

SCO MUSICIANS SERIES



LEONG WENG KAM

SCO hidden gems

Celebrating Singapore Chinese Orchestra's Silver Jubilee





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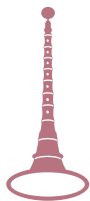
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ABOUT THE WRITER

Leong Weng Kam started writing about the Singapore Chinese music scene when he joined The Straits Times as a bilingual journalist in 1977. He retired from the newspaper after 40 years and is now an independent writer.

A co-author of *Men In White, The Untold Story of Singapore's Ruling Political Party* (2009), his other works include *Art and Soul, 80 Years of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts* (2019) and *The People's Orchestra: Singapore Chinese Orchestra 1996 – 2016* (2016).

He is a Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts board member and an independent director of the Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre.



Watch **Virtuosos and Classics** webisode series

FOREWORD



Lee Hsien Loong

PRIME MINISTER
SCO PATRON

This year, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) celebrates its silver jubilee. Since SCO's inauguration in 1996, I have witnessed its growth and transformation, from its humble beginnings as a community music group into a world-class national Chinese orchestra.

At home, the 85-member SCO has become the "People's Orchestra" known for its wide range of performances enjoyed by Singaporeans of all races. It regularly plays to full houses at the Singapore Conference Hall. Abroad, it is recognised as one of the world's leading Chinese orchestras for its comprehensive repertoire, superior sound quality and high professional standards. SCO gave its most recent overseas performances during a 10-day European tour of Germany, Czech Republic, Italy and Greece in 2019, just months before the outbreak of Covid-19.

Like other arts groups, SCO has had to cope with the disruptions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. But it adapted well, and found new ways to engage its audience through digital platforms. I thoroughly enjoyed watching SCO's first virtual fund-raising concert in October last year, which raised more than \$750,000.

This commemorative publication, *SCO Hidden Gems – Celebrating Singapore Chinese Orchestra's Silver Jubilee*, features eight of SCO's pioneering musicians – their lives, music and contributions to SCO's journey.

I hope you will draw inspiration from this diverse and talented group of musicians, and continue to support SCO, our People's Orchestra. Congratulations on your 25th Anniversary!

MESSAGE



Edwin Tong

**MINISTER FOR CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND YOUTH
& SECOND MINISTER FOR LAW**

Congratulations to the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) on your 25th anniversary!

Reaching this milestone is testament to SCO's outstanding contributions to Singapore's arts and culture landscape over the past decades. Since its inception in 1997, SCO has represented Singapore's multi-racial identity as a National Orchestra. Alongside traditional Chinese orchestral pieces, it has pushed the boundaries with its repertoire of unique Nanyang-flavour compositions, drawing from regional influences and fusing East-West styles. The multiculturalism of Singapore's society has provided rich inspiration to SCO in forging a unique Singapore Chinese culture that we can embrace and be proud of.

As "The People's Orchestra", SCO has tirelessly promoted Chinese orchestra music to children and youth in schools, and has brought free performances under the Community and Caring series to public parks, hospitals and the heartlands. These outreach efforts have inspired Singaporeans from all walks of life through your music.

SCO has also been instrumental in the growth and celebration of Chinese Orchestra as a traditional art form. Through the Singapore National Youth Chinese Orchestra and biennial Singapore Chinese Music Competition, SCO identifies and nurtures future generations of Chinese orchestra musicians in Singapore.

Amidst these challenging times, SCO has stayed resilient and adapted its offerings, pivoting to online programmes and digital platforms. This has enabled audiences to enjoy live-streamed concerts and recitals, recorded digital performances by the musicians, short documentaries, talks and demonstrations. All these would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of SCO's musicians and professional management team.

This commemorative book profiles SCO musicians for the first time and will serve as a valuable resource for audiences to better understand and appreciate the orchestra and its musicians.

Congratulations SCO, and I wish you every success as you move forward to the next 25 years, and many more years beyond that.

PREFACE



Ng Siew Quan

SCO CHAIRMAN

At 25, SCO is still considered a young orchestra by any measure. But within such a short period, it has chalked up great achievements to become a uniquely Singapore icon and among the top Chinese orchestras in the world today.

Starting as a community orchestra with 32 musicians, it was elevated to a national orchestra in 1996. SCO is now 85-member-strong, many of them leading instrumentalists who are the orchestra's pioneers.

SCO boasts a rich and diversified repertoire comprising commissioned works and re-arrangements with new orchestrations from original compositions in different genres such as Western classical, jazz and pop, Chinese dialect songs and folk tunes of other ethnic races.

SCO has performed to critical acclaim in many countries – from China and Malaysia in the early years to Hong Kong, South Korea and several European cities more recently.

