music conductors and composers then—Ng Tai Kong from Hong Kong to lead its Chinese orchestra. Under his leadership, six full-time musicians, including Goh Ek Meng,



Boh Chit Hee, another Chinese music pioneer active in the 1960s who became a bonsai expert later.



Singapore's first full-fledged Chinese orchestra started by Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association at the group's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert at Victoria Theatre in 1961.

Ouyang Liang Rong, Yeo Siew Wee and Phoon Yew Tien were recruited. Yeo, a suona player, later left to join the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra in 1977 but returned to teach in 1981. Phoon, who played the flute then, would go on to become a leading Singapore composer of Chinese orchestral music and a Cultural Medallion recipient in 1996. In later years, he worked very closely with the SCO and was its composer-in-residence in 2014.

Ng left the orchestra to return to Hong Kong three years later. He was succeeded by Lim Tiap Guan, former conductor of the Singapore Armed Forces Reservists'



**GUZHENG TRIO:** (from left) Lian Yoong Ser, Mo Jiangzhu and Boh Chit Hee playing the instruments as members of Kangle Chinese music group in 1970.



Lee Khoon Choy on the guzheng with the PA Chinese Orchestra led by conductor Ku Lap Mun in the 1970s.

Members of the National Theatre Chinese Orchestra before their performance at the Victoria Theatre on August 19, 1968.



Association Chinese Orchestra in 1977. Another musician from Hong Kong, Ku Lap Man, who was also percussionist and composer, took over from Lim as conductor in 1980.

As the orchestra grew, it extended its outreach performing at national and community events and representing Singapore at festivals overseas in the 1970s and 1980s. Under Ku's leadership, the orchestra swelled to 32 full-time members by 1984.

The 1970s and 1980s were considered the golden era of traditional Chinese orchestral music in Singapore. It was the period when Chinese instrumental and orchestral music became popular with Chinese Singaporeans with more concerts than ever being staged all over the island.

In the early 1990s, there was talk about elevating the PA Chinese orchestra to a higher level to play a greater role in Singapore's cultural landscape. The idea of a fully professional national Chinese orchestra was germinating.



**GUZHENG**

*Plucked String Instrument*

{CHAPTER 2}

# Birth pangs of a people's orchestra





新加坡華樂團首演

SINGAPORE CHINESE ORCHESTRA  
INAUGURAL GALA CONCERT

GUEST-OF-HONOUR: DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER  
BRIGADIER-GENERAL (NS) LEE HSIEN LOONG





Chng Heng Tiu (*left*) and Choo Hoey were classmates in Chinese High School in the late 1940s.

**S**OMETIME in 1995, prominent businessman Chng Heng Tiu was asked to chair a pro-tem committee with a daunting mission: to upgrade the PA Chinese Orchestra and transform it from a community to a national Chinese orchestra.

As he wondered about whom he could turn to for help, one name flashed to his mind—an old friend and former classmate from Chinese High School, none other than Choo Hoey.

What's more, the maestro was available as he was approaching 65 and due to retire after leading the SSO, Singapore's first national orchestra, as its music director and conductor for 16 years.

Both were students of the premier Chinese-medium all-boys school soon after World War II in 1945. Founded

by pioneer Chinese community leader Tan Kah Kee in 1919, Chinese High was a leading school in Singapore and South-east Asia then. It attracted the region's brightest students and had the best teachers, many from China. The school with its landmark clock tower in Bukit Timah merged with Hwa Chong Junior College to form Hwa Chong Institution in 2005.

When the two boys passed out from the school after studying there for six years in 1951, they went on their separate ways. Chng started work as a construction site supervisor with the help of his Chinese High principal Cheng An Lun. Choo left for London to further his music studies.

By the mid-1990s, Chng had made his mark as a successful entrepreneur and community leader. One of his earliest projects which he often recalled with pride was three blocks of hostels built for the former Nanyang University in Jurong in 1955. He later went into property development and diversified into other businesses.

After his studies in London, Choo settled in Greece and became an internationally known music conductor in Europe. In 1979, he was invited by then deputy prime minister Goh Keng Swee to set up the SSO. The following year, he was conferred the Cultural Medallion by the Singapore government.

Their paths crossed again when the Singapore Chinese Orchestra Company was registered on May 8, 1996 and Choo was appointed adviser and joined its board with 11 other members, mainly leading Chinese businessmen and

community leaders.

They included Chua Tian Poh who later became a top developer and community leader; Teo Chiang Long, a well-known Teochew businessman and community leader from Ngee Ann Kongsi, a philanthropic organisation of the dialect group; Chia Ban Seng who led the Association of Nanyang University Graduates in Singapore for many years and Chew Keng Juea, then head of Singapore Press Holdings' Chinese language newspapers division.

Recalling the appointment with Singapore's second national orchestra, Choo said: "Frankly, I do not know very much about Chinese orchestras because I have been involved in Western symphony orchestras all my life. But for my old classmate's sake, I did all I could to help." Choo remembered that Chng used to sit just behind him in class.

One urgent task, he said in an interview for this book, was to raise standards and expand the size of the orchestra. The former PA orchestra inherited by SCO came with 32 full-time musicians, 70 per cent of whom were Singaporeans. Its conductor Qu Chunquan was recruited from China by PA in 1993.



**BO (also known as cymbals)**  
*Percussion Instrument*



**STAYING POWER:** The 12 former PA orchestra musicians. 1. Lee Heng Quee 2. Koh Kim Wah 3. Ann Hong Mui 4. Phang Thean Siong 5. Lee Khiang 6. Goh Yew Guan 7. Lim Sin Yeo 8. Poh Yee Luh 9. Boo Chin Kiah 10. Sim Boon Yew 11. Chew Keng How 12. Teo Teng Tat



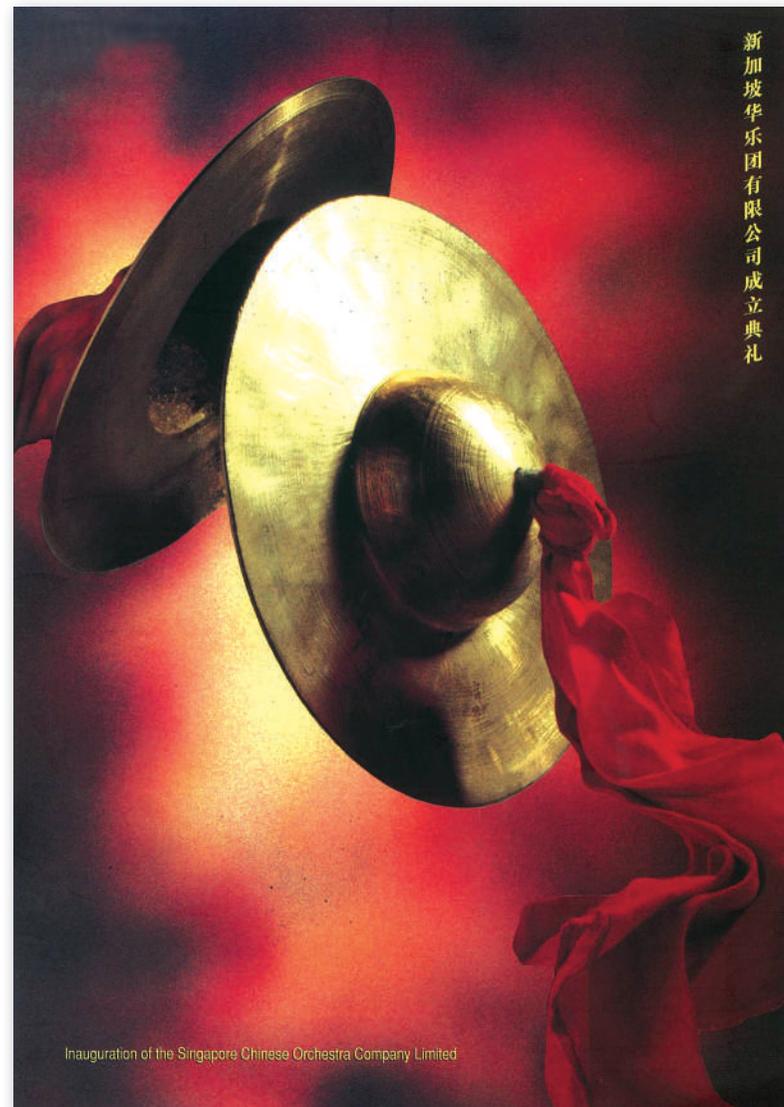
After 20 years, 12 of them are still with the SCO. They are zhonghu player Sim Boon Yew, erhu players Ann Hong Mui and Chew Keng How, daruan player Koh Kim Wah, cellist Poh Yee Luh, percussionist Teo Teng Tat, suona players Lee Heng Quee and Boo Chin Kiah, dizi players Lim Sin Yeo and Phang Thean Siong, pipa player Goh Yew Guan and double bass player Lee Khiang.

Tapping on his knowledge and connections with music circles in China, Choo recommended Hu Bingxu to be SCO's new music director and conductor. Hu was then China's top music conductor who started as an oboe player with the Central Philharmonic Orchestra in Beijing before becoming a conductor and music director, leading seven national-level orchestras in China at one time.

The award-winning conductor was known for his creative and large-scale symphonic music arrangements for *yangbanxi* or "model performances" as they were known such as *Sha Family's Creek* during the Chinese Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976. His other works included modern Peking operas *Taking Tiger Mountain* and *Azalea Mountain*, both also "model performances" from the period.

On June 24, 1996, before Hu was appointed about a year later, SCO held its first event—a dinner-cum-fundraising concert to mark its successful registration as a company in the ballroom of the then Pinetree Town and Country Club owned by Chng.

In his chairman's message in the souvenir magazine, Chng thanked then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for



Souvenir programme for SCO's inauguration dinner-cum-fundraising concert at the former Pinetree Town and Country Club on June 24, 1996.

mooting the idea to upgrade PA's Chinese orchestra into Singapore's national Chinese orchestra. "Such a professional Chinese orchestra will act as a stimulus for promoting Chinese music, it will also enrich our multi-racial culture," he wrote.

Why did Mr Goh, now Emeritus Senior Minister, propose the formation of a national Chinese orchestra? In an interview for the book, he said: "We already have the SSO started by Dr Goh Keng Swee which was a success. I felt that since we have a large Chinese-speaking population, their interest in Chinese orchestra music might not be sufficiently catered to.

"We already had a Chinese orchestra in the PA, so why not build on it to raise its standards and status to be a national orchestra by giving it more resources and then a home?"

To boost its standing and rally public support for Chinese orchestral music in the same way Dr Goh did for symphony music with the SSO, he suggested that then deputy prime minister and now PM Lee Hsien Loong be the orchestra's patron. "I am glad Hsien Loong took up my suggestion," he said.

As ESM Goh recollected, the first challenge for the orchestra was to recruit the best musicians and China seemed to be the only place to recruit them. With the help of Hu, Chng acted immediately to expand the orchestra and double the number of its musicians within a year.

But getting Hu over to Singapore was not plain sailing.

The process took almost a year. "I was happy to be asked to lead the SCO," he told this writer, "but I was so busy with work then that I had no time to consider the orchestra's offer at all."

He remembered that it was only in early October 1996 when he was conducting the Guangdong Symphony Orchestra for a two-night concert in Hong Kong that he met SCO chairman Chng and several board members. Impressed by his performance at the concert, they met him to discuss an offer.

Hu received an offer about a month later from SCO which required him to start work on 1 January 1997. "But I could not accept it at such short notice as approval from the authorities was needed for my release to work in Singapore and that would take some time."

His first task, after taking up his appointment at SCO about six months later in April 1997, was to get more musicians. Some were already coming from China and Hong Kong and a few were Singaporeans who had graduated in Chinese instruments from music conservatories in China, since January 1997.

But he needed to speed up recruitment. Hu realised immediately that if he were to launch an open recruitment exercise in China, he would be swamped with applications and the selection process and auditions for the candidates would take months to complete. "Besides the attraction of working overseas, the simple reason was that a month's salary for a musician in SCO then would equal about six



Members of the newly-formed Singapore Chinese Orchestra led by music director Hu Bingxu (*seated sixth from the left*) at its old premises in Kallang in 1997.

months for a similar position in a Chinese orchestra, even at the top ones,” he explained.

The solution suggested by SCO management was to handpick up to 10 top musicians directly from Beijing without them having to go through auditions. The choices

he made proved to be the right ones as the group who came, except one, are still with SCO and playing leading roles after 20 years.

They include the orchestra’s concert master Li Baoshun and the talented pipa player Yu Jia who was only 22 when

she came. Her father Yu Songlin was leader of the Central Chinese Orchestra in Beijing. She is now the orchestra's pipa principal player.

The others in the group of 10 are erhu principal Zhu Lin, zhongruan principal Zhang Ronghui, sanxian player Huang Guifang, dizi principal Yin Zhiyang, cellist Ji Huiming, sheng principal Guo Changsuo and erhu player Zhang Bin. The absent one is gaohu player Ma Dongyan who migrated with his Singaporean wife to Australia in 1999.

For Zhang Ronghui, then only 25, it was her first trip to

Singapore. Her knowledge of the country was then limited to what she saw on Mandarin television drama serials featuring Zoe Tay and Xiang Yun. "We were all young music school graduates and had barely started work in orchestras back home when we came. We were adventurous and excited and for most of us it was the first time we got to work overseas."

She recalled renting a three-room Housing Board flat in Eunos estate in the eastern part of Singapore with three others from her group and attending practices and rehearsals at the former PA headquarters' compound in Kallang. "The



Doyenne of erhu Min Huifen at SCO Inaugural Gala Concert on April 20, 1997. She died of a stroke in Shanghai in 2014, aged 69.

environment was good and SCO management helpful in making sure we settled in quickly and happily,” she said.

The new additions boosted the SCO’s strength to 62 by the time the orchestra staged its inaugural gala concert as a national orchestra at the magnificent Victoria Concert Hall in September 1997 with Hu conducting together with Qu Chunquan who became his deputy.

With then deputy prime minister Lee Hsien Loong as the evening’s guest of honour, the orchestra presented an interesting and varied programme including *Step Up and Up*, an overture by Singapore composer Phoon Yew Tien who was commissioned by SCO to write the piece with a congratulatory message for the special occasion.

In his speech, then DPM Lee brought cheer to every one present when he announced the government’s intention to refurbish the Singapore Conference Hall and Trade Union House in Shenton Way and turn it into SCO’s permanent home for its rehearsals and performances.

A memorable highlight at the gala concert was the solo performance by the doyenne of erhu music, the late Min Huifen from Shanghai. The guest soloist played the four-part erhu concerto, *The Great Wall Capriccio*, one of her signature pieces.

*A Night in Pasir Ris*—a short Chinese composition by visiting Chinese composer Peng Xiuwen—was perhaps one of the first pieces with a strong local flavour played by the orchestra.

On the same evening, SCO dizi player Lim Sin Yeo



SCO first music director and conductor Hu Bingxu was appointed in April, 1997.

made his debut as a soloist with the orchestra performing the five-part concerto, *Cascades*, written by SCO deputy music director Qu Chunquan with Chinese composer Yu Xunfa.

