

SCOring Cultural Points



03 JULY 2015

12:41AM SGT

By Goh Hua Zhen

huazhen@six-six.com

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra celebrates its 20th anniversary next year and is still going strong. SIX-

SIX.COM speaks to Executive Director Terence Ho and international artiste Dame Evelyn Glennie to find out the orchestra's secret to success.

Singapore celebrates its Jubilee this year, and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) will celebrate its 20-year milestone next year. 20 years of giving the nation a unique blend of Asian sounds. On 3 July, the Orchestra will be presenting its own tribute to our jubilee, in their concert entitled "Towards the future - SCO celebrates SG50".

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra is Singapore's only professional Chinese orchestra. It resides at the Singapore Conference Hall and is made up of 85 musicians. Local in flavour, the SCO will feature on 3 July local composers like Phoon Yew Tien and Eric Watson, and local guest artistes like local band Mlcappella. The orchestra will be playing works like "A Stroll in the Lion City" and a medley of National Day theme songs.

Executive Director of the SCO, Terence Ho, 45, spoke about the concert, SCO's unique brand of Singaporean music, as well as what the orchestra is doing to retain audiences and his take on the Singapore spirit.



Singapore-centric programme

Most tellingly, the SCO's vision is to be a "world renowned Chinese Orchestra with a uniquely Singaporean character". This explains, for the most part, the artistic boundaries the SCO is pushing with regard to infusing Singaporean elements to their music. The highlight of July's concert would have to be the piece "An Independent Note". Written by local composer Eric Watson, it entails

chinese orchestra music set to extracts of late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's speeches. The speeches will be narrated by local veteran actor Lim Kay Tong. Even before MM Lee passed away in March, the project was already in the pipeline.

"People will say (the concert programme) is rojak," Ho said, referring to the colloquial term referring to fusion.

"I think our programme is very Singapore-centric – it is very meaningful especially when we think of SG50," he said.

Yet, even aside from this concert, the SCO has always been focused on Singapore-based artistes. This, Ho attributes, to the SCO's obligation as a national orchestra. Its homecoming series recognises artistes based overseas. Past artistes involved in the series include internationally renowned Singaporean violinist Kam Ning. As part of their concert programme this year, another renowned Singaporean violinist Siow Lee Chin, will be returning to Singapore to play with the Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra and the Singapore National Youth Orchestra as well. Siow is currently Professor of Violin at the Soochow University School of Music in China.

However, the orchestra has not forgotten to raise its international profile by working with overseas artistes as well. Dame Evelyn Glennie, Scottish virtuoso percussionist who is slated to perform with the SCO in September, was full of praise for the orchestra.

Aside from being "very open minded" and "willing to try new collaborations, Dame Evelyn also thinks that "pushing existing boundaries" in "courageous and thoroughly contemporary concerts" keeps the music produced by the SCO "fresh and entertaining". Dame Evelyn was providing an email response to questions sent to her by SIX-SIX.COM.

Dame Evelyn also observed that what the SCO has been doing with its Singapore brand of fusion music is inspiring.

"The SCO brings together the old and the new, Eastern styles and Western styles, in a joyous celebration of music's power to move us all."



Capturing Audiences

As with any orchestra, the survival of the SCO lies in the health of its concert attendance. This is especially pertinent for the SCO, being a national orchestra which receives government support, and also sponsorship and donations from the Singapore public.

Of the 100 to 120 concerts a year, more than half are in the “heartlands”, for example in parks, schools and hospitals. Not considering overseas performances, the rest of their concerts are ticketed with 15 different sets of programmes.

Each series has a specific theme. The themes range from as diverse as chinese opera concert to young people concerts. There are also concerts which are based on celebrations like Mothers day or Chinese New Year.

Ho admits that this is intentional. “We have our audiences in mind,” he said. “Our programmes are for people from all walks of life,” he said.

Ho says that this contributes to the affiliability of the orchestra. By honouring the heritage and values of Singapore, the relatability of the orchestra increases. He raised the example of the Chinese opera concert that the orchestra stages annually. It attracts a lot of members of the older generation who may otherwise be alienated from a orchestra with a more traditional offering.

Of course, Ho recognises the challenges faced in accomodating the tastes of all audiences. “Like food, you cannot cook a dish to satisfy everyone,” he said. Yet, this segmented marketing strategy seems to work for most. The SCO frequently sells out its concert hall, which seats over 800. It has also had to add concerts such as those in the Young Children’s series as the initial offering was majorly oversubscribed.

“The audience is always hungry for new things, hence we need a creative and engaging programme,” he said.

“It's a very challenging industry,” admitted Ho.



The Singapore spirit

Ho also acknowledges that the orchestra has an important mission as the nation's premiere orchestra and as its cultural ambassador. The gravity of this mission is not lost on the artistic team, management board and staff.

The team thus worked together and in 2014, put up the Our People, Our Music concert, which saw them break two world records for Largest Chinese Orchestra and Largest Chinese Drum Ensemble. There were almost 5,000 musicians playing to a 30,000 strong crowd at the then newly constructed National Stadium. At one point, the concert sold 1,200 tickets a day.

Ho acknowledges that the event, which would not have achieved success without the voluntary participation of Chinese orchestra from schools, and the enthusiastic support from Singaporeans, bears testament to the Singaporean spirit.

“What we want to showcase is the Singaporean spirit,” Ho said.

“Although (Singapore is) small, we have a big heart.”

ABOUT THE WRITER

Goh Hua Zhen