While we are still in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic adjusting to restrictions and changes, we have much to celebrate as we reach our 25th year.

As part of the celebrations, we have published this commemorative book *SCO Hidden Gems – Celebrating Singapore Chinese Orchestra's Silver Jubilee* to shine the spotlight on some of our pioneer musicians.

The success of any orchestra to a large extent depends on the standard and quality of its musicians. A world-class orchestra cannot exist without its outstanding musicians. SCO is no exception.

Published in English and Chinese and penned by different writers for the two language editions, they include never-before-told stories behind the struggle and success of the musicians as well as interesting details about the instruments they play.

Through the candid accounts of our eight hidden gems, the book traces the making of a top Chinese orchestra and provides valuable background information on SCO's early years too.

Lastly, I would like to thank Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, our Patron for writing the Foreword and Minister for Culture, Community and Youth & Second Minister for Law Edwin Tong for his Message.



PROLOGUE

We are 25!

It was an unprecedented concert for unprecedented times – three Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) soloists performing on stage with their faces masked and seated metres apart from one another.

In such a surreal setting, the orchestra's Yangqin Principal Qu Jianqing, Pipa Principal Yu Jia and Sanxian Associate Principal Huang Guifang relished the opportunity to play their string instruments at the hour-long show *Pluck* on July 31, 2021.

The event was the first of three shows that SCO organised under its Virtuoso Series to launch its silver jubilee celebrations.

Watching the evening performance at the SCO Concert Hall with rapt attention was an audience limited to only 50 because of the restrictions and safety measures imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. The guest-of-honour was Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Transport Baey Yam Keng and Mrs Baey.

About 100 others who had bought e-tickets enjoyed the concert via live streaming. It was time for bowed string instruments to shine at the second concert *Bow* in August, with Concertmaster Li Baoshun and Erhu Principal Zhao Jianhua performing to a larger live audience of about 200 as restrictions were eased.

The third show in September was *Winds*, which showcased the talents and music of Sheng Principal Guo Changsuo, Dizi Principal Yin Zhiyang and Suona/



(From left) Huang Guifang, Qu Jianqing and Yujia performing *In the Deep of the Night* at the *Virtuoso Series: Pluck*.

Guan Principal Jin Shiyi. It was also live streamed with a limited number viewing it in person.

All three sell-out concerts were followed immediately by post-show dialogues between the performers and the audience as well as online viewers.

To build up interest in the Virtuoso Series of concerts, the eight SCO musicians in the three shows were featured in short episodes or webisodes entitled *Virtuosos & Classics*, which began running on social media platforms in early July. In the videos, they gave their views on music and discussed the instruments they play.

SCO also recorded three pre-concert talks by the musicians for release online.

The pandemic failed to derail the 85-member orchestra's anniversary celebrations as it displayed its mettle and ability to adapt.

As SCO's Executive Director Terence Ho put it: "The past 25 years of hard work and dedication are just part of SCO's journey and the pandemic shall not hinder our efforts to continue striving forward. Under the new normal, SCO will grow stronger and hit new milestones."

During the celebrations which lasted six months, SCO also held two other bigger concerts.

The first, *Our Shared Memories: The SCO Yesteryear*, held on the first two days of October, paid tribute to the orchestra's pioneers from the 1990s, especially those from the former People's Association (PA) Chinese Orchestra.

“At the core of SCO are the musicians and we are featuring them for the first time as we mark our 25th year to share their stories and success.”

The highlights included homegrown dizi player Lim Sin Yeo playing the dizi concerto *Haw Par Villa Myths* written by Chinese composer Liu Bin.

The guest-of-honour was none other than Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong. In 1993, Mr Goh, who was then Prime Minister, mooted the idea of establishing a national Chinese orchestra, which led to SCO's formation the following year.





PROLOGUE

Later in October, SCO staged a two-night gala concert, *Dazzling Rhapsodies*, delighting fans with its best works.

Among them was Concertmaster Li Baoshun's performance of the gaohu concerto, *Legend of the Merlion*, which SCO commissioned Chinese composer Liu Xijin to write in 1999. It is the orchestra's earliest work with Nanyang flavour and one of its signature pieces today.

SCO Patron, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong attended the first of the two-night gala concert.

Ng Siew Quan, who took over as SCO Chairman in 2018, hailed the orchestra's achievements since its inception, and said: "We have plenty to celebrate after 25 years."

Interestingly, Ng played the sanxian in his school's Chinese orchestra when he was a junior college student many years ago.

The origins of SCO can be traced back to the early 1960s when it was a Chinese instrumental section in PA's Cultural Troupe which entertained residents in the heartlands, often performing on a makeshift stage.

By the mid-1970s, the music group had morphed into a semi-professional community orchestra before upgrading to become Singapore's second national orchestra in 1996. The first, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, was formed in 1979.

