

CULTURAL
MEDALLION
2013

TSUNG YEH
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Born in 1950 in Shanghai, China, Tsung Yeh is best known for his stewardship of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO), and his pivotal role in its transformation into a major orchestra of international acclaim. As Music Director of the SCO since 2002, Tsung Yeh has demonstrated strong artistic vision in pushing the envelope of Singapore's Chinese orchestra music, and developing a *Nanyang* style body of musical work.

Yeh's musical education began with the piano, at age five. He later received a scholarship to study at the Mannes College of Music in New York before pursuing postgraduate studies at Yale in 1983. An artist who represents a confluence of East and West, Yeh holds a rare distinction of being music director of both a Western symphony orchestra and a major Chinese orchestra.

Under Yeh's musical directorship, the SCO has gained increasing appreciation and renown in regional and international circuits. The orchestra has successfully toured international musical festivals,

notably in London (2005) and Beijing (2007). Yeh's innovative endeavours present a balance between the classics and the contemporary. He has expanded the orchestra's repertoire through multimedia and multi-disciplinary productions that have redefined the musical boundaries of the Chinese orchestra in Singapore, giving the internationally acclaimed SCO more depth and width. These works include *Mostly Gershwin* (2013), interweaving Chinese orchestra music with jazz blues, *Awaking* (2008), an original idea of fusing Elizabethan music and *Kunqu* opera music, *Thunderstorm* (2005), *Admiral of the Seven Seas* (2005), *Instant is a Millennium—A Musical Conversation with Tan Swie Hian* (2003) and *Marco Polo and Princess Blue—A Symphonic Epic* (2002).

Yeh is also a dedicated mentor to young Chinese orchestral talent. He has helped to develop and create opportunities for young musicians, conductors and composers. Since taking the helm of SCO, Yeh has established the Singapore

Youth Chinese Orchestra (2003), and the Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition (2006), both of which seek out and develop young musical talent. He has also nurtured and mentored conductors such as Quek Ling Kiong, Wong Kah Chun and Moses Gay. Under his tutelage, these SCO musicians have expanded their musical vocabulary, to meet and match the versatility and diverse range of SCO programming.

Under Yeh's music directorship, the SCO has scaled new heights in its efforts to become a world-renowned Chinese orchestra with a uniquely Singaporean character.



TSUNG YEH MUSIC DIRECTOR, PIONEER

By Dr Tan Shzr Ee

"In Europe, there are groups called Early Music groups and they don't play pop; which is all right. But this is not an Early Music group, it's not an Early Chinese orchestra. It's a Chinese orchestra and we're supposed to play any kind of music."

— Tsung Yeh, ST 2012: C4

AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ORCHESTRA

Chinese orchestras have occupied an interesting—if unwieldy—place in modern history. Musical cultures and practices deemed “feudalistic” or “backward” were given an overhaul and brought in line with imagined technological advancements, as a result of cultural experiments in the 1950s and 1960s in line with modernisation campaigns that China underwent following their defeat in the Sino-Japanese and the Opium Wars. From a political perspective, these revamped projects were deemed worthy competitors to “western” exhibitions of cultural prowess on the international stage. In musical terms, this meant that small ensembles or solo traditions privileging intimate setups, melody-based textures and “horizontal” sonic aesthetics were artificially expanded to fit the model of symphony orchestras. Instruments were made larger as they acquired more strings, bigger resonators or valves. Chordal accompaniments and bass lines were grafted onto otherwise self-contained acoustic worlds. Instrumentalists exchanged the *joie de vivre* of improvisation or the spontaneous realisation of scores for standardised, clean-cut playing in the large format of the orchestral ensemble. (Fang 1981, Han & Gray 1979)

60 years on, Chinese orchestras have come some way in the search for sonic balance and reportorial maturity, even as their politically incorrect beginnings have now been relegated to a discussion point of history. And yet, they belong to an institution that is still adapting to changing demands of postcolonial cultural flows, globalised audiences and evolving tastes. At the same time, instrumental technologies and human creativity have opened up new avenues allowing for the debate to move beyond the early, crude historical genesis of the 1950s and 1960s. At the crossroads of the contemporary Chinese orchestra's journey through the 21st century stands Tsung Yeh, Shanghai-born and



US-based conductor of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. Yeh delivers pragmatic insight on coming to terms with the aesthetic, cultural and political revamping of modern Chinese ensembles, balancing the need for organic musical development alongside making rapprochements with history.