Lim, regarded as one of Singapore’s most outstanding dizi players then, became a full-time musician after joining the PA Chinese orchestra in 1979. “I was very excited and privileged to be the soloist for the very significant inaugural concert. Then deputy prime minister Lee was there and the concert hall was packed to the brim.”

Indeed SCO’s inaugural gala concert was an impressive



The concert, *Maestros Extravaganza*, featuring (from left) Yeh Tsung, Choo Hoey and Hu Bingxu, was played to full house in July 2016.

show but behind the scene there were teething problems for the board members and administrators. Some were problems inherited from PA.

Former music director Hu remembered that there was too much interference from the management, even on musical matters. “They even tried to tell me what the sitting arrangement of the musicians on stage should be,” he said.

The musicians were required to report for work from nine to five every day irrespective of whether there were rehearsals or group practices, something orchestras in China did not do, he added.

Some SCO musicians and management staff however remembered Hu as inflexible, and lacking in understanding of the local situation. “He came from a different culture and system from Singapore’s,” explained one musician.

Hu said the early days were difficult because “we started with nothing”. The orchestra had very limited music scores in its library and he had to get them from China. “We had to start planning to have more regular concerts not just one or two a year,” he said.

Hu was called a “temperamental conductor” by the Singapore media and even among some musicians and board members. There were mixed views on his leadership. When his contract was due in the year 2000, his supporters circulated a petition for orchestra members to sign for its renewal, said former SCO erhu player Wong Sun Tat, son of former Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra concert master Wong On Yuen.

Hu, who was 61 then, left without renewing his contract in the end. Chairman Chng left the SCO board by August 2000, and was succeeded by board member Chew Keng Juea. Among those who left the board was maestro Choo who returned to Greece. Chng died in 2008 after a long illness, aged 77.

There was also a change in leadership of the orchestra’s management when founding general manager Sim Bee Hia, formerly an assistant director with PA, left the post in 1998 and was replaced a few months later by media consultant Ong Heng San, in a new position as senior manager.

At SCO’s invitation, both Hu and Choo returned to Singapore to conduct the orchestra together with Yeh Tsung for a special concert, *Maestros Extravaganza*, which was part of its 20<sup>th</sup> year celebrations in July 2016.

Looking back, the first three years for SCO were difficult and a time of constant adjustments as it struggled to find its feet as a professional orchestra. As the new millennium began, a new 17-member board, including seven newcomers, prepared for the tough challenges ahead.



**MALING**

*Percussion Instrument*

{CHAPTER 3}

# The first 10 years



丰收十年 Age of Bloom

主宾: 新加坡共和国总统纳丹先生  
Guest-of-Honour: Mr S R Nathan  
President, Republic of Singapore

28-07-2006

1997-2006 Anniversary Celebrations  
新加坡华乐团 Singapore Chinese Orchestra







Loh Mee Joon and Lee Chun Seng were married in 1997.

**S**O what was the first 10 years of the SCO like? Well, you can do no better than chat with a married couple who happen to be two of its longest serving staff.

Stage manager Lee Chun Seng and his wife, artistic affairs and resource services manager Loh Mee Joon had witnessed the orchestra's ups and downs, the milestone events, the leadership changes, the move to a new home and its growing concert calendar and overseas trips.

Both were working for PA when SCO was registered in May 1996 and launched a recruitment drive to upgrade PA's orchestra to the national level. Then a 30-year-old librarian-cum-co-ordinator for PA, Lee was absorbed into SCO as stage supervisor together with the PA orchestra's 32 musicians and conductor Qu Chunquan, who was recruited from Shanghai just the year before.

He encouraged his fiancée Loh, four years younger and working as a programme officer then, to join SCO so they could be together as colleagues. She applied and received a five-year secondment from PA to be a programme executive with SCO.

Their love of Chinese music started in secondary school when they were members of their respective schools' Chinese orchestras. Loh played the liuqin, a small plucked four-string instrument, and Lee, the dizi or Chinese flute, and later the sheng, an ancient Chinese wind instrument.

They met in the late 1980s when they were members of the Keat Hong Chinese Orchestra, a leading musical group among community centres and clubs. Both yearned to be professional musicians but could not afford to go for further training as they had to start work after completing school to support their families.

After graduating from Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Loh worked as an engineering assistant for an electronic manufacturing plant for five years before joining PA in 1995.

Lee was a police constable for six years after leaving Jurong Secondary School in 1984. He later opened a Chinese music school and sold Chinese musical instruments before joining PA in 1993.

They tied the knot in 1997, a year after they joined SCO. They have two daughters.

Having worked with SCO from day one, the couple have a treasure trove of memories. Loh recalled that the pioneering support staff consisted only of the general

manager Sim Bee Hia and two assistant managers, one in charge of finance and herself.

The offices and rehearsal rooms were located at borrowed space in PA's headquarters at Kallang, once the site of Kallang Airport, Singapore's first purpose-built civil airport between 1937 and 1955. PA had occupied the facilities including its distinctive terminal building since its formation in 1960. It moved to its present premises on King George's Avenue in Jalan Besar in 2009.

"So when I was seconded from PA to SCO in 1996, I needed only to move from one office building to another within the PA's HQ compound in Kallang," said Loh.

What kept them for so long in their jobs with the orchestra? "I think it is my passion," she said, "although I didn't make it as a professional musician, I came with a Chinese orchestra background. I treasure my work which is part of a Chinese orchestra. And I enjoyed working on challenging projects such as our inaugural concert in 1997, and the mega concerts which followed."

Lee put it down to his love of Chinese culture and music and the contributions he made as a stage manager. "I want SCO to grow to become as well-known and be on par with



**LIUQIN**

*Plucked String Instrument*

the Western symphony orchestras”.

As a newly wedded couple and co-workers, they remembered being kept busy by an exciting line-up of events following SCO's inaugural concert at the Victoria Concert Hall in April 1997.

Lee was thrilled to be involved in SCO's first performance overseas—the Eight Ismailia International Folkore Festival in Cairo in August 1997—by a 10-men team of musicians.

Soon after he and the other SCO musicians returned from Egypt, they started preparing for yet another major



The first SCO mass participation concert, titled *Thunderous Reverberations*, was held at the former World Trade Centre in February 1998.



SCO's Millennium Concert at the Singapore Indoor Stadium on January 1, 2000, attracted 1,200 participants mainly from schools and community groups.

event: SCO's first mass participation concert titled *Thunderous Reverberations*. Held at the former World Trade Centre in February 1998, the event saw more than 300 participants from schools, tertiary institutions and community centres and clubs.

It was also the first concert combining percussion

instruments such as drums and cymbals and woodwind instruments such as the dizi and sheng.

The highlight was a specially commissioned piece titled *The Sporting Golden Lion* by China's top percussionist and composer Li Minxiong from the Shanghai Music Conservatory who was the event's artistic consultant. He



SCO's first OPOM concert at the Singapore Indoor Stadium on July 30, 2004, had 2,400 participants and attracted 8,000 people in the audience.

mentored SCO's then principal percussionist Quek Ling Kiong during his study stint in China. Quek was the lead drummer for the work supported by the Jurong Town Community Club's Dragon and Lion Troupe.

He said the two-metre round drum now on display in the ground floor foyer at the Singapore Conference Hall was bought especially from China for use during the event.

Two positive spin-offs were attributed to the event: It led to more percussion groups, especially those for drums, being formed in schools, and the realisation that they could be independent performing groups without the full orchestra.

The success gave SCO the confidence to stage two more mass participation concerts. On January 1, 2000, it held the Millennium Concert at the Singapore Indoor Stadium

which attracted more than 1,200 participants, mainly from schools and community groups. On July 30, 2004, it organised the first OPOM concert, at the same venue, with the number of participants doubling to 2,400 and playing to an 8,000-strong audience.

In all, SCO first year's calendar saw a total of 18 concerts, mostly at the Victoria Concert Hall. They featured some of the world's best guest performers who included Chinese pipa virtuoso Liu Dehai, dizi expert Lu Chunling, composer and conductor Guan Naizhong and Japanese violinist Takako Nishizaki, playing to full houses.

Then China beckoned. The 62-member SCO went on its first tour for about a week in September 1998. Aware that playing Chinese music in China would be a case of “carrying coals to Newcastle or selling sands to the Saudis”, the orchestra led by its music director and conductor Hu Bingxu made sure it included several Singapore compositions in the programmes for their three concerts in Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen, such as Phoon Yew Tien's *Festive Overture* and *Suriram*, an adaption from a Malay folk song re-arranged by SCO zhonghu player Sim Boon Yew. Two years later, it toured Taiwan.

The passing of the baton proved problematic for SCO. When music director Hu Bingxu left in March 2000 with the expiry of his three-year contract, the orchestra embarked on an urgent search for his replacement. As a stop-gap measure, Professor Xia Feiyun of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, a former head of the music school's Chinese

music department, was invited to be SCO's principal guest conductor about a year later on March 1, 2001.

In an interview with The Straits Times published on November 24, SCO newly appointed chairman Chew Keng Juea, then a senior executive of Singapore Press



Music director Hu Bingxu led SCO to its first China tour in September 1998, when the orchestra performed in Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen.

Holdings said the urgent task was to find a new music director. The ideal candidate, he said, “must not only be a world-class conductor but also be able to manage a professional orchestra well”.

He actually had Chinese national-turned-Singaporean conductor Yan Huichang in mind, a contender for the job as SCO’s first music director in 1996 which went to Hu Bingxu instead. But later in June the following year, Yan, then only 43, became the new music director of the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, a position he was still holding in 2016.

Yan had replaced Peng Xiuwen, one of China’s top conductors and composers, who died suddenly of a heart attack six months earlier in December, aged 65. So Yan was not available for SCO’s top music post when Hu Bingxu’s contract expired in April 2000.

Then sometime in 2001 when SCO was desperately looking for a new music director, then board member and Hugo recording company boss Aik Yew Goh recommended Yeh Tsung, a musician he met in Hong Kong, who was not on SCO’s radar simply because he came from a Western symphony orchestra background.

Shanghai-born Yeh, who studied piano and later conducting at the Shanghai Music Conservatory before leaving for the United States for further studies in 1981, was then concurrently music director of both the South Bend Symphony Orchestra in the United States and the Hong Kong Sinfonietta.

After guest conducting the SCO for a two-night concert

at the Victoria Concert Hall in September 2001, he was offered the contract with unanimous support from the orchestra’s musicians and board members.

Yeh made front page news in The Straits Times on January 25, 2002 when he arrived in Singapore as SCO’s new music director and conductor and led his debut concert at the Singapore Conference Hall.

Amid a controversy shrouding his appointment over other full-fledged candidates from the Chinese orchestra world, the paper described him as a smooth operator who was out to prove his critics wrong although he was Western-trained for symphony orchestras.

Yeh told the reporter that he took up the SCO appointment as a challenge. He later explained to this writer that he grew up at the Shanghai Music Conservatory where many of his schoolmates and teachers played Chinese music. “Singapore, to me, is a perfect meeting point of East and West,” he said adding that he was determined to do something new and interesting and perhaps even unconventional with SCO.

Regular concert-goers would agree Yeh has succeeded beyond expectations. His contract with SCO was renewed continually with the current contract ending in 2019. The prevalent view is that since 2002 when he joined SCO, he has raised the orchestra to world-class standard with a uniquely Singapore repertoire, most remarkably within the last 10 years.

With the benefit of hindsight, one wonders: What if the



Yeh Tsung made front page news in The Straits Times on January 25, 2002.

late maestro Peng Xiuwen had not died suddenly 20 years ago in 1996 and continued to lead the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra? What if Yan Huichang, a Singapore Cultural Medallion recipient as well who replaced him, were available to accept SCO's offer?

It is a tantalising what-if for without Yeh Tsung, SCO's story would have taken a different trajectory.

SCO's move to its new home at the refurbished Singapore Conference Hall and former Trade Union House

in Shenton Way on July 16, 2001 marked another milestone in its history. The facilities were closed in September 1999 for extensive renovations over the next one-and-a-half years which included installing a new acoustics system and new seating arrangement in the auditorium at a cost of nearly \$15 million. The government foot the bill and leased it to the SCO at very nominal charges.

SCO executive director Terence Ho is another long-service staff who had crossed over from PA. In his youth, he



Then DPM Lee Hsien Loong (*second from left*) declaring the opening of SCO's new home, the refurbished Singapore Conference Hall on September 22, 2001. With him were (*from left*) SCO director Poh Choon Ann, chairman Chew Keng Juea and vice chairman Chia Ban Seng.



Professor Xia Feiyun, SCO's principal guest conductor from Shanghai, conducting the Twin Celebrations concert in September 2001.

played the erhu with several Chinese orchestras. At 16, he was the erhu champion in the 1985 National Chinese Music Competition.

Ho joined the orchestra as marketing manager in August 1998. He succeeded former board member Ken Chang in leading the management team of 43 staff in 2008 when he was appointed general manager. Ken, a music producer, stepped in as executive director when the previous general manager Ong Heng San left for greener pastures in 2002.

Ho, who became executive director since January 2015, said: "SCO's move to the Singapore Conference Hall in 2001

and the appointment of Yeh Tsung as music director a year later in 2002 were two significant events in the orchestra's history as they provided good hardware and software for SCO to move forward."

SCO marked the big move and its fifth anniversary in a twin celebration concert at the Singapore Conference Hall on September 22, 2001. Its patron, then DPM Lee Hsien Loong, was the guest of honour who declared the opening of SCO's new home.

Ho recollected that he wrote to Mr Lee to ask if he could continue to be SCO's patron when he became PM in 2004. The new PM's reply came promptly, which read: "I

will continue to be your patron as long as you want me.” All SCO musicians, staff and board members were delighted, he said.

SCO made its maiden appearance in Europe when it performed in Budapest and London in 2005 and in Edinburgh in 2009. Several of its members also went to Paris to take part in the Singapour Festivarts in 2010.

Yeh Tsung set about building a stronger SCO’s repertoire of Nanyang and Singapore-inspired Chinese orchestral music when he launched the first SCO International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition in November 2006.

With cash awards for four categories of winners, the event saw more than 70 entries from several countries.

SCO marked the move to this refurbished Singapore Conference Hall and its 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary as twin celebrations in September 2001.





The late President S.R. Nathan and Mrs Nathan viewing an exhibition in conjunction with SCO's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert in 2006. Standing on the left were director Poh Choon Ann and then general manager Terence Ho.

It marked the beginning of SCO's search for compositions to reflect life in Nanyang or the south seas and develop a uniquely Singaporean flavour and style. Brimming with confidence and vigour, the orchestra entered its second decade of development.



**SHENG**  
*Wind Instrument*

{CHAPTER 4}

# Making unique music Nanyang-style







Chen Chong Swee  
*Tropical Fruits*, 1966, in Chinese ink.

ONE day in early 2002, maestro Yeh Tsung was wandering around town when he chanced upon an art exhibition displaying the works of several Singapore pioneer artists.