In just 25 years, SCO has developed into a top Chinese orchestra boasting many talented musicians, Ng proudly pointed out. Apart from traditional Chinese compositions, its rich repertoire includes works with a unique Nanyang flavour and others that blend Eastern and Western elements.

SCO has also been highly rated by music critics, musicians and composers in China, where it has performed on several occasions, the last in 2018 in Shanghai.

Chinese composer Zhao Jiping, renowned for the music he wrote for Zhang Yimou's movies such as *Raise the Red Lantern*, has praised SCO for having an "excellent conductor, good management and world-class musicians".

2018 was an important year for SCO. Its musicians returned to a newly-revamped home at the Singapore Conference Hall after a major renovation lasting one year and costing nearly \$16 million. The acoustics in the concert hall was upgraded and access for the elderly and handicapped improved with better passage ways, wheelchair ramps and new lifts.

In 2019, SCO performed in Gwangju, Korea, in May and went on a 10-day tour of Germany, Czech Republic, Italy and Greece between late August and early September, its second tour to Europe after its first in 2005.

SCO hidden gems



Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat (first row, third from left), the Guest-of-Honour, with SCO members and artists at SCO's first theatrical production, *Infinite Island: A Theatre in Concert* in 2019.

Music for the concert was composed and arranged by SCO's resident composer Wang Chenwei and the story enacted by MediaCorp artistes Felicia Chin and Ben Yeo.

Then came the outbreak of Covid-19 in December which engulfed the world. All SCO concerts planned for 2020 were canned.

Ng, who accompanied the orchestra on the tour, said: "We are proud to bring our music to more people around the world and to be able to perform in the great music halls in Europe marked a new milestone for SCO."

The orchestra performed at the Berlin Konzerthaus, the Rudolfinum's Dvorak Hall in Prague, the Chiesa di San Giacomo in San Domenico in Forli, Italy, and the Ancient Theatre of Dodoni in Ioannina in Greece.

Soon after the orchestra's return from Europe, SCO presented its first theatrical production, *Infinite Island: A Theatre in Concert*, in collaboration with theatre practitioner Goh Boon Teck to commemorate Singapore's bicentennial.

But the disruptions brought about by the pandemic led SCO to find new ways to engage its audience through digital media. Videos on Chinese orchestra music, features on SCO musicians and snippets of their individual and group performances began to appear on digital platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

SCO staged its first virtual orchestral piece when 54 of its members played *Confluence* which was posted on social media platforms in March 2020.

Several other events had to be moved online too, including a fund-raising concert later in October. As in previous fund-raising gala concerts by SCO, Mrs Goh Chok Tong entertained with her songs. The annual event raised more than \$750,000, an impressive amount considering it was done online.

PROLOGUE



SCO presented its first virtual orchestral piece *Confluence* in 2020. It weaves together Indian, Malay and Western musical styles played by musicians with Chinese instruments.

A month later in November, SCO held the first edition of the Singapore Chinese Music Competition in hybrid form. More than 500 instrumentalists, aged between seven and 54, took part in the junior, intermediate, senior and Grand categories.

Previously known as the National Chinese Music Competition, the biennial event was first organised by the National Arts Council in 1998. The history of the competition dates back to the then Ministry of Culture in the 1980s.

If not for the pandemic, said SCO's Terence Ho, at least 1,000 contestants were expected to take part in the competition, which added two new categories, for orchestras and ensembles.

The top prize in the Grand category went to erhu teacher and player Deborah Siok, a member of the Singapore National Youth Chinese Orchestra and student of SCO's Concertmaster Li Baoshun.

SCO is featuring the lives and music of eight of its principal instrumentalists – who have been in the spotlight of its 25th anniversary celebrations – in the commemorative book *SCO Hidden Gems – Celebrating Singapore Chinese Orchestra's Silver Jubilee*.

They are Li Baoshun, Zhao Jianhua, Yu Jia, Qu Jianqing, Huang Guifang, Guo Changsuo, Yin Zhiyang and Jin Shiyi.

SCO hidden gems



Mrs Goh Chok Tong singing *Plum Blossoms for a Better Tomorrow* at SCO fund-raising concert in October 2020.

“At the core of SCO are the musicians and we are featuring them for the first time as we mark our 25th year to share their stories and success,” SCO Chairman Ng said.

But he stressed that this marked only the beginning of SCO’s efforts to introduce its musicians to the public, adding: “We have more hidden gems than the eight. In fact, all our musicians are our gems.”

SCO Music Director and Conductor Yeh Tsung was all praise for the first eight “hidden gems” unveiled in

this publication. “They were all taught by well-known Chinese masters in the instruments they specialise in. I hope they will pass on their skills and talent in music to the younger generation in Singapore,” he said.