"In my younger days, I preferred the organic approach, and wondered about these artificial, man-made improvements. But they had already been established by my time; Chinese orchestras had already come into being and were taken for granted as institutions. I prefer to think forward, to work with the future and work with what we have, to develop the unknown rather than undo the past."

— Tsung Yeh (2013)

Crucially, Yeh has also argued for institutional and top-down engagement in necessary experimentation and research, if only for the international playing fields, bigger funding resources, policy-development and national discourse making.



“All forms of art and all sorts of artists need support—all the way back to the days of Mozart and his patrons. But the important thing with orchestras is that they can contribute to shaping mainstream musical life. And Asian orchestras will be able to do this on their own terms.”

— Tsung Yeh (2013)

Yeh has taken sustained steps in reforming Chinese orchestral repertoire and musical training. He has also embarked on intercultural project work, carving out alternative ways of music-making within and without Singapore’s articulation of cultural identity in local, regional and international terms.

DEVELOPING EARLY INSPIRATIONS

Born in Shanghai in 1950, Yeh is the son of a businessman and vocal professor, the latter of whom continues to teach at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (ST 2012:C4). Beginning his musical studies at age five on the piano, his early interests in Chopin and Bach were interrupted by the onset of the Cultural Revolution, which saw him sent down to impoverished Dingyuan county in Anhui Province. Taking relocation and harsh labour with equanimity, he recalls: “Things are quite strange, you know. You think this is punishment; they sent you to a terrible place but I think I was able to turn it into something quite positive.” (ST 2012: C4).

An illness brought the budding musician back to Shanghai, which coincided with the end of the revolution and an opening to audition for a place in a college in the New York. Yeh obtained a full scholarship to study at the Mannes College of Music,

where he discovered a new interest in conducting that led to further study at Yale University’s postgraduate programme. Upon graduation, he found his first job as assistant conductor to Leonard Slatkin at the St Louis Symphony, later becoming director of South Bend Symphony Orchestra, an institution with which he has been associated for more than 20 years. In 2002, he was appointed Music Director of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra.

Yeh speaks of how his inspirations have changed over his development from a pianist to conductor, music director and cultural negotiator.

“In China, in my early days when I was still studying the piano, my heroes were Fou Ts’ong, Yin Chengzhong and Liu Shikun. When I went to the States I looked towards Asian conductors—Seiji Ozawa, who was the first Asian who made it in the mainstream world; the first Asian superstar. As I began to mature I found role models in Karajan, and later, Bernstein. Now I like Carlos Kleiber, simply because he is able to transform, to communicate; his skill as a communicator is without equal.”

Today, however, more often I am not inspired by individual people, or individual things—but by elements, experiences and ideas. I remember going to a small, rural village in Indonesia as part of a field trip, watching a ritual ceremony. We had to change cars several times to get to this place. The performer was authentic and true to himself, and he was communing between human beings and the greatness of nature. This, for me, was a different sort of inspiration, the kind of inspiration I look for in my life and work.”

— Tsung Yeh (2013)

REFORMS IN CONTEXT TO SINGAPORE

Yeh's contributions to Chinese orchestra in Singapore's context have likewise echoed his more recent concerns with holistic and local cultural interactions, alongside the need to maintain a broader public profile. His reforms, whether small or large in scale, have been implemented on multi-faceted platforms.

Yeh's expansion of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's repertoire, for example, began with an in-house initiative to broaden the scope of literacy and widen potential programming options. Targeted campaigns to include the works of contemporary composers have led to multiple commissions from local and overseas names in the Chinese orchestral world such as Phoon Yew Tien and Kuan Nai-Chung. Yeh has tried to situate these endeavours within Singapore's multicultural heritage, borrowing the term '*Nanyang Style*' from the local Chinese visual arts community to encourage the development of homegrown musical aesthetics and a regional curatorial eye. Eschewing state imperatives in culturally engineered prescriptions of the official "Chinese", "Malay" and "Indian" ethnicities in nationalist song campaigns, he has sought to broker the musical Other through the Chinese, conservatory-trained eye. One of the first projects that grew out of his campaign for Chinese orchestral music of the region was *Marco Polo and Princess Blue*, an ambitious symphonic epic, indulging romantic imagination at the expense of historical accuracy with musical graftings by Liu Yuan through the Renaissance explorer's possible journey back from China to Italy via the antipodes.