Having only arrived in Singapore in January to be music director of the SCO, he was fascinated by his first encounter with the paintings of prominent artists such as Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang and Chen Chong Swee.

He remembered looking intently at tropical fruits and trees such as rambutans, papayas and coconut trees, local street scenes and Malay kampungs. Making a deep impression on him was their style of painting—in Chinese ink or oil—which essentially reflected the way of life in Singapore and neighbouring countries.

He learned that this school of art was initiated by a

group of five pioneer artists who made a historic trip to Bali in 1952. They were Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng and Georgette Chen.

On their return, they staged a collective exhibition to show what they had seen and experienced there. They used Chinese painting techniques to depict Balinese women dancers or rice fields and mountains or any local subject. This was a departure from the traditional painting of flowers and birds or landscapes in China.

Their display caused a stir immediately in the Singapore art scene with the “localisation” of their Chinese ink works, and later those in oil and watercolour as well. Their paintings heralded what is now known as the Nanyang School of Painting. In Chinese, Nanyang literally means the south seas, but it usually refers to South-east Asia, including Singapore and Malaysia.

After visiting the exhibition and pondering on its significance, Yeh wondered: “If there is a Nanyang school for Singapore art, why not a Nanyang-style form of Chinese orchestra music which will be uniquely Singapore?”

Yes, he thought, why not create a multi-cultural, Nanyang repertoire of music for the SCO that will be different from the traditional Chinese pieces played by most Chinese orchestras in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong?

Yeh recalled that when he arrived here, he found that most of SCO’s music scores in the library were from China and were even “a bit on the old side”. There were only a few local compositions by Leong Yoon Pin and others, and



Law Wai Lun (*left*) receiving his award from then SCO chairman Chew Keng Juea at SCO’s first International Competition for Chinese Orchestra Competition in 2006.

those re-arranged for the orchestra from popular Malay folk tunes such as *Di Tanjong Katong* and *Suriram*, both by SCO musician Sim Boon Yew.

What he needed to do was to create something new which the younger audience could relate to. “I always have this feeling and need. In the days when I was in the US with the South Bend Symphony Orchestra, we played a lot of



**FENGLUO**  
*Percussion Instrument*



Scene from *Zheng He: Admiral of the Seven Seas*, a large scale symphonic fantasy epic by Law Wai Lun, premiered at the Singapore Arts Festival in 2005.

American compositions, and with the Hong Kong Sinfonietta, we also played many local composers' works there. So I want to have our own music in the SCO too. That's how I came out with our Nanyang-style music or Nanyang repertoire," he said.

With a sense of urgency, Yeh began to commission local compositions. Among the first Singapore composers he approached was Shanghai-born Law Wai Lun, who moved here from Hong Kong in 1995 when he was 51, just two years before the former British colony returned to Chinese rule.

Law, who graduated from the Beijing Central Music Conservatory in piano and music theory, was then teaching students privately at his Housing Board flat in Tampines. He was introduced to Yeh by recording company Hugo's boss and SCO board member Aik Yew Goh.

Law's first composition for SCO was the symphony poem, *Prince Sang Nila Utama and Singa*, which premiered in the concert, *A Nanyang Musical Voyage*, at the Esplanade Concert Hall in 2004. The concert featured mostly Malay music, songs and dances.

The piece was inspired by the legend of Singapura, which tells the story of the founding of Singapore by a prince from a neighbouring sultanate and how it got its name which means lion city. Law said it took several months of research work, including a visit to the towering Merlion statue in Sentosa.

Next was another symphonic piece, a five-part work for Chinese orchestration, *The Celestial Web*, based on a modern 117-verse poem by artist Tan Swie Hian which expounds the noble philosophical insights of universal love, among other things. It was written for SCO's opening performance at the Singapore Arts Festival in 2003.

This was followed by an even larger-scale symphonic fantasy epic, *Zheng He: Admiral of the Seven Seas*, also in five parts and commissioned by SCO for the same Singapore arts festival two years later in 2005. It was more than a Chinese orchestral musical as it delved into Chinese and South-east Asian history. It was also composed in conjunction with the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ming dynasty admiral's voyages to South-east Asia and the West with 280 ships and some 28,000 men.

Law's more recent contribution was the symphonic poem, *Hong San See*, for the concert, *Tunes of Min Nan*, in 2014. It tells the story of Singapore's early immigrants from China, especially those from the southern Fujian province, and how they founded the Hong San See Temple which they built on Mohamed Sultan Road more than 110 years ago as an important place to trace their heritage and history. It

represents the toil of Singapore's ancestors and the music pays tribute to the hard work of Singapore's early settlers.

He also wrote the music with his nephew Lincoln Lo in Hong Kong for *Ruan Lingyu's The Goddess*, a silent movie which premiered at the Esplanade Concert Hall in 2014.

Maestro Yeh's venture into Nanyang repertoire began with the 2004 concert, *A Nanyang Musical Voyage*. Since then he has been commissioning local composers to write pieces about the life and history in Singapore and the region.

Law, who became SCO's first composer-in-residence in 2012, noted that the process of creating a truly Nanyang repertoire would take years by composers of different



Chinese opera artistes Chen Juanjuan (*left*) and Chen Jiangfeng in *Tunes of Min Nan* concert in November 2014.

generations. “SCO’s music will be different from the other Chinese orchestras and truly Singaporean which every one here can relate to and appreciate,” he said.

As maestro Yeh put it, commissioning new works was like throwing pebbles into a pond, and then waiting for reactions in the water to appear, but that was not enough.

To enlarge its Nanyang repertoire, he launched the first SCO International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Compositions in 2006, which emphasised works with strong Nanyang elements or flavour.

But what really is Nanyang flavour? Yeh said many people had asked him and his reply was that it could be anything on the people, their stories and events, both past and present, in South-east Asia.

The first prize for the inaugural competition went to Singapore-based British composer Eric Watson, then 60, for his work, *Tapestries: Time Dances*, inspired by the rich colours of inter-weaving threads he found in tapestries representing diversity in the multi-racial, multi-language and multi-culture society in Singapore and South-east Asia.

Malaysians Simon Kong and Yii Kah Hoe won the second and third prize awards with their respective compositions *Ispirazione II*, a three-movement piece on three tropical fruits, and *Buka Panggung*, meaning the opening of the stage. Law took the Nanyang Award with his symphonic fantasy epic, *Zheng He: Admiral of the Seven Seas*, written in 2005.

Two more editions of the competition, in 2011 and



Eric Watson was the first prize winner of SCO’s inaugural International music competition in 2006 with his work, *Tapestries: Time Dances*.

2015, were held attracting entries by composers from as far as Hong Kong and China. Yeh’s efforts to inspire more Nanyang-style compositions received a big boost from prime minister and SCO patron Lee Hsien Loong when he made a personal donation of \$750,000 in 2011.

Watson received his musical training at the Trinity College in London majoring in the piano, violin, composition and conducting before he moved to Singapore in 1990. He started to write music and do orchestration work for SCO from Western musical pieces after winning the 2006 competition.



Actor Lim Kay Tong, narrating in the symphonic poem, *Independent Note*, comprising Singapore founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's quotable quotes at the SCO concert, *Towards the Future*, at the Esplanade Concert Hall in July 2015.

His first commissioned work for SCO was *Mahjong Kakis* which premiered in 2007. The piece was all about the popular game Chinese played every where, and if one listened carefully, the shuffling of tiles and conversations among the players could be heard.

Watson's more significant piece of work for the SCO was perhaps the symphonic poem, *Independent Note*, which premiered at the orchestra's concert at the Esplanade Concert Hall in July 2015 to mark Singapore's Golden Jubilee year.

The piece written for orchestra and narration was a musical tribute to Singapore's founding prime minister Lee

Kuan Yew who died earlier in March of the same year, aged 91. It comprised 21 quotable quotes from the Singapore leader's famous speeches over 50 years which were read out by actor Lim Kay Tong.

Yeh explained that the commission was inspired by American composer Aaron Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*, a 1942 work featuring speeches by 19<sup>th</sup> century American president Abraham Lincoln. "If there is already such a work for a famous American president, I thought there should be one for an outstanding Asian statesman too, and that person should be none other than Lee Kuan Yew," he said.

A more recent work by Watson was his orchestration for Singapore composer Dick Lee's musical, *The Journey of Lee Kan*, first performed by SCO at its concert of mainly Peranakan-inspired music, *The Nyonya Journey*, at the Singapore Conference Hall in November 2016. The work tells the story of Dick Lee's ancestor from Yongchun in Fujian province, China, who came to Malacca to work in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Watson, whose wife is a Singaporean Methodist church pastor, said Yeh's efforts in creating more Nanyang-style music would expand SCO's repertoire making it different from other Chinese orchestras and uniquely Singaporean.

"People in Singapore who come to listen to the orchestra can now relate to it better because the music is about themselves, their culture and history," he commented.

Besides Law and Watson, another key Singapore

The *Nyonya Journey*, SCO's concert of mainly Peranakan-inspired music, including Dick Lee's musical about his ancestor's history, was held at the Singapore Conference Hall in November 2016.





Phoon Yew Tien, a former conductor-in-residence with SCO has composed, re-orchestrated many Nanyang-flavour and East-West fusion pieces.

composer supporting SCO's Nanyang efforts is Phoon Yew Tien, a former PA Chinese Orchestra musician-turned composer. His Nanyang-inspired works for SCO included *Village Pasir Panjang* which premiered in 2005 and *Reminiscence of March* written for the Singapore Festival of Arts in 1999. He is also credited for working on numerous orchestration for crossover acts when SCO adapted Western musical pieces.

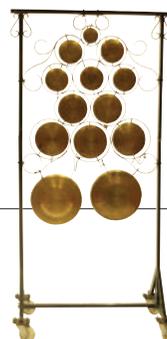
To increase his pool of composers of Nanyang music, Yeh has been conducting seminars and workshops after each international music competition since 2006. He would follow up by leading field trips with winners and other interested composers to the neighbouring countries and China.

To inspire and provide more material for the composers, Yeh had led teams of between six and eight participants to heritage sites in Singapore, Kuching in Sarawak, Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, Malacca, several Indonesian cities and towns and southern China.

One participant who went with Yeh and other composers to Malacca in 2014 was Singapore-based Malaysian composer Chong Kee Yong. He came up with *Celebration of Faith*, a piece based on a Peranakan festive event which premiered in the SCO concert, *The Nyonya Journey*, in November 2016.

“SCO has a unique repertoire, perhaps the only in the world and I am glad to be given the opportunity to write such genre of music on South-east Asia culture and history,” said Chong, who graduated with a doctorate in music from Huddersfield University in the United Kingdom.

What's next for the maestro? Suffice it to say that Yeh is continuing to work on musical ideas that will capture the Singapore Dream and reflect the ideas that inspire a nation and the values that Singaporeans share. Could we expect music on legendary Chinese pioneers such as Tan Kah Kee? Watch the space in the SCO website.



**TEN-FACED GONG**  
*Percussion Instrument*

{CHAPTER 5}

# East-West fusion and all that jazz







Chris Brubeck said only in Singapore could he “jam” with a Chinese orchestra.

**B**RAVO—“A never-before attempted alchemy of American jazz and blues with Chinese orchestral music.”

That’s a newspaper reader’s rave review of the SCO performance with the renowned American jazz trio Triple Play in a two-night concert at the Singapore Conference Hall in August 2007. The trio featured Chris Brubeck, the ever-versatile jazzman son of legendary jazz pianist Dave Brubeck.

Dora Yip wrote that she felt immensely proud of SCO and her country when Chris, who played the bass guitar and trombone, exclaimed to the audience during the encore that it was only in Singapore that he could “jam” with an orchestra, let alone a Chinese orchestra.

Congratulating the orchestra for its “out-of-the-box vision” in her letter published in *The Straits Times* on August



Jazz pianist and composer Jeremy Monteiro (*on the keyboard*) started performing with SCO and Yeh Tsung since 2009.

21, she described how various soloists stepped up to the fore to “jam” with the jazz trio—from a master guan player who performed like a top saxophonist to a young erhu player who sportingly played an impromptu solo at the second encore.

“I was very reassured that creativity, spontaneity and originality are very much alive and kicking in the Singapore arts scene,” she penned.



**GUANZI**  
*Wind Instrument*

What she found truly inspiring was when she heard Dave Brubeck Quartet's *Take Five*, one of the most innovative and defining jazz pieces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being played by the trio and adapted for the Chinese orchestra by Singapore composer Law Wai Lun. It was taken to entirely new musical possibilities through the collaboration with classical Chinese music, she commented.

Such audience reaction was music to the ears of maestro Yeh Tsung since he introduced East-West fusion concerts and crossover acts by adapting Western music for the Chinese orchestra after he took over as SCO music director in 2002.

The American jazzmen's performances proved to be a big hit with the local audience. By popular demand, the trio returned in June 2009, and again in August 2014 when they played to a full house as the Brubeck Brothers Quartet at a gala concert titled *Return of the Brubeck*.

Indeed jazz music has blended so well with the Chinese orchestra that Yeh started engaging Singapore's prominent jazz pianist and composer Jeremy Monteiro and his regular jazz drummer Tama Goh to perform with SCO since 2009.

Jeremy's performance of Singapore composer Kelly Tang's *Montage: Three Movements for Jazz, Piano and Chinese Orchestra*, is now a signature piece with the SCO. In 2014, the Cultural Medallion recipient and Tama reprised the piece when they toured Shanghai, Nanjing and Suzhou with the SCO. It vowed the Chinese audience who heard the mixture of jazz and Chinese instrumental music for the first time.

"I enjoyed playing with the Chinese orchestra and I think we can work together more often," said Jeremy who played the same piece with the SCO in Kuala Lumpur in 2015.

Besides developing the unique Nanyang-flavour music, Yeh began experimenting with various genres. Western classical repertoire was adapted for Chinese orchestra with help from Singapore composers as early as 2003. In that year's season-opener, he conducted Alexander Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances* and Isaac Albeniz's *Tango*. They were followed by others, one of which was Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, a popular American musical, which met with initial resistance from the more conservative audience.

One vocal critic who cautioned SCO against going overboard in such experiments was orchestra board member Choo Thiam Siew. He maintained that a Chinese orchestra will never sound the same as a Western symphony orchestra and that Chinese music instruments such as the erhu can never replace the violin.

He believed that adaption or orchestration of a Western piece of music for the Chinese orchestra could sound like "painting a Western artwork in oil using a Chinese brush".

Instead he wanted the orchestra to bring out the unique features of its instruments such as the ruan and guzheng, which were often drowned out in the more contemporary and East-West fusion works.

Maestro Yeh, however, took the view that SCO's forays into new territories with East-West fusion concerts was "to break new grounds for the Chinese orchestra". "It will benefit



Child flute prodigy Nikolai Song (*left*), playing opposite SCO dizi musician Zeng Zhi in the concert, Casual Classics, with Yeh Tsung conducting in April 2014.

the musicians at least,” he explained, although such music genre-adaptation meant he needed to change the ways his musicians look at orchestral balance, musical idioms and Western art as opposed to Chinese aesthetics.