Let’s turn the pages to read about their fascinating lives and the struggles and sacrifices they made to get to where they are today. Also don’t forget to scan the QR code at the beginning of each profile to watch and listen to each musician’s favourite piece.

Deborah Siok, a student of Li Baoshun, won the top prize in the Grand category of the Singapore Chinese Music Competition in November 2020.



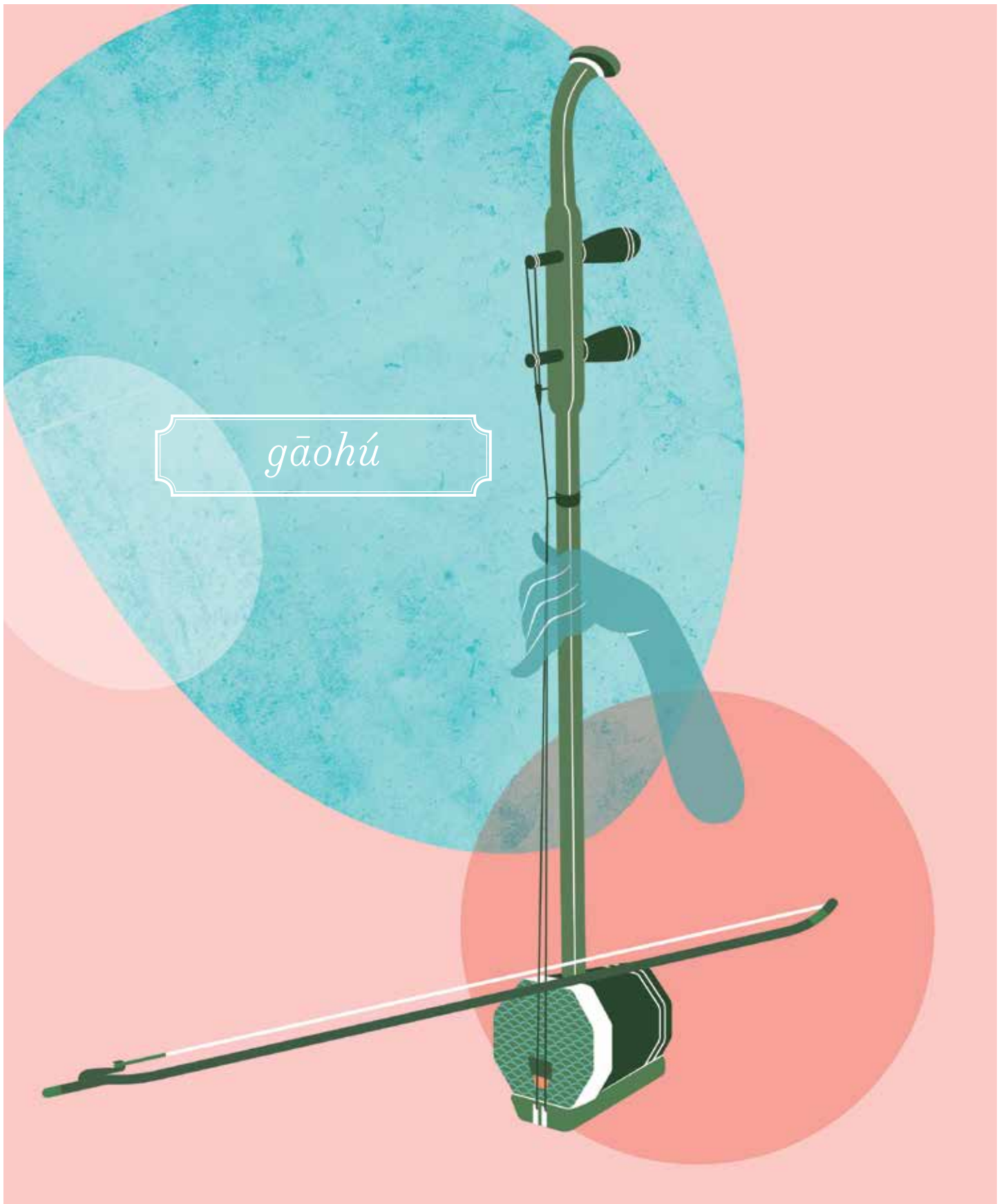


Watch
Li Baoshun's
performance

PIECE *Legend of the Merlion*
COMPOSER Liu Xijin
CONDUCTOR Yeh Tsung
CONCERT Flavours of Chinese
Music – A Night of
Liu Xijin's Works,
March 4, 2017
VENUE Victoria Concert Hall

DESCRIPTION This love ode is a story of the beautiful and mysterious Merlion. It comprises three movements – Seek Blessings, Raging Sea, and Nanyang's Affection. The work was commissioned by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and premiered at a performance on November 28, 1999 at the Victoria Concert Hall.

gāohú







Li Baoshun

An Immigrant's Concerto *for Singapore*

It was an episode etched in the memory of Concertmaster Li Baoshun, an experience which has served him well in his career with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) spanning some 25 years.

