

Source: THE STRAITSTIMES | MONDAY, JULY 6, 2015

Evening of feel-good works to mark Singapore's 50th birthday

REVIEW/CONCERT

TOWARDS THE FUTURE:

SCO CELEBRATES SG50

Singapore Chinese Orchestra

ESPLANADE CONCERT HALL/Last Friday

Chang Tou Liang

Celebrating the nation's 50 years of independence, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) came up with a feel-good programme of works relating to Singapore's history and all things local.

Conducted by music director Yeh Tsung (right), the concert had the feel of a variety show, with something for everyone in the audience.

Espousing the ever-widening ethos of Nanyang music, it began with Fujian native Xie Xiang Ming's *A Stroll In The Lion City*, which won first prize in the 2011 Singapore International Chinese Orchestral Composition Competition.

True to its subject, it is a brief minimalist-styled work, simple but effective in conveying the idea that people here do not stroll but quickly shuffle on, sometimes aimlessly,

and often oblivious to the percussive interjections that pepper our paths.

More substantial is former SCO composer-in-residence Law Wai Lun's *Hong San See*, a symphonic poem about Min Nan immigrants who depart Chinese shores to set up shop in Nanyang.

Its mysterious impressionistic opening gave way to the *dagu's* frenetic beat as boats get buffeted in stormy seas before arriving in the *Promise Land*, with an apotheosis gloriously greeted by the peal of tubular bells.

Present composer-in-residence Phoon Yew Tien was represented by *Nostalgic Medley*, a pleasant suite of seven Chinese golden oldies from the 1940s through the 1960s, including *Girls Of The West* and *Every Family Has Its Own Troubles*.

Lyrical from start to finish, its appeal to the pioneer generation would be that of familiarity and reliving the good old days.

Receiving its world premiere was Eric Watson's *An Independent Note*, with 21 quotations from founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's famous speeches set to musi-

cal accompaniment.

The selection was chronologically ordered, with a climax at his famous teary breakdown caught on television on Aug 9, 1965.

Veteran thespian Lim Kay Tong (who plays Lee in the feature film 1965) used stentorian tones to overcome the orchestra's mass of sound and the unfortunate overall effect was one of the audience being lectured or talked down to.

Serious turned to ridiculous with Kuan Nai Chung's *Singapore Capriccio*, a pastiche of Rachmaninov's *Paganini Rhapsody* with the Malay song *Chan Mali Chan* as its subject.

There was even a copycat "18th Variation" for talented teenage pianist Serene Koh to luxuriate in.

Despite her spirited and pinpoint articulation, nothing could hoist this hack job from the depths of banality.

Far better was Phang Kok Jun's *MI Camedley*, with the six-member vocal band *MI Cappella* singing, beat-boxing and dancing their way through four xinyao numbers, including *Xi Shui Chang Liu*, *Cheng Li De Yue Guang*, *Chi De Qi Ku* and *Here We Go*.

Their infectious performance



PHOTO: SINGAPORE CHINESE ORCHESTRA

saw conductor Yeh imitating their nifty steps on his podium, thus garnering the loudest applause.

More subdued was singer-entertainer Robert Fernando's crooning of familiar National Day Parade songs including *We Are Singapore*, *One United People* and the ubiquitous *Home*.

Of course, he asked the audience to join in for the last song, but the listeners remained steadfastly placid.

The most ambitious work, another

world premiere, was Law Wai Lun's *Ode To Singapore*, a choral cantata with the 90 voices of The Vocal Consort.

Sung completely in Chinese, the impressive a cappella *Prelude* relived the opening of Tchaikovsky's 1812 *Overture* in its choral version.

In the highly dramatic *Fight And Strive*, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* and Howard Shore's *Lord Of The Rings* score were referenced.

Before one imagined that the *Little Red Dot* was part of *Middle Earth*, *Song Of Singapore* exuded lyricism and sentimentality.

The grand finale was a recitation of *The Pledge* by S. Rajaratnam, with the clarion call of *Majulah Singapura* and the promise to work towards a bright, stellar and prosperous Singapore.

On the nation's 50th year of existence, could there be a greater aspiration than that?