

Man on the moon

REVIEWER EMBARKS ON AN INTERSTELLAR MISSION TO CHONG KEE YONG'S LATEST PREMIERE AND LIVES TO TELL

IT'S NOT OFTEN that one gets moved to tears at a performance of contemporary music. Yes, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov have been known to bring forth a sniffle or two, but avant-garde music? Highly unlikely. I was therefore quite taken aback, and embarrassed, that as Chong Kee Yong's new opus *Tearless Moon* came to its poignant conclusion with the trumpeter and recorder player slowly making their way from the back of the hall down the aisles towards the exits beside the stage, my eyes grew heavy with tears.

This is no fabrication. I congratulated the composer immediately after the performance, telling him how I managed to just choke back the tears. It was bad enough to be dressed in a ridiculous pseudo-batik outfit paired with my brother's ill-fitting pants and dress shoes required by the orchestra's silly dress code, but to have a grown man cry at a concert was just beyond ridiculous.

'So you didn't really cry - that's why

it's called *Tearless Moon*,' laughs Chong. He was, of course, being modest, his obvious satisfaction dampened only by the imperfections of the premiere - due in part to the short rehearsal time and, significantly, to the refusal of the orchestra's management to observe Chong's instructions to place certain instruments up on the second floor where the expensive box seats were. Happier to leave them vacant - there wasn't exactly a stampede for the evening's tickets - than to ensure that the music sounded as good as it was meant to sound, their decision meant that the two groups of wind players who would have made magic in the ambient space above the hall played right into most of the audience, ruining the experience for everyone.

This was only one of the many pitfalls that Chong found scattered along the road to his *Tearless Moon*, which began rehearsals on May 18, 2006 in preparation for the premiere on May 20. I followed Chong through his rocky journey, and

discovered that it was far easier to break into a Maybank vault and run off with the money than to create honest art in the Valhalla of the nation's artistic vanity.

Armed with Chong's complex new score, which he had to print at his own expense 'because you have already won so much money', so said the men in black (suits), we settle into our seats as conductor Kevin Field prepared the orchestra for the work's maiden journey. Fasten your seatbelts; there will be turbulence.

The concert is just three days away and the orchestra is playing the piece (for the first time) as an ensemble. Chong is visibly anxious as Field talks the players through the many cues that would be required. After laying out the master plan, down comes the baton and, with astonishing musicianship, Field and his band produce quite a remarkable read-through. It already sounds fantastic!

Some of the musicians come up to the composer to congratulate him and

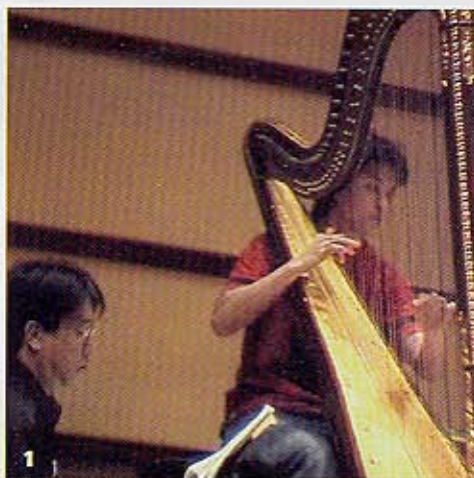
work out some rough spots. 'Is this the sound you want?' asks the bassist, making a strange whooping noise. Chong nods enthusiastically. The orchestra is split into sections and a detailed session is conducted – here, many of the intricate sounds and figures notated by Chong are painstakingly worked through at breakneck speed. In two hours, it is shaping up nicely. Field suggests some minor but effective changes. 'Can we have all the violins playing here instead of one?' They try it and it sounds terrific.

Two hours later, we emerge on an empty stomach but high on adrenaline. 'I think they have got it at least 80%,' remarks Chong happily. I comment on how supportive some of the musicians are, especially the cellist and bassist. 'There is much less resistance this time around,' he says. 'In the past, I used to get very angry with some of them, but now I just let them be. They have to learn how to deal with living composers. It is a valuable opportunity for them to learn how to play these modern techniques.'

An eventful first day brings new confidence to the young composer. 'In the past, I was quite afraid of going up to these orchestras, because they will attack you! But now, I am much more confident,' he reflects. His resolve shows in the music, which is a milestone in the composer's growing career. A wonderful piece of symphonic music lasting over 20 minutes, it is his most ambitious piece yet. 'You should write more for full orchestra,' I tell him, recollecting the immense power in the build-up of the central section and the stunning beauty of the final section.