He also thought they presented great opportunities to train musicians’ playing techniques. As a result, their standard of play would be raised as he had shown successfully with SCO musicians over the years.

SCO guan player Han Lei, who plays the thousand-year-old Chinese instrument in the same style as a saxophone, imitating the sound and all, when he “jammed” with jazz musicians, agreed. “It is a challenge always in such

crossover acts. It means I have to study and understand the two instruments really well, especially the guan, to push the limits of its capabilities to the fullest.”

Han, a Shanghaiese, graduated from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing before joining the SCO in 2005. He noted that his brief experience playing the keyboard with a jazz band in Shanghai came in useful when he was asked to play the guan alongside the piano, guitar and trombone.

“As jazz music requires spontaneity from musicians, it allows free expression, and that I can also do with my guan,” he said.

SCO concert master Li Baoshun, who was among the first batch of musicians from China to join SCO in 1997, acknowledged the difficulties in playing Western pieces with Chinese instruments as they sound different from those in the symphony orchestra.

“The musical language of the pieces is rooted in Western culture, so we have to try very hard to adapt our instruments to the change. Similarly, if Western music instruments were to be used to play traditional Chinese music, they would face the same problems too,” he said.

He noted that Chinese orchestras in China started

playing Western music several years ago, but none played so often as SCO. “I am happy that SCO musicians are willing to accept the challenge to adapt and change and present something new and interesting in our East-West fusion concerts,” he added.

Yeh stressed that picking the right work to play was crucial. For example, he chose Russian composer Borodin’s *Polovtsian Dances* in the beginning because it already had a very oriental blend of sound that went well with the Chinese orchestra.

Regular concert-goers would have heard American



American singers Kimberly Eileen Jones (*left*) and Lawrence Mitchell-Matthews performing with SCO with Yeh Tsung conducting at the Mostly Gershwin concert in July 2013.



Celtic violinist Christopher Stout playing with SCO's ruan ensemble with Yeh Tsung conducting at the concert, *Flavours of Scotland—Go Celtic LIVE!* on March 29, 2008.

evergreens such as *Rhapsody in Blue* adapted for SCO by local composer Phoon Yew Tien, and *Strike Up The Band* adapted for the orchestra by British-born composer Eric Watson.

The maestro was probably thinking in the same vein when he staged yet another memorable crossover act—a mostly Gershwin concert at the Esplanade Concert Hall in July 2013.

In Yeh's view, Gershwin's melodies are even better choices for a Chinese orchestra because both styles are

rooted in folk music. As he pointed out, melodies for Gershwin's 1935 musical, *Porgy and Bess Suite*, for example, were written for folk instruments such as the banjo which is not part of the normal Western symphony orchestra, but which are very similar to the sanxian, a three-string plucked instrument or even the four-string pipa.

International soloists invited to play with SCO included Scottish percussionist Evelyn Glennie, Celtic violinist Christopher Stout, American violinists Mark O' Conner and Grammy-award winner Joshua Bell. Many Western music

pieces adapted for the Chinese orchestra were written by Phoon, Watson and Law Wai Lun.

In the 2016 Homecoming concert with SCO in June, Singapore-born pianist Melvyn Tan, who is now residing in Britain, played French composer Maurice Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G Major* with the Chinese orchestra for the first time. It was adapted by Law.

Speaking to the media before the concert, Tan said it was the perfect piece to play with a Chinese orchestra. "This particular piece of Ravel lends itself very well to the arrangement of the orchestral part for Chinese instruments, as the language of the music is actually quite Eastern, combining Chinese and other Asian elements which Ravel loved, and also incorporates jazz, that other love of his," he explained.

Law admitted that the adaptation was not an easy task.

"The sounds of instruments in a Western symphony orchestra are very different from those of a Chinese orchestra. We can only try our best to make them sound right and good, if not even better," he said.

He felt that as Singapore composers were doing better in such works, SCO should do more of such East-West fusion concerts to elevate the Chinese orchestra to the international level. "The Western symphony orchestra is accepted internationally because it can play all genres of music, including Chinese music, well. And Chinese orchestras must also be able to do the same," he argued.

In its other concert series, SCO has performed with various dialect operas and music. They included Hokkien Classics in 2010, Hakka music and songs in 2012, Teochew and Peking operas in 2013, and a Hokkien opera in 2014.



K-pop music at SCO's Korea, New Waves concert in September 2016.



China-born Singaporean Peking opera artiste Tian Ping singing with SCO at the Peking Opera Extravaganza concert in June 2013.



Comedian-singer Marcus Chin singing in *Rhapsodies of Spring* Chinese New Year concert in January 2015.



Hong Kong superstar Liza Wang at SCO's Mother's Day concert in May 2007.

Law agreed that it was easier to write music for Chinese operas to be sung with the Chinese orchestra. "In operas, they needed only a few instruments, and singing with the orchestra only means adding more instruments to make them sound even better," he said.

The two nights of Peking Opera Extravaganza concert in June 2013 featuring top artistes from China including hualian actor Meng Guanglu and Tianjin-born Singaporean laodan actress Tian Ping were the most successful, playing to full houses for both shows.

Tian Ping performed with the SCO again in September 2016 at its concert titled *Korea, New Waves*, singing the Chinese opera section in a Korean composition about ghosts. "Singing opera songs with the orchestra will not only attract audiences to the concert hall but will also help to promote Chinese operas. It is a win-win for both the Chinese orchestra and opera," she said.

SCO also puts up special concerts for different groups of audience such as its Mother's Day concerts which started

in 2004. Many international stars invited here to perform for the older folk included Frances Yip, Adam Cheng, Liza Wang from Hong Kong and others from Taiwan. Also gracing the stage were popular local artistes such as Sebastian Tan.

Since 2008, its Chinese New Year concert, *Rhapsodies of Spring*, led by Singapore comedian-singer and radio DJ Marcus Chin has proved to be a big hit. To accommodate the increasing turn-out each year, the venue has been upgraded to the Star Theatre at Buona Vista.

The diversity of SCO concerts whose range extends to Malay, Indian and Japanese music and songs has attracted a wide following. One ardent fan is founding NAC chairman and Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh.

SCO is unique in its ability to reach out to and engage with other genres of music, he said. He made it a point to attend SCO concerts which were bi-cultural in nature. "I remember attending with great pleasure when the SCO performed with some musicians from Japan, Korea and other South-east Asian countries. All these concerts were



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春花齐放2013  
Rhapsodies of Spring

UFM 100.3

SCS

新加坡华乐团

金蛇曼舞吉祥春

亥



Yeh Tsung conducting the Chinese New Year concert, *Rhapsodies of Spring*, featuring local radio DJs and artistes in 2013.

not only successful musically, but more importantly they brought people together.

“Music unites people, music can cross many boundaries, boundaries of language, culture, religion and I think SCO has performed this superbly.”

Expounding on SCO’s mission of catering to every one, maestro Yeh said that because of its progressive formation, he always believed that the Chinese orchestra has a large capacity that goes way beyond traditional Chinese music.

“SCO must search and gradually create a strong Singapore character. Its repertoire now is like a cultural “rojak” —on one side, we have silk and bamboo music and Peking opera type from the traditional Chinese repertoire; on the other side, we launch jazz, swing, Celtic, and gypsy music to reflect the colourful Western influences on Singapore. In the middle, we play our own unique Nanyang music to showcase our identity.”

His pledge remains the same as it was on his first day with SCO: “It is my belief that we must serve people beyond race and language. Our music should be for every one in Singapore.”



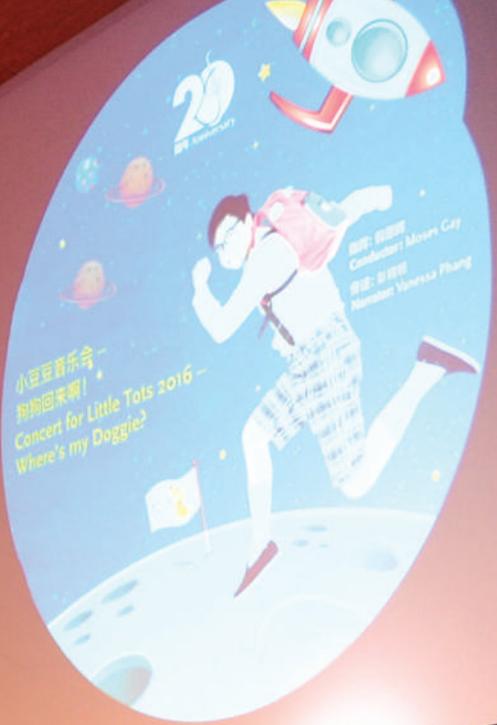
#### **SANXIAN**

*Plucked String Instrument*

{CHAPTER 6}

# Inspiring the young, reaching out to all







Resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong is well-known for his children's concerts, and those for young people.

ONE morning in March 2016, after a concert at Punggol Secondary School, SCO resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong received a slip of paper with the name and mobile number of a Secondary 3 student.

It was a request from a 15-year old student, Yanni Wee, who wanted to meet him at the end of the concert for schools titled *Tunes of SCO* under an arts education programme.

But Quek, who was leading a 45-strong SCO group, had already left the school. The name did not ring a bell but when he called the student two days later and was shown photos via the boy's mobile phone, the past came to life.

The photos were of a four-or five-year old boy at the annual SCO children's concerts he started and conducted more than a decade ago. "I cannot forget those big eyes,



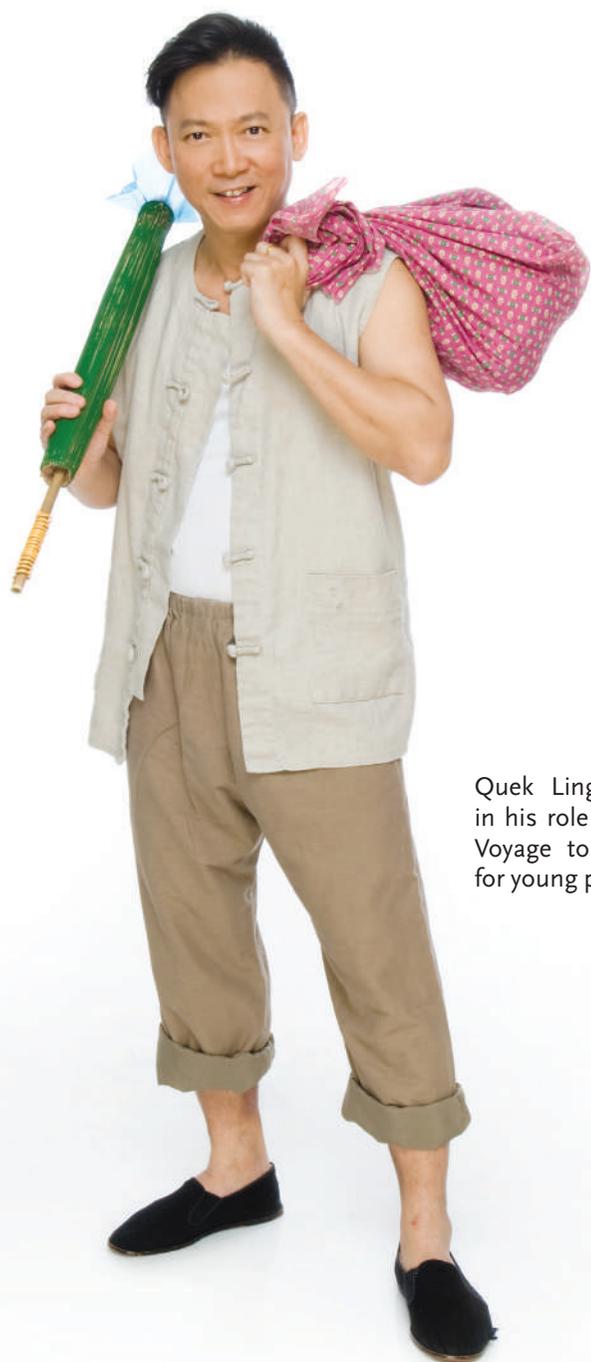
SCO Moses Gay conducting the SCO at Marsiling Primary School on August 6, 2014, in its programme for schools.

and remember his parents would usually stay back after a concert to talk to me about their son,” recalled Quek.

He was surprised that the teenager could remember him after so many years. But what really gladdened Quek while talking to the student again was to know that Yanni was studying the piano and preparing for his Grade 7 practical examination.



**YANGQIN**  
*Plucked String Instrument*



Quek Ling Kiong dressed in his role as Ah De, in the Voyage to Nanyang series for young people since 2013.

Yanni, who also plays the guitar and attends SCO performances regularly, told the writer that the concerts he experienced as a child had exerted a great influence on him and that was why he wanted to meet Quek again to say “thank you” for introducing him to the world of music.

“I hope to be a musician one day but I realise it is not going to be easy,” admitted the son of a Land Transport Authority engineer and a home-maker.

A few years ago at the end of another concert series for young people, a Russian woman came up to him to request a yangqin teacher for her daughter. “I recommended SCO yangqin principal Qu Jianqing right away,” he said.

These were some of the moments which stuck in his memory as he recollected the concerts for the young which he started and developed into family concerts and later musicals. They were meant to provide opportunities for parents to find out more about Chinese instrumental music and the instruments that might interest their children.

“Parents often ask me whether their kids should take up the erhu or guzheng and where they can go to learn them,” said Quek who was only too pleased to help and respond to email inquiries after the concerts.

The two series of annual concerts for children and young people and the encounters with parents and children have more than convinced Quek of the importance of the schools’ education programmes which SCO carried out in collaboration with the NAC soon after its formation in 1996.



Quek's Little Adventurer of SCO series for children, in which he plays Dr Quek, has been very popular since it began in 2011.

The orchestra visits up to 10 primary and secondary schools a year to give hour-long educational concerts. In addition to introducing the different sounds of the Chinese instruments, it would often play its signature pieces from its Nanyang repertoire written by local composers such as

Law Wai Lun's *Prince Sang Nila Utma and Singa* and Eric Watson's *Mahjong Kakis*.

SCO assistant conductor Moses Gay now shares the job of planning the programmes and conducting concerts in the schools with Quek.

In almost 20 years, the orchestra would have played in hundreds of schools with many requesting repeat performances. The schools pay the orchestra for the concerts with subsidies from the government.

Separately, the orchestra makes occasional appearances at tertiary institutions, polytechnics and art schools such as the School of the Arts (Sota) and Nafa, usually sharing the stage with student musicians.

In 2014, SCO started a music training programme for youth with special needs at Pathlight School, Singapore's first school for autistic students, with the support of Deutsche Bank. Two SCO musicians, a percussionist and wind instrumentalist, visit Pathlight weekly to teach the

students drums and the flute. A year later the programme was extended to another special needs school, Rainbow Centre.

SCO dizi player Tan Chye Tiong admitted that it was very challenging to teach the Chinese flute to Pathlight students. "But it is very meaningful because otherwise they may not get the chance to play Chinese instruments at all."

