

CULTURAL MEDALLION 2019

ERIC JAMES WATSON

Eric James Watson, PBM (b.1946) is a musician, composer, conductor, music technologist and pedagogue.

Born in Cardiff in Wales, United Kingdom, he was raised in Middlesbrough in North East Yorkshire where he learnt how to play the piano and the violin. At the Trinity College of Music, he studied composition and conducting, for which he won a Ricordi prize (1967). He initially taught music in schools, and went on to work in London's West End as a conductor and pianist in musical theatre.

Since relocating to Singapore in 1991, he has focused on fusing diverse musical and cultural sources, particularly Chinese, Indian, South East Asian and Korean instruments, in a symbiotic and fruitful relationship. He strives to go beyond the instant, surface appeal of a particular piece of music and delves into its cultural and philosophical principles, using those as his guidelines for artistic creation instead.

In 2001, he was the composer and musical director for the Singapore National Day Parade (NDP). In 2007, he wrote and arranged orchestral music for NDP with four orchestras – the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO), as well as an Indian and a Malay ensemble.

In 2006, he was awarded first prize in the inaugural Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition, organised by SCO, for his work 'Tapestries I – Time Dances'. He penned the top-prize-winning pieces 'Aftermath' and 'Nebulae' for the National Piano and Violin Competition in 2011 and 2013 respectively. Significant early works included 'Singapura' (1993), a set of orchestral variations based on a local melody of the same name; and the musicals 'A River In Time' (1994), commissioned by the National Trades Union Congress and staged at the Singapore Indoor Stadium, and 'Land Of A Thousand Dreams' (1995).

As composer-in-residence of SCO from 2016 to 2018, he composed two major works, 'Nanyang Gate', a concerto for sanxian and Chinese orchestra; and 'As The River Flows', a music history of the Singapore River. Other prominent works with SCO included 'Dialogue for Solo Tabla and Chinese Orchestra' (2007).

Watson has taught at various institutions including the Central School of Speech and Drama, Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, LASALLE College of the Arts, and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and is currently Associate Lecturer at the Singapore University of Social Sciences. He also served on advisory committees and adjudicating panels, including for Ding Yi Music Company, the Infocomm Media Development Authority and the National Arts Council. He was awarded the Hua Yuan Association's Kuo Pao Kun Award in Arts and Culture for New Immigrants; and in 2017, he was a recipient of The Public Service Medal.



Conducting NAFA Orchestra for a Beatles music concert with Anita Sarawak, music arrangement by Eric James Watson, Marina Bay Floating Platform, 2007.

Photo courtesy of Eric James Watson

FOR ONE AND ALL, THE COLLABORATIVE COMPOSER

BY TAN SHZR EE



IN A SHIFTING world of compositional practice where old notions of ‘greatness’ and ‘the canon’ are fast being challenged and revised by progressive feminist thought (McClary 2000) and, more recently, decolonised approaches (Gebrial 2018, bin Tajudeen 2012, Tan 2019), Eric James Watson’s slow-and-steady contributions to the music scene in Singapore makes for an interesting culmination with his reception of the Cultural Medallion this year (2019). He joins 125 other distinguished individuals who since 1979 have been recognised for their “artistic excellence and professional maturity,” showing “extraordinary contribution and leadership in shaping the development of Singapore’s arts and culture.”

The Welsh-born Watson grew up in Yorkshire, United Kingdom, trained at London’s Trinity College of Music, and cut his professional teeth directing musicals in the same city’s West End. After moving to Singapore in 1991, he has spent at least a third of his life in Southeast Asia. As such his person, musical voice(s), and body of work make an interesting case in the turning of pages in chapters attempting to narrativise growth, change, capacity-building and genre-making among activities engaged by those who call themselves composers in Singapore.

Ostensibly, an article as such designed around the pinnacle of achievement behind a lifetime milestone award would seek to celebrate the oeuvre of a single, heroic figure of the ‘Great Composer’ – a title Watson is very cautious about embracing. He points out and agrees that “there is no such thing as a history of the compositional figure as a solitary individual or *artist* in traditional music in Southeast Asia” and that music is always “collaborative... always created together, whether you’re talking about gamelan or improvisation in Indian music.”

“That much I have tried to evoke in many of my projects,” he adds. “I always try to give freedom to my ensembles, and my students. We often work things out together on the spot. It’s actually a very liberating process.”

Watson’s words ring with paradox as well as truth in a critical period of cultural change today, in both music studies as well as in new revisionist and de-centred

approaches to understanding Southeast Asian ex-empire histories and politics. Here, the ‘Great White Male Artist’ as a figure has since the 1990s been re-evaluated against the need to look at histories of the ‘small’, hitherto ‘invisible’ people – not least women (McClary 2000). More recently, understandings of aesthetics and values in culture-making (as opposed to ‘high art’-making) are being overturned through reverse and reclaimed perspectives of post-colonial Southeast Asian cosmopolitan ‘natives’.