The following day, we reconvene at the concert hall, as the orchestra tries out Chong's peculiar layout. Two "echo groups", one brass and one woodwind, tuck themselves at the back of the hall. 'I wanted them upstairs, but they wouldn't give up those expensive boxes,' Chong complains ruefully. From where we are seated at the centre of the hall, they nevertheless sound quite good – the four-dimensional sound scheme provides a new spaciousness to the music, giving it a totally different atmosphere from the day before. I could predict, however, what would happen on premiere night with this placement.

Field takes the orchestra through two full run-throughs, miraculously coordinating the three groups of musicians to produce a stunning performance without the help of eyes at the back of his head. 'Echo groups, am I clear enough... clear enough... clear enough...?' he asks of his conducting. 'Yes, you are... yes, you are... yes, you are...' the echo groups reply. They practise the trumpeter and recorder player's



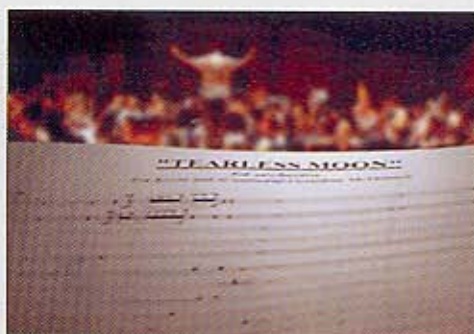
Main picture & 1 The composer confers with his musicians prior to cosmic premiere

final exit, and Field tries out his own playing part at the very end of the piece, which requires him to hit – seven times – a Japanese temple gong placed on a timpani, while modulating the timpani's pedal, to produce an otherworldly whisper, repeating this seven times.

'I heard that seven times seven is really important to the Chinese, so I have to hit it forty-nine times? Or else I'll upset somebody up there?' asks Field after the rehearsal. 'The reason I didn't do it just now is that it's one of those things you can only do during performance, do you know what I mean?' he assures Chong. As we pack up, Field offers a fond word of thanks to the composer. 'I know what you've done; I can hear it. I'm just trying to control myself, but I can hear it,' he tells Chong simply.

Field is a man of few words but they are often enough to tell the story. An enigma of a personality, but with a definite heart underneath his poker-face. As the bassoonist practises on his recorder the tune that Field wrote for his late wife Geraldine McDonnell, in memory of whom *Tearless Moon* was composed, it is hard not to feel emotional. Yet, the Englishman, who fronts the largely western orchestra that calls itself Malaysian, braves the premiere without the slightest hint of the tragic circumstances that he has faced. It is all in a day's work, after all.

As I leave the concert hall with the orchestra's KGB hot on my heels for having attempted to take photos at the concert, the year's most important artistic event, and leaving empty-handed lest I have the puny Mat Salleh in the suit with his puffed-up ego set the feared security organs on me, I wonder whether it has all been worth it. Having heard *Tearless Moon*, I am left without a doubt that it has. ■



A HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO TEARLESS MOON

Chong Kee Yong's new work for full orchestra shows the composer reaching new heights of expression and feeling. No longer can he be accused of writing intellectual, experimental music – *Tearless Moon* proves to be a moving experience, both sonically and musically. No weepfest, it is as avant-garde as they come; yet, the young genius from Klang has found an expressive language all his own in this uncompromising genre.

The work begins with a clatter of percussion that transports us into an otherworldly plane, where the winds struggle to recall a distant melody amid the assault of percussive interjections. The divided violins launch into an eerie rocking figure that will return like signposts, as the orchestra searches desperately through a turbulent landscape. In it, there are hints of Kabuki, splashes of nature and undercurrents of ritual.

The turning point comes midway, where the oscillating bongos kick off an incantation, an exorcism, that summons up a whirlwind of voices that gather into a sonic gale, like a tumultuous ascent of migratory birds and reminiscent of Rautavaara's climax in his *Angel of Light*. Woodwind and strings fly like voices calling out to each other as they spiral in ascent. The tuba chants mournfully and the brass whips the orchestra into a fierce climax that is cruelly crushed into a deafening silence ('stop as though torn off!' instructs Chong in his score).

A solo double bass tries to take wing but fails to escape his fate. Suddenly, amid the settling dust of shattered souls rises the cor anglais, calling out an Irish melody. The voice is shaky and uncertain, an apparition seen through the prism of a traumatic experience. It is a heartbreaking moment as the souls from both sides of the divide try to connect but spiral away, torn by the forces separating life and death as soprano recorders play what sounds delightfully like bird calls in the distance.

In the dying moments of the work, the solo trumpet intones a bluesy sombre tattoo, answered by the recorder with its Irish melody. As both players proceed down the aisle dressed in their dark suits, one can't help but think of pallbearers – a potent image that was suggested by conductor Kevin Field during rehearsal. As trumpet and recorder part ways, one is reminded of the painful divide between life and death, two so in harmony yet destined never to connect. We are left with the lone conductor playing on the temple gong, desperately calling out into the wilderness for a voice that has since left the building.