According to Quek, the objectives of the school programmes are to reach out to as many students as possible, including those with special needs, and hope that with better understanding and appreciation of Chinese orchestral music, they will learn the instruments or attend its concerts.



Quek as a tourist in the Little Adventurer of SCO series started in 2011.



As trishaw rider in Voyage to Nanyang: Mesmerising Street Opera, which started in 2013.

SCO's children concerts created by Quek and staged once a year started in a simple format to introduce the Chinese orchestra and the sounds of its instruments to the young. The first was *When Mr Forte Meets Ms Piano* in 2005 followed by *The Magical Baton* in 2008.

They were developed into children's musicals by Quek and his team in The Little Adventurer of SCO series in 2011 which proved a hit with the children.

Similarly, the young people's concerts inspired by the Leonard Bernstein's series in New York began as a guide of sorts to Chinese orchestra. Its first event *Delicious Music in Life* in 2006 compared the beautiful sounds of music to enjoyment in food. Two years later its concert titled A

*Pictorial Approach* compared music with the visual arts.

The repertoire in these concerts include traditional Chinese pieces such as *Reflection of the Moon on Erquan*, Kuan Nai-chung's *Instrumental Guide to the Chinese Orchestra*, Western children's classics like Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee* as well as Singapore composers' works commissioned by SCO.

SCO even brought its young people's programmes on tour when it staged an adaptation of its 2012 concert, *Music Meteorological Station*, when the orchestra performed in the Suzhou Industrial Park during its visit to China in 2014.

But it was its Voyage to Nanyang series created in 2013, a musical with Quek playing the role of Ah De, a Chinese



He whipped up as he played with the 'animals' in the Fiesta of Animals! children's concert in 2011.



As Dr Quek in the Little Adventurer of SCO concert, Mathematics Equation in Music!. The concert series started in 2011.



Traditional puppet shows were part of the Voyage to Nanyang concert series for young people which started since 2013.

immigrant in Singapore from China which proved the most popular, playing to full houses. In it, Quek in his character role shares his experiences in discovering old street scenes, street operas and performances such as the traditional puppet shows and wayang kulit, the traditional Malay shadow plays.

The series received rave reviews with Quek being praised in one citation for his “astounding energy, enthusiasm and music knowledge which helped the young see, grow up, remember and not close the umbilical link to their heritage”.

SCO chairman Patrick Lee would often take his primary

school-going grandson Ethan and his cousin Sky to the shows. “They enjoy them very much and I think our concerts for children and young people helped to encourage them to enjoy Chinese music early and we must continue to do so,” he said.

Both the Little Adventurer of SCO series for children and the Voyage to Nanyang series for teenagers have been made into CD-book sets and DVDs respectively and are selling well.

In 2014, SCO went a step further when it launched a

new series for children as young as two, Concert for Little Tots, with the first titled *Trails of the Missing Spectacles* and a year later, *Where Is My Doggie?* Both concerts conducted by Moses Gay saw a turn-out of about 80 toddlers each, all came with their parents of course.

Still on the young, SCO with Quek as music director and conductor has been running the Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra since 2003. Comprising 100 members, aged between 11 and 26, it holds three concerts a year.

“Our youth orchestra is an excellent training ground for students who aspire to become professional musicians and join SCO, though not many take up music as a career in the end,” Quek said.

Over the years, he noted, it had already nurtured a big group of Chinese music lovers. So far, three former members of the youth orchestra have joined the ranks of SCO. They are



Patrick Lee with his grandson Ethan and Grace Leong (*left*) from the audience with SCO musicians dressed in costumes at a Voyage to Nanyang concert in November 2015.

Moses Gay as the character Momo in Concert for Little Tots.



suona associate principal Chang Le, zhongruan associate principal Lo Chai Xia and zhongruan player Koh Min Hui.

Other outstanding young musicians from the orchestra include teenager Megan Tan, who plays the medium-sized zhongruan and won the top prize in the junior, youth and open categories of the instrument at the National Music Competition in 2008, 2012 and 2014 respectively.

Since 1997, the SCO has been staging free community concerts in public parks and the heartlands. They are organised by SCO Education and Outreach team helmed by its two conductors Quek and Gay and assisted by manager Chin Woon Ying.

Each year the orchestra gives four free concerts at the parks, mainly at the Botanic Gardens and Gardens by the Bay, and at least six in the heartlands in collaboration with grassroots groups and other arts groups from the community. They are supported by Singapore Press Holdings as part of its Gift of Music series to contribute towards more gracious



LIVE IT REAL  
THE COLLEGE OF LIBERAL AND ARTS



SCO performing at a special concert in conjunction with Singapore Jubilee year at Botanic Gardens on May 30, 2015.



SCO performing at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital under its Caring series of outreach performances in 2016.

living in Singapore.

For working adults in the Central Business District, it holds the occasional lunch-time concert at its concert hall at Shenton Way as well as at open spaces at One Raffles Quay. Sponsored by Deutsche Bank since 2012, this series was started in 1998.

In 2004 after the outbreak of the Sars epidemic, groups of SCO musicians visited public and community hospitals to bring Chinese music and cheer to patients. Under its Caring series of outreach performances, they go to up to seven hospitals each year.

Quek said the long-term vision of SCO Education and Outreach team was to inspire people of different education and social backgrounds with its music. “We hope to reach out to all so that every Singaporean will have the chance to listen to us at least once in their lifetime.”

What gratified him immensely was that 70 per cent of



The SYCO led by its conductor Quek Ling Kiong at the concert tour in Hsinchu, Taiwan in 2013.

SCO's performances a year were presented by the team, forming a substantial and important part of the orchestra's programmes.

Certainly Quek, who is in his 40s, has played a prominent

role in Singapore's musical development nurturing the younger musicians and cultivating a younger audience. He was a recipient of the Singapore Young Artist Award in 2002 and the Cultural Fellowship in 2013, both from NAC.

Apart from his current duties at SCO, Quek teaches music and conducting at several art schools, including Sota, Nafa and LaSalle College of the Arts.

The son of a mechanic and home-maker mother started playing various Chinese instruments when he was in primary school and picked up the drum when he entered secondary school.

After graduating from Ngee Ann Polytechnic with a diploma in business studies in 1987, he worked for a few years as an administrator with a private music school before he decided to pursue a music career. He went to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music to study percussion from 1994 to 1996 under an NAC scholarship and was taught by some of the best teachers such as Li Minxiong, Xue Baolun and Li Zhengui. He joined SCO as a percussionist principal soon after his return from China.

He moved to conducting with encouragement from SCO music director Yeh Tsung after a year of advanced studies and workshops in Europe, where he obtained a diploma from the Zurich University of the Arts under another NAC scholarship in 2007.

He was promoted from assistant conductor to associate conductor in 2008 and became resident conductor in 2013. He also took over from maestro Yeh as music director of the Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra in January 2016.

In February 2016 he took the children's musical—*The Little Adventurer of SCO*—to Hong Kong at the invitation of the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra and later in June to



Quek Ling Kiong with his young SYCO members in a candid shot.

Jilin in Heilongjiang, China, at the invitation of the provincial Chinese orchestra there in conjunction with the Children's Day celebrations.

"I am happy that my children's concert series, a Singapore brand name, has now gone overseas," he said. Expect him to travel with the series more often as requests from Chinese orchestras have started flowing in.



**DIZI**  
Wind Instrument

{CHAPTER 7}

# Meet the music makers







SCO youngest member, Yuan Qi, came from Xuzhou in Jiangsu province, China.

**E**VER wonder who the youngest musician of the 85-strong Singapore Chinese Orchestra is?

Well, the next time you attend a SCO concert, look out for a slim and petite girl playing the higher pitch gaohu usually seated at the corner of the fourth row on the extreme left of the stage just behind the double bass players and facing the audience.

At 25 in the year SCO celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Yuan Qi from Xuzhou in Jiangsu province, China, enjoyed the distinction of being the youngest of the orchestra's 14 twentysomethings recruited mainly from China.

Having settled down in Singapore for the past three years, she said she was now “enjoying every bit of her life here” with her own circle of friends and Sunday church attendances.

Her Singapore story began when she applied to be a SCO musician in early 2013, just months before her graduation from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China's most prestigious music school.

While her fellow graduates were seeking to join Chinese orchestras in China, Hong Kong and Macau, Yuan chose SCO because she felt that it stood out from the rest.

"I heard SCO's recordings in school and they left me with a deep impression, particularly its varied styles which sounded very innovative and modern. The orchestra's rich and interesting East-meet-West repertoire and other music genres offer a good variety. It is just like Singapore, very multi-national," she said.

After an audition here, she joined the orchestra in September and became its youngest musician at 22. Graduating with a bachelor's degree in erhu performance, she continued her studies with the same conservatory through long-distance study and obtained her master's degree in May 2016.

Yuan's passion for music was ignited in her childhood while attending primary school and the Youth Palace, an education and activity centre for young people commonly found in Chinese cities or towns. When the only child was seven, she was asked by her parents—a lawyer and company executive—to pick the instrument to play, she chose the erhu without hesitation. "That's the instrument I knew best and I have always liked how it sounds," she said.

Excelling in the instrument, she started to win

competition after competition in primary school and was talent-spotted by her teachers for admission to the secondary school attached to the Tianjin Conservatory of Music. There she made her concert debut as a soloist in 2008 at 17 before entering the famed conservatory in Beijing.

Being the youngest member of the orchestra has its advantages, she admitted. "You have lots more to learn from the more senior members who share their experiences readily with you."

The twentysomething group lowered the average age of the orchestra's 82 musicians—minus the three conductors—to 42. Those a year older than Yuan include Tan Manman, an erhu player; Li Yuan, a zhonghu player and Li Yulong, who plays the gaohu like Yuan.

Apart from the Chinese nationals, two Taiwanese, erhu player Hsieh I-chieh and cellist Huang Ting-yu, together with sheng player Kevin Cheng from Hong Kong, are the other foreigners in this youth group.

The only two Singapore-born members are zhongruan player Koh Min Hui, who joined the orchestra in 2011 when she was 21, and cellist Eddie Sim who came in 2014 when he was 25.



**GAOHU**

*Bowed String Instrument*



#### THE 20-SOMETHINGS:

**FIRST COLUMN** (from top): Hsieh I-chieh, Lin Gao and Kevin Cheng Ho Kwan.

**SECOND COLUMN** (from top): Tan Manman, Li Yulong, Chang Le and Qin Zijing.

**THIRD COLUMN** (from top): Huang Ting-yu, Wu Kefei and Li Yuan.

Four from the group are already assuming leadership roles. Chinese national Lin Gao is the zhonghu principal player, and another Chinese Wu Kefei, is his deputy in the same section as the associate principal player. China-born Chang Le, who grew up in Singapore, is the suona associate principal while Lo Chai Xia, a Malaysian-turned-Singaporean, is the orchestra's zhongruan associate principal player.

In all, 50 of the 82 SCO musicians are Singaporeans, 26 of them local-born while the rest, 24 of them, naturalised citizens—all from China except for one Malaysia-born. The remaining 32 musicians are either permanent residents or work pass holders from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The gender ratio: 44 men and 38 women.

The orchestra's oldest members are zhonghu player Sim Boon Yew, and erhu player Chew Keng How, both Singapore-born who turned 62 in 2016. They are among the 12 older musicians from the former PA Chinese Orchestra absorbed into the SCO 20 years ago.

Sim, who has spent more than 40 years playing professionally in a Chinese orchestra, said: "I am doing it out of passion but I will retire by the end of 2017 to give way to new blood in the orchestra. But I will continue to teach students from school orchestras."

He has witnessed SCO's growth from a semi-professional group in PA to a world-class orchestra today. "I am very proud to have played in the orchestra in the past 20 years," said Sim, who is also honorary music director of Keat Hong Chinese Orchestra.

One interesting fact about the SCO musicians is that there are eight married couples among them. It could have been nine if pipa principal Yu Jia's husband Wong Sun Tat had not left the orchestra to join Nafa to head its Chinese music department in 2011.

Many met their spouses after they joined the orchestra, with the exception of sanxian player Huang Guifang from the pioneer batch of SCO musicians who came from China in 1997. Her cellist husband, Ji Huiming, joined the orchestra two years after her in 1999. Their daughter, who was brought up in Singapore, is in her 20s and working as a marketing executive.

Both the wives of erhu principals Zhao Jianhua and Zhu Lin are Taiwanese who perform in the orchestra. Like Zhao, his wife Chen Shu-hua, plays the erhu. Zhu's wife, Wang Yi-jen, plays the zhonghu.

Zhu married Wang in 1999. Remarking that their son and daughter were born in Singapore, Zhu said: "We like working and living here especially for our children because Singapore is clean and safe and the education system is suitable for them."

The other married couples are percussionist Wu Xiangyang and gaohu associate principal Zhou Ruoyu;



**LOCAL MUSIC SCHOOL RECRUITS:**

*(First row, from left) Tang Jia, Wang Luyao and Sim Lian Kiat Eddie.  
(Second row, from left) Lo Chai Xia and Koh Min Hui. (Top) Moses Gay.*



新加坡華樂團音樂廳



DEWAN PERSIDANGAN SINGAPURA





ALL THE  
SCO MUSICIANS

**FIRST ROW** (from left): **Ling Hock Siang** (Erhu Associate Principal), **Guo Changsuo** (Sheng Principal), **Zhang Ronghui** (Ruan Principal), **Qu Jianqing** (Yangqin Principal), **Zhu Lin** (Erhu II Principal), **Yin Zhiyang** (Dizi Principal), **Li Baoshun** (Concertmaster), **Quek Ling Kiong** (Resident Conductor), **Tsung Yeh** (Music Director), **Moses Gay** (Assistant Conductor), **Zhao Jianhua** (Erhu I Principal), **Yu Jia** (Pipa Principal), **Xu Zhong** (Cello Principal), **Zhang Hao** (Double Bass Principal), **Tang Jia** (Cello Associate Principal), **Tan Loke Chuah** (Percussion Associate Principal), **Duan Fei** (Percussion Associate Principal), **Lin Gao** (Zhonghu Principal)

**SECOND ROW** (from left): **Huang Guifang** (Sanxian / Zhongruan), **Koh Min Hui** (Zhongruan), **Han Ying** (Zhongruan), **Ma Huan** (Yangqin), **Qin Zijing** (Erhu), **Tan Manman** (Erhu), **She Ling** (GaoHu), **Lo Chai Xia** (Ruan Associate Principal), **Jin Shiyi** (Suona / Guan Principal), **Wu Kefei** (Zhonghu Associate Principal), **Chang Le** (Suona Associate Principal), **Xu Hui** (Guzheng /w Percussion), **Ann Hong Mui** (Erhu), **Tan Joon Chin** (Pipa), **Koh Kim Wah** (Daruan), **Poh Yee Luh** (Cello), **Goh Yew Guan** (Pipa), **Kevin Cheng Ho Kwan** (Zhongyin Sheng)  
**THIRD ROW** (from left): **Shen Qin** (Erhu), **Li Yuan** (Zhonghu), **Wang Yi-je** (Zhonghu), **Zhang Bin** (Erhu), **Chew Keng How** (Erhu), **Liu Zhiyue** (GaoHu), **Li Yulong** (GaoHu), **Seetoh Poh Lam** (Liuqin), **Cheng Tzu Ting** (Zhongruan), **Chen Yingguang Helen** (Cello), **Zhao Li** (GaoHu), **Sim Lian Kiat**