The date: September 3, 1987. The event: the opening of the inaugural China Arts Festival in Beijing at the Capital Indoor Stadium before a capacity crowd of 18,000 with Chinese Culture Minister Wang Meng as the guest-of-honour.

The performance: *The Great Wall Capriccio*, an erhu concerto by Central Chinese Orchestra, with Min Huifen as soloist. Written by the orchestra's then leader Liu Wenjin, it was to be the highlight of the evening's concert.

Min, the doyenne of erhu music from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music who performed the concerto's premiere in 1982, was naturally composer Liu's choice to play it again at the festival's opening.

But the day before the performance, with the erhu virtuoso still ill and undergoing treatment for cancer, festival organisers were unsure if she would be able to step on stage.

Li Baoshun, a fresh graduate from the China Conservatory of Music who was just 24 then, was told to be on standby as her substitute in case the famous soloist could not show up.

Though he had joined the orchestra only the year before, he was deemed well-prepared and the most competent musician to play the piece.

Still, it was with great anxiety and trepidation as he waited for Min to appear, which she did, much to the relief of all, especially Li and the event organisers.

“I was all ready though, having rehearsed and played the concerto with the orchestra several times,” related Li.

Nevertheless, he could not help feeling unnerved, given the importance and scale of the concert. It was to launch a three-week event featuring 3,000 performers from more than 50 Chinese arts groups and artistes. Comprising more than 180 performances in several Chinese cities, the comprehensive programme included modern musicals and Chinese operas, Chinese instrumental and symphony concerts, traditional Chinese and contemporary dances, acrobatics and magic shows.

The tense episode over the festival opening in 1987 taught Li the importance of self-discipline and being prepared for the unexpected – qualities which he feels all professional orchestras and musicians should possess.

These attributes have helped him to stay the course in his lifelong music career, first as Erhu Principal and later as deputy and acting leader with the Central Chinese Orchestra for nearly a decade before he relocated to join SCO in 1997, he said.

Li was part of the pioneer batch of foreign talent from China to join SCO after its inauguration as a national music company just the year before.

Two years earlier, he had been appointed concertmaster of the now-defunct Asia Orchestra, a collaborative project of three traditional orchestras from China, Korea and Japan which held regular performances.

What then is the role of a concertmaster? He can be compared to the captain of a sports team. Among other things, he leads the orchestra’s members in working with their music director or conductor and ensures that all goes well before and during a performance.

