

## Classical Finding Singapore's voice

As the Singapore Chinese Orchestra prepares to perform in Hong Kong for the first time, Li Meng de Bakker talks to maestro **Tsung Yeh** about their repertoire and the origins of Nanyang style

Rising storm  
SCO under the baton of Tsung Yeh



**S**ingapore has experienced a momentous year, first enduring the passing of the nation's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, in March, and then celebrating 50 years of independent sovereignty in August. Now, in a cultural first, this October sees the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) perform in Hong Kong for the first time, under the baton of music director maestro Tsung Yeh.

Promising to showcase its own particular brand of musical spice – the Nanyang style – to local audiences, the SCO will perform two concerts, beginning with a fully scored revival of the classic silent movie, *The Goddess*. The conclusion takes the form of a grand programme featuring two star soloists and more than 100 singers from the Opera Hong Kong Chorus and Children's Chorus.

When asked about the origins of Nanyang style, maestro Yeh reveals, "We borrowed the term to represent a type of music written for the Chinese orchestra, particularly the SCO." He explains further, "It has Singaporean and neighbouring countries' character. I think this is very essential."

When Yeh joined the SCO in 2002, most of the repertoire was from China – something he believed needed to change. "I felt there was an urgent need [for the SCO] to have its own voice," he recalls. That year, at the Singapore Art Museum, Yeh found the inspiration he was searching for when viewing an exhibition of Nanyang paintings. Developed in the early 20th Century, the style was pioneered by Chinese artists who combined Sino and European techniques to depict regional subjects. Afterwards, Yeh pondered, "If there was a Nanyang painting school, why [couldn't] we have a Nanyang music style?" This led to the creation of an annual composition competition that began in 2006, encouraging local and regional composers to define and cultivate Nanyang music, as well as vie for inclusion in the SCO's growing repertoire.

Commissioned for the 2014 Huayui festival, the first part of the SCO's performance takes place in Tsuen Wan with a screening of the *The Goddess* set to an original score by composers Lincoln Lo and Law Wai-lun. The heartbreaking story of a mother's sacrifice, the movie

stars Ruan Lingyu, whose suicide age 24 immortalised her as one of the great tragic talents and beauties of early Chinese cinema. However, it's the universal theme of the film – rather than Lingyu herself – that proves most enduring for Yeh.



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"What emerges [from the film] is the enormous strength of this woman, and the love that she has for her son. This kind of thing is timeless."

For the October 18 performance at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, the SCO is set to undertake a varied programme tailored to its Hong Kong audience. Yeh is happy to detail certain highlights, explaining, "The opening piece is a Cantonese folk tune, *Thunder Storm and Drought*, but rearranged with jazz elements. It represents the old tradition with

new developments. The second piece is our 2006 competition grand prize winner, *Mahjong Kakis*. These two pieces try to engage a Hong Kong spirit." Also on the programme are *Fire Ritual*, by renowned composer Tan Dun, and *Marco Polo and Blue Princess*, an 'operatic fantasy' commissioned by Yeh. The latter, which will conclude the SCO's visit, features Hong Kong's Warren Mok and Chinese soprano Wu Bixia performing the title roles in Western and Chinese operatic styles.

When we ask about the cultural exchange between Hong Kong and Singapore, Yeh tells us it's a constantly ongoing process, something he believes is based more on the two cities' similarities, not their differences. "They are both islands, and they have many historical similarities with their relationship with the West. They're also both the result of migrants," he muses, before concluding with a smile, "the SCO coming to Hong Kong is kind of like visiting a cousin."

**Singapore Chinese Orchestra**  
Sat Oct 17, Tsuen Wan Town Hall, Auditorium; Oct 18, HKCC Concert Hall. Tickets: \$160-\$360; urbtix.hk.