**Eddie** (Cello), **Huang Ting-yu** (Cello), **Foong Chui San** (Zhongruan), **Wang Luyao** (Double Bass), **Xu Wenjing** (GaoHu), **Jing Po** (Daruan / Zhongruan), **Zhang Li** (Liuqin / Zhongruan)  
**FOURTH ROW** (from left): **Chen Shuhua** (Erhu), **Ma Xiaolan** (Harp / Konghou / Guzheng), **Tao Kaili** (Erhu / Banhu), **Hsieh I-chieh** (Erhu), **Ong Yi Horng** (Gaoyin Sheng), **Lim Kiong Pin** (Diyin Sheng), **Tan Chye Tiong** (Xindi), **Lim Sin Yeo** (Bangdi), **Phang Thean Siong** (Xindi / Qudi), **Lee Khiang** (Double Bass), **Qu Feng** (Double Bass), **Neo Yong Soon Wilson** (Zhonghu), **Goh Cher Yen** (Zhonghu), **Ngoh Kheng Seng** (Percussion), **Wu Xiangyang** (Percussion), **Shen Guoqin** (Percussion), **Yuan Qi** (GaoHu), **Zhang Yin** (Pipa)

**FIFTH ROW** (from left): **Ji Huiming** (Cello), **Boo Chin Kiah** (Cizhongyin Suona), **Han Lei** (Guan), **Zeng Zhi** (Bangdi / Qudi), **Zhong Zhiyue** (Zhongyin Sheng), **Meng Jie** (Zhongyin Suona), **Liu Jiang** (Diyin Suona), **Sim Boon Yew** (Zhonghu), **Xu Fan** (Percussion), **Teo Teng Tat** (Percussion), **Cheng Chung Hsien** (Erhu), **Lee Heng Quee** (Zhongyin Suona)  
**NOT IN THE PHOTO:** **Zhou Ruoyu** (GaoHu Associate Principal)



Stephanie Ow playing the erhu at the Dream Beyond concert in 2014.

suona player Meng Jie and erhu player Qin Zijing who is among the 20-somethings; cello principal Xu Zhong and liuqin player Zhang Li; sheng player Zhong Zhiyue and zhongruan player Han Ying.

Erhu associate principal Ling Hock Siang is the only Singapore-born in the group of married couples. She married gaohu player She Ling from China in 2015.

For many SCO musicians, it is common practice to double up as conductors or instructors for Chinese orchestras in schools, tertiary institutions and community

Percussionist Ngoh Kheng Seng (*centre with bow tie*) led Pathlight students in a drum performance at the Dream Beyond concert in 2014.



groups and even semi-professional orchestras.

Many also teach students privately. Even SCO youngest member Yuan Qi is teaching the erhu after work to students at Catholic High School, just three years after joining the orchestra.

Although they are paid for their services, nominally in some cases, they have contributed significantly to the overall development of the Chinese orchestra scene in Singapore.

Some SCO musicians volunteer their services in music programmes for youth with special needs such as the one started at Pathlight School, Singapore's first autism-focused school, in collaboration with Deutsche Bank in 2013.

Ngoh Kheng Seng teaches percussion instruments to students there twice a week. In September 2014, he led the students in the inaugural Dream Beyond Concert at the Singapore Conference Hall, an annual special concert series for youth with special needs, which also featured Stephanie Ow, an 18-year-old erhu player who is visually handicapped. The concert series is also supported by Deutsche Bank

"Though some have difficulties concentrating, I enjoyed working with the students at Pathlight, especially when they are ready to perform at our concerts," said Ngoh, who also teaches percussion to members of the NUS Chinese Orchestra.

Another volunteer is erhu associate principal Ling Hock Siang who is coaching Stephanie Ow, now studying for her diploma at Nafa under SCO's "Born to Be" Scholarship, again supported by the German bank.



Erhu associate principal Ling Hock Siang mentored Stephanie Ow who is visually-handicapped.

Ling, who joined SCO in 1996 and won the Young Artist Award in 2004, said: "I have been coaching Stephanie for several years and since she is a member of the Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra I have to prepare her whenever a concert is coming up. It is a challenge to teach her because she can't see and need to commit everything she learnt to memory. It is satisfying to see her play well on stage afterwards."

SCO zhongruan principal Zhang Ronghui has been promoting the ancient, round-shaped four-string instrument that comes in four different types and sizes in Singapore since she joined the orchestra in 1997.

Soon after she arrived, she started teaching the

instrument to primary schoolgirls. She formed the Singapore Ruan Ensemble which now has some 50 mainly student members. The ensemble has groomed some of the brightest talents in the instrument such as twin sisters Clara and Sophy Tan and put up regular performances locally and overseas. It marked its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a mega concert at the Esplanade Concert Hall in 2015.

Born in Xi'an, capital city of Shaanxi province, China, in 1972, Zhang who graduated from the Central Music Conservatory before moving to Singapore, became a Singapore citizen in 2013. She is married to an engineer who also hailed from China.

“The ruan may occupy only a tiny section in the orchestra, but I am happy it is now popular with many students of Chinese music in Singapore,” said Zhang, who is the ensemble’s music director.

Two of her students and members, Lo Chai Xia and Koh Min Hui, have become professionals now under her in the medium-sized zhongruan section at SCO, as associate principal and player respectively.

“To see my students pursue a music career, joining SCO and playing alongside with me in the orchestra is perhaps my greatest achievement and contribution to Singapore,” she said.

Another noteworthy musician is Singapore-born dizi player Tan Chye Tiong, who is also an accomplished self-taught watercolourist. Since the early 1980s, he has been staging music-cum-art shows to display both his talents. He was working as an administrator at a music school before he joined SCO as a full-time musician in 1996.

He said the two art forms, music and painting, complemented each other very well. Knowledge of Chinese



Zhang Ronghui (*fifth from left*) and her young Singapore Ruan Ensemble members, several of them winners at both local and overseas music competitions.



Dizi player Tan Chye Tiong performing at his art exhibition opening in Shanghai in June 2016.

music had actually helped him paint, especially in expressing his feelings in the works. His art training came in useful when he had to explain his feelings in music by using visual examples, he noted.

Tan, who is also a student of Shakuhachi, a traditional Japanese bamboo flute, staged his last exhibition at the Shanghai Jiaotong University in June 2016 when he showcased his watercolours and played the flute at its opening.

SCO's reliance on foreign talent may be lessening as graduates from local music schools begin to fill its ranks. In 2011 zhongruan player Koh Min Hui was recruited after she completed a Nafa-University of Wales joint bachelor's degree programme.

Joining at around the same time were cello associate principal Tang Jia and double bass player Wang Luyao, both scholars from Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at NUS.

They were followed in 2013 by two other Nafa graduates, assistant conductor Moses Gay and zhongruan associate principal Lo Chai Xia who completed joint degree programmes offered by Nafa in conjunction with British universities.

The latest local recruit was cellist Eddie Sim from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music who joined in 2014. Sim, who started learning to play the cello when he was 13, said: "It has been my dream since I was in school at Hwa Chong Institution to join the orchestra."

Indeed SCO musicians are looking forward to the infusion of local talent. Tang Jia, who came here from Qingdao, Shangdong province has a master's degree from the Tasmania Conservatory of Music before joining SCO in 2011. Now a Singaporean, she said: "SCO is a world-class orchestra and I am very proud to be a part of it. I hope to see more Singaporeans coming to join us."

SCO can be seen as a snapshot of changing Singapore society spanning from the young to the old, local to foreign. Despite the differences, they have jelled as a closely-knit group with a strong camaraderie. The next chapter will feature what it is like when they travel abroad to perform.



**RUAN**

*Plucked String Instrument*

{CHAPTER 8}

# SCO on tour: From East to West

招商銀行·深圳



# 音乐厅开幕季





Sidney Lai in the top picture as the one-year-old toddler in the film and 81 years later with Yeh Tsung at the concert in Hong Kong in 2015.

**A** SILENT black-and-white film about a single mother who turned reluctantly to prostitution to support her infant son was being screened at Tsuen Wan Town Hall Auditorium in Hong Kong—to the accompaniment of live music by SCO.

The film was the 1934 classic titled *The Goddess* starring Ruan Lingyu, an internationally-known actress from Shanghai in the 1930s who led a tragically short life. It was directed by Wu Yonggang and produced by Lianhua Studio in Shanghai.

The date was October 17, 2015 and the screening was part of a SCO concert performing music composed by Law Wai Lun from Singapore and his nephew Lincoln Lo in Hong Kong.

As the concert ended and the audience started



SCO playing live music to accompany the screening of the 1934 silent movie *The Goddess*, starring Ruan Lingyu, at the Tsuen Wan Town Hall Auditorium in 2015.

streaming out, an elderly Chinese man in a colourful striped polo shirt caused a little commotion in the auditorium when he rushed to the stage to catch the attention of maestro Yeh Tsung and his musicians.

The grey-haired man made the surprise revelation that he was the one-year old toddler featured in the film.



**BANGZI**

*Percussion Instrument*

Introducing himself as Sidney Lai, aged 82, a retired photographer, he said he was the godson of the actress, Ruan Lingyu, who killed herself after an overdose of sleeping pills, apparently over problems with her husband less than a year after the movie was made. She was only 24.

Her dramatic suicide was covered widely by the international media which reported that during her funeral procession which extended for 4.8 km, three of her die-hard woman fans killed themselves out of grief. The New York Times called it “the most spectacular funeral of the century”.

This extra-ordinary episode was just one of SCO’s many memorable encounters since it started touring in 1997.

As maestro Yeh related, Lai said he attended the concert with a group of friends after learning about the screening of the movie in which he appeared more than 80 years ago.

“My father, Lai Man Wai was a senior manager in Lianhua Studio and that was how I ended up as the baby in the film, I suppose,” he told SCO staff members and a group of Singaporeans, including journalists and a music critic who accompanied SCO on its concert tour in Hong Kong.

Lai added that his late elder brother Henry, several years his senior, also acted in the movie. He played Ruan’s son until he was about 12 in the show when he was expelled from school because of his mother’s involvement in the vice trade.

Now he spends most of his time documenting the films produced by his father’s movie company in the 1930s, hoping to publish a book or put up an exhibition some day.

Yeh said if he had known of Lai’s presence at the

concert, he would have invited him on stage to introduce himself. “I just couldn’t believe my eyes seeing the toddler in the movie having grown into an old man and was in the audience of our silent movie concert in Hong Kong. What a wonderful story!” he said.

The concert was the first of a two-night performance by SCO at the invitation of the Hong Kong government’s Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

The second night’s concert at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre on October 18 titled *Essence of Nanyang* featured more local composers’ works. The mainly Nanyang music included Eric Watson’s *Mahjong Kakis* and Malaysian Simon Kong’s *Ispirazione II—Rambutan*. The highlight was a major work commissioned by SCO played at the opening of the Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay in 2002—the symphonic poem *Marco Polo and Princess Blue* by Chinese composer Liu Yuan. SCO concert master Li Baoshun also played Chinese composer Tan Dun’s huqin concerto, *Fire Ritual*.

The concert was attended by many Singaporeans living, working and studying in the territory. After the concert, the writer met a former Singapore leftist politician and unionist Goh Boon Toh who resides in Hong Kong. He was one of the six leftists who captured the PAP central executive committee briefly in a power struggle against Lee Kuan Yew and company in August 1957. He assumed the post of the party’s assistant treasurer before he was arrested and deported to China by the colonial government. “I came because I wanted to hear the SCO play. I find the conductor



MCCY Minister Grace Fu (*standing 11<sup>th</sup> from the left*) with both Singaporean and Malaysian performers and officials at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas Concert Hall in Kuala Lumpur in December 2015.

Yeh Tsung to be very lively, and the orchestra really sounded very differently from the Chinese orchestras in mainland China and Hong Kong.”

Later in December, SCO performed at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas in Kuala Lumpur for the first time as part of the Titian Budaya Singapore Cultural Festival to mark 50 years of Singapore-Malaysia bilateral ties. It featured works by both Singaporean and Malaysian composers as well as performances by Singapore artistes including Singapore Idol Taufik Batisah, jazz pianist Jeremy Monterio, wayang group Kumputan Sri Campuran and tabla player Jatinder

Singh Bedi.

That was not SCO’s first performance in Malaysia though. In August 2000, an ensemble from the orchestra took part in the Equatorial Rain Forest Arts Festival in Kuching, Sarawak playing mainly Cantonese music. Members included Ng Seng Hong, Sim Boon Yew, Yong Phew Keng, Qu Jianqin, Zhang Ronghui and Lee Khiok Hua.

SCO made its third visit to China in May 2014 performing in Shanghai, Nanjing and Suzhou. Its programmes, which drew laudatory reviews from both musicians and audiences, included a concert and matinee



SCO musicians at Changi Airport leaving for China on a 17-day tour which included performances in Beijing, Shanghai, Macau, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Zhongshan

for children for the first time at the Suzhou Arts and Culture Centre to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park.

The orchestra featured the works of several Singapore composers as well as pieces which reflect multi-racial Singapore and compositions which show strong Nanyang flavour such as *The Ceilidh—A Concerto for Chinese Orchestra* by Eric Watson, *First movement from The Voyage from Admiral of the Seven Seas—Zheng He* by Law Wai Lun and *Passage—Fantasy for Cello and Chinese Orchestra* by Ho Chee Kong.

Taking the spotlight was home-grown jazz pianist and composer Jeremy Monteiro's performance of Singapore

composer Kelly Tang's work, *Montage: Three Movements for Jazz, Piano and Chinese Orchestra* which wowed the Chinese audience with its blend of jazz and Chinese music.

Shanghai Conservatory of Music executive director Chen Ming said that it invited SCO "because of its unique blend of Chinese orchestra music with Western and Nanyang-flavour music."

In his National Day Rally Speech later in August of the same year, PM Lee Hsien Loong mentioned with pride the orchestra's successful concert tour in China with its multi-cultural, East-meet-West and Nanyang repertoire.

For the Chinese nationals who are members of SCO, a China tour would allow them to catch up with family



in 2007.

members and friends. They would take the opportunity to visit them in between the concerts. Maestro Yeh took time off during the orchestra's tour in Shanghai to visit his mother, a vocal teacher, still teaching in her early 90s. His father a businessman, died in 1996, aged 75.

Erhu principal Zhao Jianhua's third visit to China with SCO in May 2014 proved to be the most poignant. Five days before the orchestra left for the trip, his mentor from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and the undisputed queen of the erhu, Min Huifen, died from brain haemorrhage in a hospital in Shanghai, aged 69. She taught him the erhu for 10 years from the age of 17 when he joined the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra in 1978. The late maestro Min performed at SCO's

inaugural concert in April 1997 and again with SCO in 2006.