Subsequent projects have also seen Yeh seek inter-disciplinary collaborations and cross-genre exchanges. These include exploits to bring jazz, folk and blues into the lingua franca of the orchestra in *Mostly Gershwin* (2013) and *Fiddle Fiddle* (2012); explorations in performance practice through meditations on Elizabethan music and *kunqu* opera (*Awaking*, 2008); forays into Indonesian puppetry (*Bayang for Wayang Kulit and Chinese Orchestra*, 2008), and co-development with visual artists, theatre practitioners and multi-media experts (*Instant is a Millennium—A Musical Conversation with Tan Swie Hian*, 2003; *Admiral of the Seven Seas*, 2005; *Thunderstorm*, 2005).

Yeh has led the ensemble to international tours in the United Kingdom and China, collaborating with film composer Michael Nyman in concerts at London's Barbican Centre. At the same time, he has also helmed outreach campaigns within Singapore, working with doyens of Singapore pop Dick Lee and Kit Chan, and also with Mandarin radio station UFM100.3.

Yeh's re-interrogation of the Chinese orchestra's origins per se has led him to come full circle in looking to the past once more. Specific local and regional traditions of small-ensemble genres such as *Nanyin* and Teochew music have begun appearing on the SCO's chamber music calendar, even if the orchestra's conservatory-groomed musicians have also had to struggle with unlearning and adapting to different styles and acoustic aesthetics.



CHALLENGES

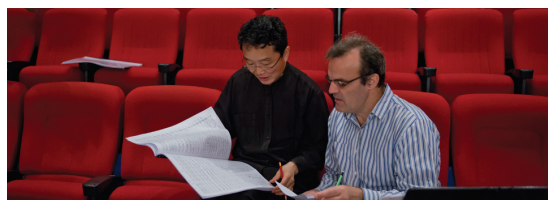
Yeh's projects have yielded new audiences and expanded the strengths and range of the Chinese orchestra. However, some of the orchestra's earliest supporters have also expressed resistance to his endeavours, lamenting the reduced focus on the repertorial core of 1980s compositions, reminiscent of 19th-century Russian symphonic and colouristic musical tableaux.

Yeh remains unsurprised by his critics, pointing out the tenacity of Chinese diasporic nostalgia ironically in the light of the Chinese orchestra's actual historic and radical beginnings. The greater challenge, he believes, lies in the older artistic debate of how to recalibrate instrumental timbres and technologies, chamber-based acoustics, compositional and performance techniques and—most significantly—aural capacities to the needs of modern-day concert halls audiences bred on the diet of globalised culture and distracted by expanding digital opportunities.

"The biggest challenge for me is to get each musician to open up his ear. We all have but one ear, but if we open up 80 ears together something new, something magical can happen. When everyone is listening together, and to one another, we can open up perspectives and dialogues, and eventually come together to create that 3D world of sound."

— Tsung Yeh (2013)

Certainly, the US-resident's recent award of the Cultural Medallion in Singapore for his outward-looking reforms must ultimately also be understood beyond the world of the Chinese orchestra, and in the context of Singapore's own aspirations for transnational image and art-making. Commenting on his twice-diasporic Chinese identity situated within a globalising world, Yeh welcomes the messiness and excitement of risk and pursuit



of the undefinable. He echoes the sentiments of Yayoi Everett and Fred Lau on the need for a more flexible identity that is not polarised between the "east" and "west" but zigzags "across the contemporary cultural terrain." (2004:24)

"Sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night, I don't know where I am—in the States? In Singapore? In Shanghai? I look at myself in the mirror and ask – who am I, what am I? Chinese, American, Shanghainese? It is confusing, but I think it is good to be confused now and then. We become more flexible, more accommodating, more adaptable persons, more willing to learn and listen."

— Tsung Yeh (2013)

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ABOUT THE WRITER

Dr Tan Shzr Ee is an arts writer, ethnomusicologist, and an active musician. She is a Lecturer with the Department of Music at Royal Holloway, University of London.

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“ It is my great honour to receive the Cultural Medallion. I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation to those who have placed their confidence and belief in me.

Mr Patrick Lee, the Chairman of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra Board, who has put forward this award nomination.

Mr Chew Keng Juea, Mr Robin Hu, Mr Lim Jim Koon, Ms Goh Ching Lee and Mr Tan Swie Hian for nominating me in the past.

The SCO Board members, staff and orchestra musicians for their strong support in my work.

Friends and audiences in Singapore who have showered me with their enthusiasm and care.

My wife Saulan who has stood by me all these years through the ups and downs of my music career.

I believe this award will open a new chapter in my life—soaring to new heights with SCO in the international scene; setting the stage with more innovative works; and staying grounded within the Singapore community to be a truly people's orchestra.

It is with utmost gratitude to Singapore that I am given this opportunity to serve and the trust to create. Thank you.”

Tsung Yeh