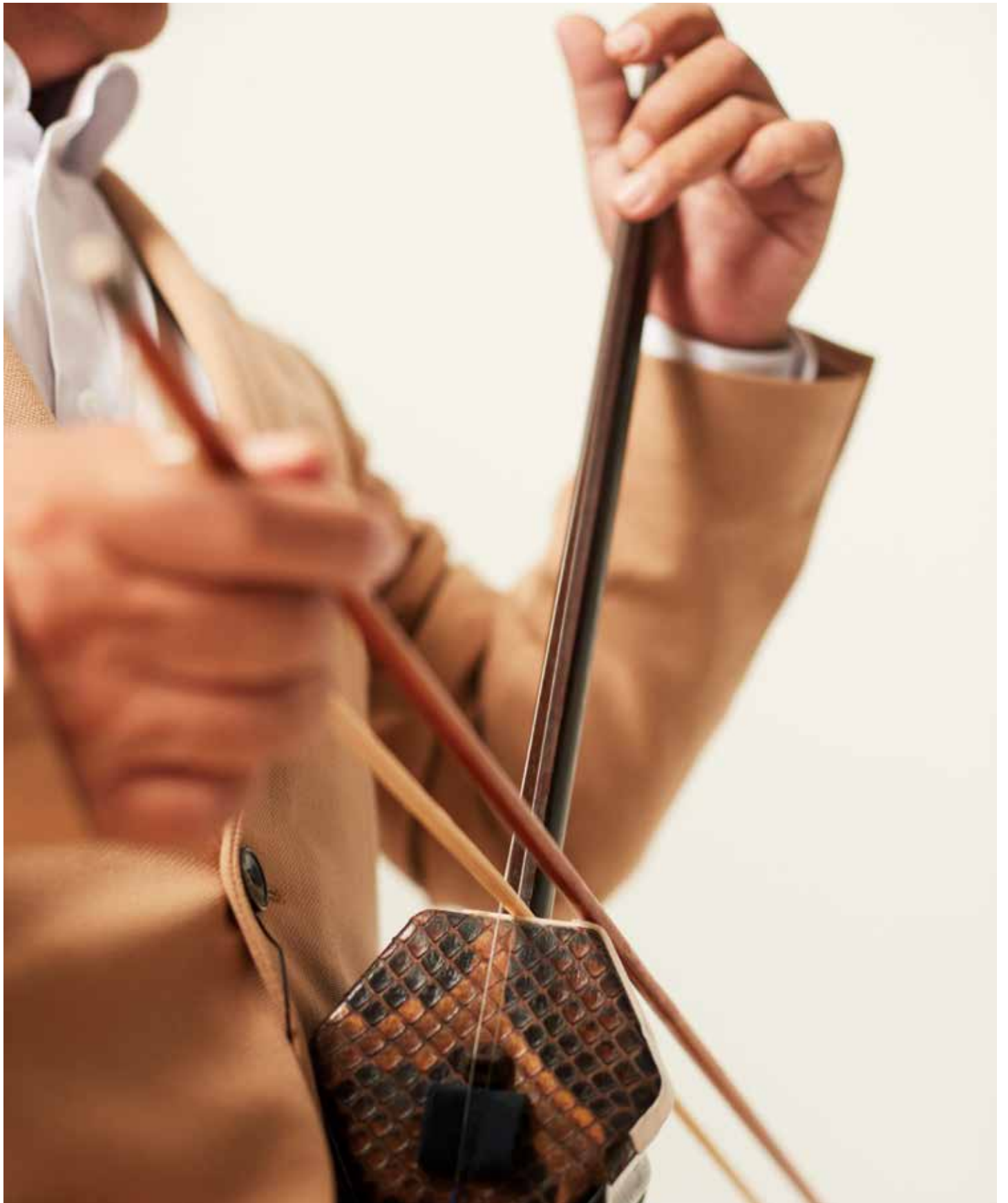
In a formal concert, Li, who plays both the gaohu and erhu with SCO, is the last musician to appear on stage before the orchestra plays the opening piece. His concertmaster’s seat is the first in the front row in the huqin section and nearest to the conductor’s left.



As SCO’s Concertmaster, Li has been working closely with Maestro Yeh Tsung for around 20 years.

Li performed his signature piece *Legend of the Merlion* at an SCO concert before the orchestra's tour to China in 2014.







Once on stage, he signals the musicians to tune their instruments. After he takes his seat, the conductor steps out to applause from the audience. The conductor shakes his hands and the concert begins.

But before that long-awaited moment, the concertmaster makes sure that every musician is fit to perform and all issues related to the performance resolved.

As Li related, like all orchestras, SCO has had its fair share of hiccups before a concert, such as the need to replace a musician who fell ill, missing music scores and instruments with broken strings.

The most serious incident at the SCO in his memory was when a musician had to take leave in the middle of a concert as he felt unwell.

“We were able to manage the situation discreetly, without raising an alarm and without the audience knowing,” he said, giving credit to his musicians for remaining calm as they helped to get the player quietly off the stage.

“Fortunately we have never had to replace a soloist at the eleventh hour because of unforeseen circumstances,” he noted.

Before he moved to Singapore, Li was an award-winning erhu performer with a fast-rising career as acting leader of the Central Chinese Orchestra in Beijing.

“Looking at the list of Chinese musicians recruited by SCO, including Qu Chunquan from Shanghai, I knew the orchestra would be starting with a strong team.”

From 1987 to 1996, he represented China and the Central Chinese Orchestra at music festivals and events in many countries in Europe, the Americas as well as Asia. One key event was a 56-day tour of 18 cities in the United States in 1996.

A prodigy begins a colourful musical odyssey

Li's musical odyssey started from his childhood days in the late 1960s in his hometown of Tianjin.

Born in 1963, just two years after the Great Chinese Famine (1959 – 1961) or the “three bad years”, when food was scarce, Li was the youngest of seven children. His father was a tertiary-educated civil servant and Peking opera fan and his mother a homemaker.

Both were book and music lovers who encouraged their children to read and listen to good music from young. Li's grandfather was a private home tutor.

With such a conducive family environment, Li naturally took to books and music appreciation like a fish to water. He recollected that when he was about five or six, he tried to read Chinese classics such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, in a special handwritten print edition, though he could not understand much of it. He often heard his mother sing familiar Wu opera songs while having to put up with an elder brother's violin practice at home.

“My fourth brother Baoguo was learning the violin then and he would play the same piece of music over and over again till I could memorise it all by heart,” he said. One day he surprised his brother by pointing out the exact notes he played wrongly in a violin piece by German composer Max Bruch.

Impressed by his natural gift and unerring ear for music, his brother started teaching him the violin. Li picked it up quickly and soon became known as the “little violinist” among his friends in school.