So it was with a heavy heart that he performed in Shanghai, Nanjing and Suzhou, stealing time in between to pay his last respects to his teacher. He recalled: "I am thankful SCO allowed me to skip my performance in Suzhou so that I could attend her funeral where over a thousand people gathered."

SCO's two earlier tours in China were in 1998 when it performed in Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen, and in 2007 when it visited Beijing and Shanghai again and the three southern Chinese cities of Guangzhou, Zhongshan and Shenzhen, and Macau.

It made its overseas debut much earlier in August 1997,

barely one year after the orchestra was formed, when a 10-man team took part in the Eighth Ismailia International Folklore Festival in Cairo, Egypt, which attracted more than 1,000 participants from over 60 countries.

It was led by the orchestra's then concert master Lam Yan Sing. Other members included percussionist Quek Ling Kiong, pipa player Goh Yew Guan, dizi player Lim Sin Yeo, suona principal Jin Shiyi and stage manager Lee Chun Seng.



SCO 10-member group represented Singapore in the orchestra's first overseas trip to Cairo, Egypt, in 1997 when they visited the pyramids.



Music director Hu Bingxu (*left*) met the then Taipei mayor and future president Ma Ying-jeou (*fourth from left*) and writer-turned-culture minister Long Ying-tai (*third from left*) during SCO's Taiwan tour in 2000.

At holiday resorts, hotel ballrooms and concert halls, they performed a wide range of music which included Egyptian tunes as well as local favourites such as *Chan Mali Chan* and *Rasa Sayang*.

What Quek Ling Kiong, SCO's then principal percussionist remembered most was the intense heat. "It was hot in the day with temperatures rising up to over 40 degrees Celsius, so most events were held in the evenings."

He noted that SCO was the only musical group as most participants were folk and national cultural troupes and that even China was represented by a dance group. "We were an all men's team because we thought it would be unsafe for women to go to Egypt then which we found to be quite true as we were

escorted by bodyguards wherever we went," he said.

Stage manager Lee recalled that the day after the team visited the National Museum in Cairo, terrorists shot and killed many tourists there. "It was a close shave because we could have been the ones shot had we gone there a day later instead," he said.

In February 2000, the orchestra performed in Taiwan as part of a traditional arts festival at the invitation of the Taiwanese culture ministry. Led by its music director Hu Bingxu, the musicians met the then Taipei mayor and future president Ma Ying-jeou and writer-turned-culture minister Long Ying-tai.

Its maiden appearance in Europe in 2005 was marked

by its participation in the Budapest Spring Festival, performances at the Barbican Centre in London and Sage Gateshead in north-east England.

SCO took part in the 2009 Edinburgh International Festival together with Singapore drama company TheatreWorks, becoming the first Chinese orchestra to appear in the Scottish festival's history. The following year several members represented the orchestra in Paris as part

of the French city's Singapour Festivarts.

Former SCO board member Poh Choon Ann who led the orchestra in its European debut and the Edinburgh event recalled: "The European audience loved what we played for them. They gave us a standing ovation after each of our performances."

The orchestra played local compositions such as *Village Pasir Panjang* by Phoon Yew Tien; Chinese composer



SCO musicians performing for a small group during their visit to Sage Gateshead in north-east England in 2005.



SCO director Poh Choon Ann (standing in the first row fourth from the left) led the orchestra for its participation in the Edinburgh International Festival in 2009.

Tan Dun's works such as music from the movie, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and another Chinese composer Qu Xiaoshong's work, *Divine Melody*. The latter incorporated a painting demonstration by Singapore Cultural Medallion recipient and artist Tan Swie Hian and a video presentation on stage as the music was played, an innovation in presenting both music and visual art.

Maestro Yeh described SCO's appearance in Europe as a breakthrough for the orchestra. It was important, he told the media then, because SCO always aimed to introduce Chinese music to the Western world, and to have them witness first-hand the wonders and immense possibilities in Chinese music.

SCO chairman Patrick Lee declared that the orchestra



Singapore's very own jazz pianist and composer Jeremy Monteiro (*on the keyboard*) performing with SCO in Shanghai in 2015.

would continue touring overseas to let the world know “who we are”. “I must say that our recent trips to China have changed perception there, that we are no longer another Chinese orchestra but a very different one from theirs because of our unique repertoire including the East-meet-West music and those Nanyang-flavour ones,” he said.

Besides raising its profile internationally, he believed that the overseas performances could help attract future talent for the orchestra. “If you don’t go out to perform, nobody knows how good we are. If we do, talented musicians overseas who like us may want to join us,” he explained. Next destinations: United States and Australia.

ESM Goh Chok Tong shared similar sentiments. Overseas performances were not only good for the experience but also a challenge to the musicians themselves, he said.

“In Singapore you may be the best, but when you go to, say, Hong Kong or China, you must be good before they would want to come to hear you. There are Chinese orchestras there too and they pit you against them,” he noted.

ESM Goh added that SCO’s trips to Europe had helped to raise the image of the orchestra internationally because SCO was not just another orchestra but one with a unique sound which reflected the multi-cultural facets of life not just in Singapore but also in South-east Asia.

What’s holding back the overseas travelling, however, is the whopping price tag. A trip could easily cost between \$250,000 and \$500,000 depending on the duration and destination, said SCO executive director Terence Ho

explaining why sponsors were sorely needed.

If maestro Yeh had his way, he would like to take his orchestra on tour at least every two years. “It is important for the orchestra to find out if the audience like its repertoire and how it sounds and these provide the opportunities for our musicians to recharge themselves and to perform with their overseas counterparts,” he said.

What was even more significant, he believed, was that the tours provided the platforms for Singapore arts to be showcased and promoted abroad. Even the best orchestras in the world, such as the Boston Symphony Orchestra, had to go on tour regularly across the United States and overseas.

He urged Singapore government agencies such as NAC to support SCO and any other group which promotes Singapore arts overseas.

What makes Yeh Tsung tick? Meet the man and his music in the next chapter.



**MUYU**

*Percussion Instrument*

{CHAPTER 9}

# Maestro who straddles two continents







Twin Towers in New York bursting into flames after two hijacked passenger planes crashed into them during the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2011.

**M**AESTRO Yeh Tsung was on a Singapore Airlines flight returning home to the United States when the captain announced unexpectedly: “We have encountered some special circumstances and can no longer land in the US.”

The plane was approaching US air space on September 11, 2001. Like all the passengers on board, Yeh, who had just guest-conducted the SCO at the Singapore Conference Hall a few days earlier, was surprised but had no inkling yet of the Al-Qaeda attacks on American soil that shook the entire world.

Nineteen suicide bombers from the Islamic terrorist group had just carried out four co-ordinated attacks in four hijacked passenger jets—two crashing into the Twin Towers in New York, another at the Pentagon near Washington DC and the fourth crash-landing into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Nearly 3,000 people perished and another 75,000 had to live with mental and physical illnesses as a result, many of them emergency workers who breathed in cancerous toxins as they struggled valiantly to save lives.

Yeh's flight was re-directed to land in Toronto and it was only at the airport in Canada that he saw television images showing the World Trade Center's twin skyscrapers collapsing like a pack of cards and other incredibly horrifying scenes of a besieged US under terrorists' attack.

The deeply shaken musician was taken by bus to the Niagara Falls later where he drove almost eight hours before arriving home in the Indiana suburb to his anxious wife and three children—two daughters and a son. "I learned later that my wife's younger sister, Mary, who worked for Lehman Brothers at the American Express Bank in the building next to the World Trade Center saved her life because she was some minutes late for work that morning and could see the planes crashing into the two towers from a close distance," recalled Yeh.

When he turned on his computer, he saw a flood of emails from his friends expressing concerns for his safety. To his surprise, some came from SCO staff and musicians whom he had just worked with for the concert in Singapore on September 7 and 8.

At the two-night concert of mainly traditional Chinese wind and percussion music, Yeh was then under consideration for the post of music director. The event was lauded as a success and most SCO musicians voted in



Yeh Tsung guest conducting SCO at the Singapore Conference Hall just days before 9/11 in the US.

favour of Yeh. "I was very touched by messages from the SCO musicians, people whom I had just met and hardly knew," he said.

One of them was SCO executive director Terence Ho who was then the orchestra's marketing manager. "We were worried because we didn't want anything bad happening to him after coming to Singapore to be guest conductor at our concerts," he recollected.

This was certainly one key factor that swayed Yeh to accept SCO's offer to lead the orchestra a few months later in January 2002. At that time he had already been leading the South Bend Symphony Orchestra in Indiana since 1988,



#### **PENGLING**

*Percussion Instrument*

and the Hong Kong Sinfonietta since 1997.

The South Bend Symphony Orchestra, which began as an all-volunteer community music group in 1932, is now a prominent regional orchestra in central US with about 80 musicians, similar in size to the SCO. “I had to give up many of my other work in Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Europe and the US in order to take up the music director position in SCO,” he said.

The maestro remembered it was SCO’s then chairman Chew Keng Juea who convinced him to come to Singapore. “He reassured me the Singapore government’s full support of the young Chinese orchestra, which was only five years old.”

Yeh made his first visit to Singapore in 1979 as a pianist accompanying the 88-member Chinese Oriental Song and Dance Troupe from Beijing which performed at the former National Theatre for over two weeks between January 31 and February 16.

“In between performances, I had time to look around Singapore and I liked what I saw. The streets were clean and to me the country was very beautiful, leaving me with a very good impression,” he recalled.

Indeed these fond memories helped make up his mind to take up SCO’s job some 23 years later, making him the first music director in the world to lead a symphony orchestra and a Chinese orchestra in different continents at the same time.

Born in Shanghai in 1950 to a businessman father and a voice-teacher mother, Yeh started learning to play the piano at the age of five and pursued his study at the Shanghai

Conservatory of Music from 1960 to 1972.

But his teenage years were traumatised by the Chinese Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976. He remembered the day in 1966 when he went home and saw Red Guards ransacking his house to look for a teleprinter. “They suspected that my mother and father were spies for KGB, CIA and the Taiwan government simply because my uncles were in Taiwan and Canada, and my mother’s vocal teacher was from Russia. “My mother was under house arrest for a year and my father confined in a political study camp for three months,” he said. They were both interrogated and tortured.

The Cultural Revolution saw the persecution of many artists, musicians, writers and intellectuals especially those influenced by the West. Although all his family members including his younger sister survived the upheaval, life was hard on the Yehs. The young Yeh lived out the most difficult decade of his life teaching the piano in the impoverished Anhui province in north-east China.

When the Cultural Revolution was over, he went back to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in 1979 to study conducting. Two years later, he won a scholarship to the Mannes College of Music in New York and could not wait to leave his unhappy past behind. He earned his Bachelor of Music degree and received the college’s Academic Excellence Award when he graduated two years later.

During his undergraduate days in New York, he fell in love with Wong Sau Lan, a secretary six years his junior and



**ALL IN THE FAMILY:** (from left) Mona's husband Jamaal Byers, Mona, son Joseph, second daughter Melina, wife Sau Lan and Yeh Tsung.

the daughter of immigrants from Hong Kong. They met at a church where he played the piano and she sang in the choir. They were married in 1983 just as Yeh was embarking on a Master's degree course in music at Yale University

He was barely 33 when he started his conducting career. Among the first orchestras he led was Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra in Missouri, of which he was its assistant conductor for three years. He was also music director of the Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra, resident conductor

of the Florida Orchestra and principal guest conductor of the Albany Symphony Orchestra in New York.

His eldest daughter Mona was born in 1984, second daughter, Melina, came later in 1992 and son, Joseph in 1997. Mona, a film major graduate who married African-American bank officer Jamaal Rahji Byers in 2015, is an independent media producer working in Los Angeles and Melina is an online marketing manager in Berlin, Germany. Joseph completed his first year of studies in international

relations at the George Washington University in 2016.

Yeh is often asked: What is life like shuttling between his US home and Singapore and leading two orchestras in two different continents?

His schedule in the past 14 years, he said, is split about half-half between the two places. Home in Indiana is a comfortable three-storey house in a South Bend sub-urban district. Home in Singapore is a standard room at Amara Hotel in Tanjong Pagar.

Literally living a jet-set life, he noted that he would often end a concert with the South Bend Symphony Orchestra in the US on a Saturday, fly to Singapore the next day and arrive at Changi Airport by late night on the following Monday. On

the next day, Tuesday, at 9 am, he would be ready to start rehearsing with his SCO musicians for the weekend concert.

Conversely from Singapore, after an SCO concert ended on a Saturday, he would take the next day's flight to the US and be ready for rehearsal with the South Bend's musicians for their coming concert on Wednesday evening.

"That's how I have been working and I am quite used to it," said Yeh who confessed that it meant spending much less time with his children. "I have a great family and my children have grown up well. I am fortunate to have my wife who looks after the children and the family in the US while I concentrated on my career," he said.

He started staying at Amara Hotel—which is a 10-minute



The SCO office in Shenton Way is just a 10-minute stroll from the hotel.



Yeh Tsung is a regular at the food stalls just opposite the Amara Hotel in Tanjong Pagar.



**A MEMORABLE MOMENT:** Yeh Tsung's first gala concert as SCO music director at the Singapore Conference Hall in January 2002.

stroll from the SCO premises on Shenton Way—from 2003, after trying out two nearby hotels. He finally chose Amara because it is close to the Tanjong Pagar public housing estate just across the road.

“I spent my free time mingling with the residents there on weekends. As the music director of a Singapore orchestra, I feel the need to understand the local people and

their culture by eating with them at coffee shops or food centres, and shopping for my groceries in the same market,” he said.

Asked to cite his most memorable moments with SCO, Yeh listed four. The first was his first opening gala concert as music director in January 2002, attended by the late and then Singapore President S.R. Nathan. He recalled Esplanade's



**ANOTHER MEMORABLE MOMENT:** The prize presenting ceremony of the first SCO International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition in 2006.

chief executive Benson Phua, telling him prophetically, that SCO would be “The People’s Orchestra”.

“I chose a programme of mostly modern pieces, including a piece by Tan Dun, to signal the changes I intend to bring and to move the orchestra forward,” he said.

The second was the first SCO International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition which he initiated in 2006 in the search for works with Nanyang flavour. “With the competition and because it was an international one, the idea of a Nanyang repertoire of music was known,” he said.

Third was his appointment as music director for the

2007 National Day Parade, held at the Floating Platform at Marina Bay for the first time. He commissioned uniquely Singapore music by Law Wai Lun, Eric Watson and Phoon Yew Tien to be played by 250 musicians from the SCO, SSO, Malay and Indian music ensembles as well as a traditional Chinese nanyin music group.

“It was never done before and the music we played reflected truly Singapore’s multi-racial characteristics with great depth,” he said.

The last was the trips he led SCO to London, Paris, Edinburgh, Budapest, Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai



Also memorable was when Yeh Tsung conducted the National Day Parade held at the Floating Platform at Marina Bay in 2007.



Yeh Tsung (*right*) with hosts Danny Yeo and Qi Qi at SCO gala dinner in 2015.

and Kuala Lumpur, just to name a few. He said they were important to make the orchestra known to the world.