How ‘adopted-native’, or ‘Singaporean’ is Watson – and should this be a question at all? The composer himself laughs at the neo-romantic idea of historicising his oeuvre through the old-school lens of framing the ‘great composer’s’ output (as one does Beethoven and Stravinsky) into ‘Early, Middle and Late’ periods.

“I don’t take myself quite so seriously,” he says with a laugh. “Of course I have to be aware. Stravinsky – when I was teenager, I greatly admired him; Beethoven without question. But this way of looking at how I write just doesn’t dominate my thinking.”

He adds: “I just try to be a composer, I do my best to communicate. I’m not unaware of niche audiences, or getting music into libraries. But the main thing is flow. And finding an appropriate response for the circumstances.”

INDEED – if one remained insistent on historicising Watson in terms of the development of his style(s) over the years, and in context to parallel the cultural trajectories in music development in Singapore, one would not so much frame his personal compositional journey in modernist terms of ‘progression’ towards a series of aesthetic goals as look out for different kinds of resonances in his disparate portfolios of works.

Watson’s commitment to collaboration is evident in his approach towards pedagogy and rehearsal, fixing notes onto a score as a matter of iteration with his performers, and interacting with his students at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts where he is an adjunct lecturer and the Singapore University of Social Sciences where he is an associate lecturer.

Deeply interested in ‘the sounds of the region – Southeast Asia, the Nanyang Style, or however you wish to call it’, he has taken steps to immerse himself in various traditional and neo-traditional Asian music communities from gamelan to Chinese ensembles. This he undertakes as a means of situating his compositional voice “in the region, of the place where I currently reside in, and have been living for more than two decades.”

These efforts have led to works such as ‘Dialogue for Tabla and Chinese Orchestra’ (2007), with its genre-specific sweeping crescendos punctuated by long and

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Eric James Watson with BG (Ret) Tan Huck Gim, army and organisers, National Day Parade, National Stadium, 2001.
Photo courtesy of Eric James Watson



Conducting NAFA Orchestra for a Beatles music concert with Anita Sarawak, music arrangement by Eric James Watson, Marina Bay Floating Platform, 2007.
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Conducting NAFA Orchestra for a Beatles music concert with Anita Sarawak, music arrangement by Eric James Watson, Marina Bay Floating Platform, 2007.

Photo courtesy of Eric James Watson

relentless improvisatory solos on the South Asian percussion instrument; and the early musical 'A River in Time' (1994), fusing joint forces of a symphonic orchestra, a Chinese orchestra and a gamelan ensemble. In 'Songs of the North' (2009), more textural and formal juxtaposition is heard as he toys with the 18th-century genre of the concerto grosso, putting the fiddle and concertina of his own native British roots in counterfoil to the Chinese *pipa* and *dizi*, set against the backdrop tableau of the Chinese orchestra. And not shying away from straight 'Western symphonic fare' either, he has written large-scale pieces commissioned by the Singapore Government, directing the National Day Parade in 2001 in recorded and live performances of an orchestral score for the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. In 2011, he wrote the award-winning 'Aftermath' for the Singapore National Piano and Violin Competition.

But if a 'turning point' had to be chosen, the composer himself would pick his first large-scale work for Chinese orchestra, 'Tapestries I - Time Dances', which won the inaugural Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition organised by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra in 2008. The piece marked the first of numerous collaborations he would go on to pursue with the institution, culminating in a 2017 concert and recording directed by Yeh Tsung and themed on his pieces, titled 'Eric Watson's World of Chinese Music.'

"'Tapestries' was a personal milestone for me," Watson recalls.

"I had a lot to learn and not just about the orchestra. I didn't expect to even make it to the top 10 (entries for the competition). There were so many other worthy people. Looking back on the piece I often think, gosh, I wouldn't do it quite like that now."

"I still think about tinkering with technical things like ranges and idiomatic phrases," he explains. "But the musicians persevered, and here we are. I've decided to let it stand as it is, it's honest to who I was then."

Today, one might see Watson's current achievements as coming a long way from his early days writing jingles for a McDonald's TV commercial.

"That was 20, 25 years ago and I have to say I enjoyed doing it! I found that it engaged parts of the musical range of thinking that I wouldn't normally do," he says.

"I don't think it is possible for composers to only work in one genre today," he adds, alert to the realities of bigger music and cultural ecosystems.

"We are all portfolio musicians, and the portfolio is as wide or as narrow as you choose it to be, or as the work comes. This includes work beyond composition -

teaching music, passing on knowledge. And combining everything in performance. My curiosity takes me where it goes. And I write as the work comes in, I try to go with the flow."