At the height of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), his primary school wanted to start a music group for propaganda purposes and Li was among the first to be roped in.

As it was a Chinese instrumental group, he was not given the violin but an erhu to play instead. “We had an erhu at home so I started fiddling with it before my brother Baoguo got his friend to teach me,” Li said.

It was only when he was eight that he started receiving formal lessons at a *shao nian gong* or Youth Palace, a popular cultural and recreational centre for the young. Later his father engaged a more experienced teacher, Fan Xiangpin from the Tianjin Song and Dance troupe, to coach him.

His interest in the erhu started to grow and he became a very diligent student in those early years. He remembered waking up as early as 6am to practise an hour before going to school every day. Then it was another hour of practice at noon during his lunch break. A longer practice session followed later in the day.



Li with composer Zhao Jiping and Mrs Zhao.

In his aspiration to be a professional musician, he was doubly blessed by the encouragement and guidance from his father and elder brother Baoguo.

Unfortunately his brother's musical pursuit was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution when he, like many young people then, was sent to rural areas on labour rehabilitation programmes. He returned home after a short stint because of poor health which also affected his ability to resume playing the violin.

In 1978, when he was barely 13, Li made an unexpected move – he joined the Music and Drama Company (MDC) of the People's Liberation Army's Air Force Unit in Fuzhou. In those days, most young people seeking a head start in their music career would usually enrol in the junior department or secondary school affiliated to a reputable music conservatory.

"Officers from the air force's MDC came to Tianjin on a recruitment drive and my teacher encouraged me to go for it," Li said. It was considered a good opportunity not only to learn and perform but also to serve in the military.

Overcoming his mother's reluctance to let him go, he took the overnight train for a two-day journey from Tianjin to Fuzhou to begin his life as a young soldier-cum-musician.

After three months of military training, he began playing the erhu in the MDC for all its performances ranging from Chinese operas and popular concerts to ballets and plays.

Li reckoned that the time he spent in military uniform and away from home helped in his growing up years. Like boys in Singapore doing their National Service, he said he was subjected to military discipline and routine. As a soldier musician, he had to travel to faraway camps in Fuzhou and beyond, some in very remote areas, to entertain air force servicemen.

“There were no mobile phones and television was still in its early days in China, so our performances were all very enthusiastically received,” he said.

When he turned 17, he felt it was time to move on. He left the air force to return home to further his studies, spending the next two years preparing for entrance examinations to music conservatories. His music teachers included erhu virtuoso Ji Guizhen.

Meanwhile, he performed whenever an opportunity arose. In 1981, he won second prize in an erhu competition in Tianjin, a useful credential in his applications for tertiary-level studies.

Good news came in 1985 when he was accepted by the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing for a four-year degree course in huqin studies. The Tianjin-born master Liu Mingyuan, a huqin specialist who became known in the West after winning an international music competition in the 1950s, took Li under his wings. His other teachers at the conservatory included Zhao Yancheng and Wang Guotong.

Those back to school years after his stint in the air force were happy ones, Li reminisced. One schoolmate whom he used to see at lectures in the campus was vocal student Peng Liyuan, now the Chinese First Lady and wife of President Xi Jinping.

“The best thing to do is keep on improving as there is no limit to perfection, and to always be ready for changes and the unexpected.”

Li excelled in his final-year examinations and was recruited by the Central Chinese Orchestra soon after his graduation in 1986. Two fellow graduates who joined the orchestra around the same time were Song Fei and Gao Shaoqin, who later made their mark as erhu soloists.

Apart from performing with the orchestra, Li also played the erhu and gaohu for music written by composer Zhao Jiping for many Chinese movies in the 1990s. They include Zhang Yimou’s 1991 box office hit, *Raise The Red Lantern*, starring superstar Gong Li.





Li with SCO's first Music Director Hu Bingxu during Central Chinese Orchestra's tour in America in 1997.

A new beginning in Singapore

Li visited Singapore for the first time in 1990 when he came with the Central Chinese Orchestra to take part in the Singapore Arts Festival. As the soloist for the orchestra's performance at the Victoria Concert Hall, he played one of his favourite pieces, erhu concerto *The Great Wall Capriccio*.

The visit proved to be a fruitful one allowing him to meet several musicians from the then People's Association (PA) Chinese Orchestra and learn about the Chinese music scene in Singapore.

When the PA Chinese Orchestra was to be upgraded in 1996, Li was among the first musicians from the Central Chinese Orchestra to be picked by its then Music Director Hu Bingxu to join the new SCO. Hu himself joined the SCO as its first Music Director and Conductor in 1997.

Those were eventful years – he married a young doctor in 1995 and their daughter was born the following year; his teacher, Liu Mingyuan, passed away from ill health the same year in 1996, aged 65.