Assessing his legacy, Yeh said he had accomplished most of what he set out to do when he first became SCO's music director in 2002 and is now setting his sights to raise the orchestra to an even higher level. Both the orchestra's resident conductor Quek Ling Kiong and assistant conductor Moses Gay were spotted and groomed by him.

In 2013, Yeh was awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's highest accolade for excellence in the arts.

After leading the South Bend Symphony Orchestra for

28 years, Yeh called it a day in June 2016. At his farewell party on May 7, he was presented the “Sagamore of the Wabash Award”—the highest honour—in Indiana by the state’s governor, Mike Pence who, as Donald Trump’s running mate,

became the US vice-president-elect after the Republicans won the November 8 Presidential Election.

The day, May 7, was also proclaimed “Tsong Yeh Day” by the mayor of South Bend City, Pete Buttigieg. Yeh was



Yeh Tsung conducting the South Bend Symphony Orchestra in the US which he led for 28 years before retiring in June 2016.



Yeh Tsung (*left*) receiving the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's highest accolade for excellence in the arts, from President Tony Tan in 2013.

also given the title of Conductor Laureate by the South Bend Symphony Orchestra Association.

Yeh will now be able to spend more time with SCO for at least the next three years until his current contract expires in 2019. He said he has big plans for the orchestra, including the creation of more and bigger works to reflect Singapore's history and its multi-racial culture. To ensure SCO continues to grow and cope with the generational changes, he mapped out a succession plan for conductors as well as musicians.

For a start, he will move out of Amara Hotel by end of

2016 and look for an apartment, hopefully close to SCO, and end his years of shuttling between the US and Singapore. "At last, I will have a private residential address of my own in Singapore," he quipped.



**BANHU**  
*Bowed String Instrument*

{FINALE}

Looking forward  
to the future







Florence Chek on her “permanent” aisle seat No 31 on row L she occupied for the past 14 years.

**A** ISLE seat No 31 on row L is not available for booking at the SCO Concert Hall at the Singapore Conference Hall for any SCO concert—it has been “permanently” reserved for a woman patron.

She is Florence Chek, a bespectacled, petite single woman in her 60s working as a human resource executive in an architectural firm. For the past 14 years, she has been occupying the seat for every SCO concert except when she is away on holiday.

Why L31 out of the 882 seats in the auditorium? “I like the corner aisle seat because it is also on the first row of the intersection between the section of seats rising on a slope and those on level ground, giving me lots more room to move around,” she said.

Although English-educated, she is an ardent supporter

of Chinese music. Chek said she decided to support SCO after attending maestro Yeh Tsung's very first concert as the orchestra's music director and conductor in January 2002 at the Singapore Conference Hall.

"I have attended SCO's concerts earlier, even those by the former PA Chinese Orchestra, but Yeh Tsung impressed me most with his vigour and lively conducting so I decided to be his fan and give SCO all my support from then on," she said.

In 2002 she started making priority bookings for tickets, often for all the shows in the whole season totalling up to 30 including those for two nights with the same programme. After a 50 per cent loyalty discount, she estimated that she spent \$800 annually.

Chek, who is also a Cantonese opera fan, has been actively promoting SCO's concerts among her colleagues, family members and friends, by alerting them to the special and more interesting programmes and often booking the tickets for them too.

Being a regular concert-goer, she is a familiar face to SCO musicians and staffers. Maestro Yeh described her support for SCO as "extra-ordinary" saying: "I only wish we have more supporters like Florence. She is now my good friend, and through her, I got to know many of her friends and family members as well."

What touched Yeh most was her generosity. "She is not as wealthy as some of our businessmen donors, but she has been buying tables of \$10,000 each at our fundraising

gala dinners and giving outright cash donations on other occasions," Yeh said.

Her support even extends beyond Singapore. In 2015 when SCO was invited to Hong Kong for a two-night performance, she and her younger sister flew there to lend their support.

Chek is among the 3,000 Friends of SCO, a programme started in 1999 to bring the orchestra closer to the audience. She is one of the 13 Platinum card holders who donate at least \$1,000 a year to SCO.

About 80 per cent are ordinary members whose registration is free and pay no membership fees. But they enjoy an outright 5 per cent discount on their concert tickets. Some 500 are Silver and the rest Gold and Platinum card members. The different amount they pay for their annual memberships determines the privileges they enjoy, such as invitations to events, the amount of discount they get for concert tickets and SCO merchandise.

It is people like Chek that the SCO looks forward to expanding its support base and outreach programme.



**SUONA**  
*Wind Instrument*



Singapore's own Kit Chan, singing with the SCO in the Huayi Festival at the Esplanade Concert Hall in 2011.

Over the years, the orchestra has succeeded in attracting a wide spectrum of audience through its mixed programmes—appealing to the young through more popular music, the seniors through its more traditional repertoire and an increasing number of the English-educated, non-Chinese and the young through its East-meet-West and Nanyang repertoire.

Indeed SCO has a concert for almost every celebration—Chinese New Year, Mother’s Day, National Day and others. The stereotypical perception of SCO as a traditional Chinese orchestra playing to only the elderly who love Chinese music is long gone.

Its annual report for the year 2014/2015 recorded an average of nearly 89 per cent attendance for all its ticketed shows during the year comprising an audience of all age groups and nationalities, up from 81 per cent a year ago. As a result, income from ticket sales has been rising steadily in recent years.

Describing SCO as a young but already world-class orchestra, founding NAC chairman Professor Tommy Koh said: “I think its future is bright because the new generation of Singaporeans are much more culture loving and music loving than the older generation. They also have an interest in re-discovering their own civilisation and others in Asia.”

All SCO has to do now is to market itself, he emphasised, “Even though you are a good orchestra and produce great concerts, you still have to market yourself. This is in the nature of the world.”

Agreeing, chief executive of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre and SCO board member Choo Thiam Siew said SCO’s future and for that matter, Chinese music in Singapore, is well and good, thanks to the promotion of Chinese orchestra music by the schools here over the years.

There are now close to 200 Chinese orchestras in primary and secondary schools, junior colleges and tertiary institutions. Together they form a mass support group for the national Chinese orchestra.

Choo noted that many students from school orchestras had gone overseas to further their studies in Chinese instruments or music and returned with degrees. Even if they did not end up as professional musicians in SCO, they would form its audience, he said.

His hope and dream: that one day the Chinese music scene in Singapore could support a tertiary institution offering studies in Chinese instruments at the degree level. This was a sentiment shared by veteran Chinese music director and conductor Tay Teow Kiat.

Although the government-supported Nafa offers studies in Chinese music, it ends at the diploma level, he pointed out. “If our students want to further their studies and be professionals in their fields, they have to go overseas, particularly to China.”

SCO chairman Patrick Lee’s two main concerns are the need to reach out to all as The People’s Orchestra and to strive towards excellence. “Singapore is a multi-cultural nation, and it is important that our programmes reflect this

to make SCO unique among the Chinese orchestras from the other parts of the world,” he said.

“Viewership” is important, he stressed, and this did not just mean concert attendance. “People can see our performances on YouTube and other social media platforms too because in the end we want more to know about ourselves and our programmes.”

To attract a wide-ranging audience from children to seniors to its programmes, SCO must aim for excellence, he explained. “This means we must continue to have the best music director, musicians and programmes”.

SCO created history when it presented the world’s first digital Chinese orchestra performance via live streaming with its concert, Strings Fantasy, at the Singapore Conference Hall on November 26, 2016. Broadcast on a high definition digital platform in collaboration with Lianhe Zaobao, it allowed viewers anywhere to watch the concert in real time after they purchased an e-ticket for a unique log-in code to key into their devices. They can play back any time they like within the next two weeks.

Reviewing SCO’s track record in its first 20 years, ESM Goh Chok Tong said: “The orchestra has lived up to expectations, standards have gone up and its concerts well attended. But there is still room to do better.”

He believed SCO should do more in identifying and grooming Singapore talent. “Don’t take the easy way out by recruiting overseas because those from China, where most SCO musicians had come from in the past, may stop



Violinist Joshua Bell playing with SCO’s 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala Concert at the Esplanade



Concert Hall in April, 2016.

coming one day when they get paid as well back home.”

This raises the all-important question of succession at SCO, even though it is relatively young at only 20 years old. Maestro Yeh said he started thinking about it not long after he joined the orchestra in 2002.

He had already set up three different platforms to identify Singapore composers, future conductors and musicians for the orchestra. There are a composer-in-residence and a young conductor-in-residence programmes to scout for and groom future talent. Moses Gay, for example, was a young conductor-in-residence before he was appointed assistant conductor in 2014.

In recent years, fellowships were introduced to identify and invite potential young composers and conductors to work with SCO. The musician fellowship programme allows the fellows, usually fresh graduates from music schools, to play with the orchestra at concerts, mostly community concerts at the parks and heartlands.

Yeh gave a special dispensation for Singapore-born musicians applying to join SCO: They can go for the live auditions directly without having to go through the preliminary round of submitting their tape-recordings for consideration. “That’s to send them the signal that they are welcome to join us but they must still be good at the live auditions,” he said.

Thankfully, helping SCO to achieve these ambitious plans is the support given by an increasing number of generous donors. One new donor is gallery owner Chan

Kok Hua who donated three paintings over the orchestra's two fundraising gala dinners in 2015 and 2016 respectively, raising \$140,000 in total.

The 2016 fundraiser held in conjunction with SCO's

20<sup>th</sup> year celebrations in Marina Bay Sands on October 21, netted a record \$1.55 million from donors.

Chan, who played the yangqin in the Chinese orchestra from school to junior college, said: "I support the orchestra



SCO Han Lei (*left*) performing at the gala dinner which marked the orchestra's 20<sup>th</sup> year in October 2016 with maestro Yeh Tsung conducting.



**VIPS, SCO LEADERS AND BOARD MEMBERS AT SCO GALA DINNER 2016:**

**FIRST ROW** (from left): Till Vestring, Victor Lye, Seng Han Thong, Patrick Lee, PM Lee Hsien Loong, Mrs Goh Chok Tong (Ms Tan Choo Leng), ESM Goh Chok Tong, Chew Keng Juea, Wu Hsioh Kwang and Ng Siew Quan.

**SECOND ROW** (from left): Quek Ling Kiong, Terence Ho, Paul Tan, Michelle Cheo, Chen Hwai Liang, Anthony Tan, Susan Leong, Choo Thiam Siew, Yeh Tsung and Moses Gay.

because its programmes cater to everyone, from the young to the old including the ordinary folks from the heartlands. I wish it will be among the world's best Chinese orchestras."

Expressing similar views is new SCO board member and lawyer Susan Leong who said the orchestra's East-meet-West programmes, blending Chinese music with music genres of the West impressed her as being forward looking.

Never satisfied, Yeh wants SCO to keep on reaching new highs—to be a top orchestra paralleling the best symphony orchestras of the West.

He aimed to change the perception in the Western

world which lumped Chinese orchestras and Chinese music together with acrobatics and folk music. This can be done by raising the standard of play and improving on the repertoire to perform something unique and international, he declared.

The maestro came to Singapore 14 years ago with this pledge and he intends to see to its fruition.



**PAIGU**

*Percussion Instrument*

## {TIMELINE}

1996-2016

**1996** Singapore Chinese Orchestra Company Limited formed with 32 full-time members from PA Chinese Orchestra on May 8. Concert held at the former Pinetree Town and Country Club to mark the event on June 24.

**1997** Hu Bingxu appointed music director and conductor on April 1. SCO's inaugural concert at the Victoria Concert Hall on April 20. A group of 10 SCO musicians took part in the week-long 8<sup>th</sup> Ismailia International Folklore Festival in Egypt in August.



**1998** Thunderous Reverberations, the first mass event for percussion and wind instruments held at the former Harbour Pavilion in February. SCO's first website set up. Hu Bingxu led SCO on a tour to China for the first time with performances in Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen in September.

**1999** Quarterly publication, Hua Yue, launched. Friends of SCO programme started.

**2000** Millennium Concert featuring 1,400 musicians held at the Singapore Indoor Stadium on January 1. Orchestra toured Taiwan in February. Hu Bingxu's three-year contract ended in April. First chairman Chng Heng Tiu stepped down, succeeded by Chew Keng Juea in September.



**2001** Xia Feiyun from Shanghai Conservatory of Music appointed as principal guest conductor on March 1. SCO moved to new home in Singapore Conference Hall on July 16. Twin Celebrations concert held to mark fifth anniversary and move to new premises on September 22.

**2002** Yeh Tsung appointed music director and conductor in January.

**2003** Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra came under SCO.

**2004** The first Our People, Our Music mass concert at Singapore Indoor Stadium with 2,400 performers held in conjunction with National Day celebrations on July 30.

**2005** First European tour—performed at the Barbican Centre in London, Budapest Spring Festival in Hungary and Sage Gateshead in north-east England between March 28 and April 3.

**2006** SCO International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition to increase repertoire of Nanyang-flavour music launched.

**2007** Second concert tour to China led by Yeh Tsung. The orchestra performed in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Zhongshan, Shenzhen and Macau in October.

**2008** Robin Hu took over as SCO chairman from Chew Keng Juea.

**2009** SCO became the first Chinese orchestra to perform at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland in August.

**2010** Co-organised the National Chinese Music competition with National Arts Council for the first time. A group of SCO musicians took part in the Singapour Festivarts in Paris.

**2011** PM Lee Hsien Loong donated \$750,000 to support the SCO International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition.



**2012** To mark its 15<sup>th</sup> year, SCO staged Singapore's first 23-day National Chinese Orchestra Marathon with 32 Chinese orchestral concerts and events from February 3-25. Robin Hu stepped down as chairman. Patrick Lee took over.

**2014** Third China tour to Nanjing, Suzhou and Shanghai in May. Our People, Our Music concert held at the new National Stadium, breaking the Guinness World Record for having the largest drum ensemble and setting a new one for staging the largest Chinese orchestra performance before 30,000 people on June 28.

**2015** Performed in Hong Kong in October and Kuala Lumpur in December as part of the Titian Budaya Singapore Cultural Festival which marked 50 years of Singapore-Malaysia ties.

**2016** Celebrated 20<sup>th</sup> year with special concerts, a pictorial history and rare Chinese instruments exhibitions at the Singapore Conference Hall from November 4 to December 11. Presented world's first digital Chinese orchestra concert Strings Fantasy via live streaming, bringing SCO's unique music across borders on November 26.



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#### **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Leong Weng Kam started to write on the Chinese orchestral music scene in Singapore in 1977 when he became a bilingual journalist with The Straits Times. A member on the SCO Artistic Resource Panel and a director of Nafa, he also co-authored *Men In White, The Untold Stories of Singapore's Ruling Political Party*. His other publications include *From Stage To Theatre, Kreta Ayer People's Theatre 40 Years And On, 1969-2010*.

He has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Chinese Language and Literature from Beijing Normal University and Master of Arts degrees in Asia Pacific Studies and Contemporary China from the University of Leeds and Nanyang Technological University respectively.

新加坡華樂團音樂廳



PERSIDANGAN SINGAPURA