THIS idea of situating his writing within the needs and expressions of place and situation might well be the running theme in his approach to creativity, in lieu of a particular 'style' or 'trait'.

Like any self-respecting composer, Watson says he is very wary of labels: "Something becomes this and that, and then there's this new little genre. I prefer to relate my work to something else in the context and circumstances of how it was put together, in ways that people can apprehend."

Unlike many of his more modernist international contemporaries who subscribe to notions of originality in the creative process which hinge on negating the work of the past in order to break out new voices, Watson is also happy to adapt his work to existing styles.

"Deconstruction is not the same as destruction. I am wary of destroying something simply because it's been there for a very long time. It becomes a question of *should*, rather than *would*."

That much may well be true of some of Watson's pieces which fall into the 'easy-listening' category; tailor-made for amateur or student orchestras, or for the stage, for moving image and film; or community outreach events. The point, he reiterates, is to "communicate well. How to make things work for their purpose, how to do things better."

But "if there is one single thing about my music," he muses after a while, "it's the colour, the sound, the variety and all of these. I don't mean variety per se in Singapore, but variety in all the ASEAN countries, they are all different but related; with shots of colour everywhere."

Interestingly, in parallel to his functionalist approach to composition, we have come full circle to the idea of locating Watson in his own chosen-by-default context of long-term and sustainable work in Southeast Asia, as well as the more nationalistically foregrounded and immediate framing of his reception of the Cultural Medallion in Singapore.

Not surprisingly, as with many Singaporean composers in his direct circle, Watson does not believe there will ever be a generic 'Singapore style.' This, he explains, is because of the resolute individualism of separate composers in the city who refuse to be identified or pigeonholed geo-culturally as well as issues of capacity

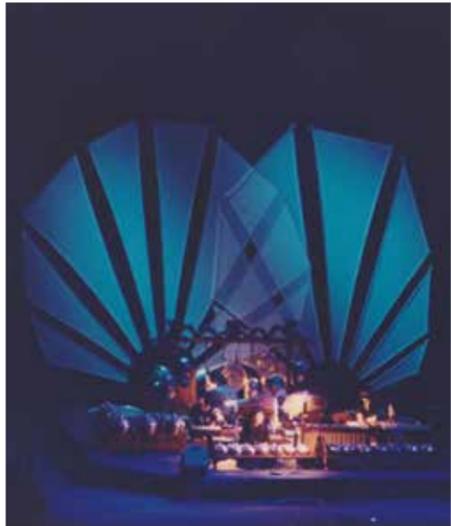
"We are all portfolio musicians, and the portfolio is as wide or as narrow as you choose it to be, or as the work comes. This includes work beyond composition - teaching music, passing on knowledge."



'The Journey of Lee Kan', a cantata by Dick Lee, music orchestrated by Eric James Watson, with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, 2016.

Photo courtesy of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra

“I’m not comfortable with only looking back at the past – my own or otherwise, I’m interested in looking forward in doing new things with new people.”



Gamelan ensemble in ‘A River in Time’, music produced and composed by Eric James Watson, Singapore Indoor Stadium, 1994.

Photo courtesy of Eric James Watson

building. Significantly, in line with Singapore’s larger aspirational initiatives to place itself on the global map as a cosmopolitan city, many Singaporean composers may well simply choose to position themselves as diverse and distinct voices belonging to unique citizens of the world.

“I’m not comfortable with only looking back at the past – my own or otherwise,” Watson points out. “I’m interested in looking forward in doing new things with new people,” he adds, citing an upcoming composition he has written for Singaporean harpist Katryna Tan.

Indeed – where the urgent demands of revisionist approaches to understanding history and culture press on in the face of necessary and important moves towards decolonisation in Southeast Asia and the world at large, Singapore itself may have jumped a few hoops in the game and transformed itself from post-colonial to cosmopolitan in the space of the same two-plus decades marking Eric Watson’s time on the island.

In the recalibrated scheme of things – an ideal colour-blind world with imagined equal playing fields – perhaps it would be a motivational dream to think of the composer resident-in-Singapore as neither simply a ‘white’ composer nor even a ‘Southeast Asian’ composer, but *‘any good’* composer writing pieces of solid, grounded work.

About the writer

Shzr Ee Tan is a Senior Lecturer and ethnomusicologist (with a specialism in Sinophone worlds) at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research projects have covered a wide range of topics, from sounds of London’s political protests, to gendering Latin American dance in East Asia, soundscapes of transient workers in Southeast Asia, sound art in Singapore and politico-musical activism on the internet. More recently she has been working on issues of decolonisation, aspirational cosmopolitanism, marginality and intersectionality in music. She is current co-editor of *Ethnomusicology Forum* and her scholarly publications have appeared in imprints of major presses from Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press to Routledge and Macmillan.

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