

Music: Home-grown heroes

Ahmad Azrai

Ladies and gentlemen, we have just witnessed a historic moment locally.

Courtesy of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) under the baton of Kevin Field, we were graced with the world premiere of not just one, but HALF a dozen new chamber works for the classical music repertoire by local composers.

The MPO Forum For Malaysian Composers is part of the Education & Outreach Programme initiated by the MPO as a platform for Malaysian composers to constructively exploit the benefit of a year of intensive integration and collaboration with the orchestra.

All six candidates attended a four-day workshop – the Forum Clinic – at the Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS (DFP), where their compositions were analysed and reviewed by a panel of composers, the musicians and the audience.

After the premiere of the candidates' works, the MPO Forum panel will then select a maximum of four composers to go through to a second year to write a longer composition for a larger orchestra. One composer will later be selected for entry to the MPO International Composer's Competition scheduled to take place in 2004.

Premieres for Western works are almost a dime a dozen everyday, and modern classical music tends to be quite difficult for a lot of people to appreciate. Not surprising when you consider that quite a bit more effort is required to understand what the composers are trying to say.

What tends to be forgotten is that at the time, those works now canonised as 'classics' were actually contemporary. If you like, think of Mozart as being the Jerry Lee Lewis of his day, complete with antics and scandals.

It was quite a packed house – which for a Sunday afternoon chamber session is impressive. Field introduced the composers, who gave a short talk on their works before the performance.

Ahmad Muriz Che Rose was the first featured composer. His piece, entitled Bertabuh Kala Senja, was certainly a fine way to start the show. It was a distinctly interesting blend of Western technique and gamelan instruments, yet with a lyrical and flowing original melody that was quite recognisably Malay.

It really was a stylistic depiction of dawn in a city, and the hustle and bustle of movement was very well done. This is not surprising, as Muriz admitted that he wanted to depict sounds that are apparent when one is travelling.

Chong Kee Yong's I Hear The Wind Calling was next. Last year, Malaysia had one of his works – The Echoed Dream – premiered, so he's no stranger to our shores. It was a work inspired by Toru Takemitsu's sparse but hypnotic compositional style, and was a remarkable depiction of nature.

It was also quite a mischievous piece, not least because when he gives instructions for the players to play divisi (divided), he means it quite literally; the various musicians were scattered all over the hall, and to top it off, he also got the non-percussion players to play percussion instruments! It sounded so wonderfully Japanese, which is hilarious considering that it was inspired by an afternoon in Switzerland...

Vivian Chua is another who's not unknown to our classical music scene. Her arrangements of local folk melodies have been performed by the MPO as well as the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra (last year during the MPO / BBC Proms).

Water: Moods And Reflections was a personal effort, and I must say that everyone was impressed by the mood that she recreated. You could tell when the water was in 'solid', 'liquid' or 'vapour' form, and the opening bars created the effect of sailing on a vast ocean.

Up next was ittar by Johan Awang Othman, who began his studies in classical piano at age 10. One of his principal teachers was the legendary composer Ned Rorem, and he currently teaches at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

ittar was said to be inspired by the dance of the Hindu icon Shiva Nataraja, and Johan also mentioned that he wanted to symbolise 'perfume', which is what the title means. It was certainly an evocative piece, and its insistent rhythms and tunes were hypnotic. Tay Poh Gek is a KL girl, who began her love affair with music on the classical piano. She then further explored contemporary music at the International College of Music (ICOM).

An Evening In The Myth (Sepetang Di Kayangan) is just one of the many works that she is currently working on, but it started off sounding like an extension of the theme from Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon! The use of gamelan instruments made this piece such a unique balance of flavours, that I dare say it would be an undoubted first choice if you wanted to use the term 'Asian fusion'. Chinese, Indian, Malay, Arab – the elements were all there, and it was truly fascinating.

Lastly, and certainly not the least, we had the premiere of Synclastic Illuminations by Adeline Wong. The recipient of several awards and scholarships, Adeline participated in many composition master classes, and it certainly shows in her work.

Beginning with a fast and furious toccatta, it progressed steadily into a broad soundscape that was reminiscent of the works of John Adams – his Grand Pianola Music, to be precise. It was a nicely balanced mix of both the British and American schools of composition, and though the onslaught pace was consistent, it had its lyrical charms as well.

Many friends agree with me that these pieces would make excellent soundtracks for documentaries – and thanks to the brilliant range of sounds that they produced, many documentaries, at that! At the end of the show, all six composers were herded onto the stage to receive a justly enthusiastic round of applause from the audience.

Before the show had begun, everyone had been given a sheet of paper to 'evaluate' the pieces and choose which four would make it to the next round.

Frankly, my friends and I refused to fill out the form, for there is no possible way to choose between such wonderful works. Granted, some pieces were easier to pick up and enjoy than the others were, and I'm sure that everyone had their own favourite piece.

But though I have a preference, I am enthusiastic for all the works and composers – which you can guess from the fact that I can't stop gushing out praises... If we had our way, all six of them should be chosen to represent our homeland in the competition.

This is, indeed, the best way to show the world how far we have come, and that we can hold our own

with the rest of the world. If there's an example of Malaysia Boleh! that's better than this, I have yet to find it.

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