When SCO's then managers Sim Bee Hia and Neo Phaik Hoon went to Beijing to make him an offer to join SCO, he did not need much convincing.

"I was very impressed with the new national orchestra's ambitious plans, and looking at the list of Chinese musicians recruited by SCO, including Qu Chunquan from Shanghai, I knew the orchestra would be starting with a strong team," he said.



He moved his family to Singapore by the end of 1997. His wife, Liu Hongmei, had to give up her medical practice to look after their only daughter, Li Xuan. The latter was active in school Chinese orchestras, playing the erhu up to her junior college days. She graduated with a degree in Electronic Engineering from Nanyang Technological University in 2018. Li scored a major success two years after he joined the orchestra when he performed the world premiere of the gaohu concerto *Legend of the Merlion* at an SCO concert at the Victoria Concert Hall on November 28, 1999.



The three-movement work by Chinese composer Liu Xijin was commissioned by SCO's then Music Director Hu Bingxu for the special concert to usher in the new millennium entitled *Welcome A New Flourishing Age*. It told the Singapore story in three parts: the struggles of early immigrants, the many problems they overcame and how the nation achieved success through sheer hard work and perseverance. It was one of SCO's early works in its Nanyang music repertoire.

It has since become Li's signature piece. He played the concerto during SCO's concert tours to China in 2007 and 2014, and at major events such as SCO's 5th and 25th anniversary concerts in 2001 and 2021 respectively.

According to Li, before writing the concerto, composer Liu had painstakingly researched Singapore's history and made frequent visits over a period of more than six months.

"He told me he was very happy with me playing the concerto because I was a new immigrant to Singapore and could express deep feelings in it well," said Li, who is now a Singapore citizen.

Li performing the huqin concerto *Fire Ritual* at SCO concert, *Essence of Nanyang*, in 2015.



Li with his wife Liu Hongmei and daughter Li Xuan.

This was why Liu always invited him to play the concerto whenever Chinese orchestras, mostly those in China, wanted to perform his work, he added.

Another work associated with Li which he enjoyed playing immensely is the huqin concerto *Fire Ritual* written by Chinese composer Tan Dun in the early 1980s. This is a contemporary piece which exploits the idea of an “orchestra theatre” in which instruments and voices simulating characters are heard from around the concert hall like a stage play.

The concerto, which uses the erhu, zhonghu and gaohu, is a fusion of modern and traditional music, Li explained, noting that a Singapore dance company adapted the piece for a dance drama with great success a few years ago. Li last performed the work during SCO’s concert tour of four European cities in 2019.

A fulfilling professional life

As SCO’s Concertmaster since 1997, Li has had the privilege of working with several music directors and conductors, beginning with Qu Chunquan as Deputy Music Director and later assisting maestro Hu Bingxu, one of China’s top conductors who led seven national orchestras in China at one time.

After Hu left SCO at the end of his three-year contract in 2000, Shanghai Conservatory of Music Professor Xia Feiyun was appointed the orchestra’s Principal Guest Conductor before Yeh Tsung came on board in 2002.

Maestro Yeh is currently the longest serving music director and conductor at SCO.

“Baoshun is an all rounder, my good deputy and a great huqin soloist, especially in his rendition of Liu Xijin’s gaohu concerto *Legend of the Merlion*,” Yeh said. Both men have worked closely together for around 20 years.



Li said he learned a great deal from each SCO music director and conductor. All of them had their unique ways of organising and interpreting music. He noted that since its inception 25 years ago, SCO has adapted well to changing music trends to attract as wide a spectrum of audience as possible through good programming and outreach activities.

But most important of all, he stressed, was the support from the Singapore government and the community from the day SCO was formed. “The financial and moral support given by the government and its leaders have been unprecedented,” he said.

In the many years that he has been in Singapore, unlike other SCO musicians, Li has only managed to teach a few students because of his tight work schedule as concertmaster.

It was only after the Covid-19 pandemic began disrupting SCO performances that he could devote more time to exercise, such as jogging and cycling, to keep fit.

Other pursuits include fishing and card and board games such as Go or wei qi as the Chinese call it. They serve as good distractions from work, he said.



Sometimes he goes to the beach alone in the quiet of the night to look at the bright lights from buildings and ships and to reflect on life and inevitably on his work with the orchestra.

He cannot predict what lies ahead for SCO, just like he couldn't tell in advance whether he would need to stand in for maestro Min Huifen to play the erhu in Beijing more than 30 years ago.

But he will continue to stand by his philosophy. “The best thing to do is keep on improving as there is no limit to perfection, and to always be ready for changes and the unexpected,” he said.

With the Covid-19 pandemic disrupting SCO performances, Li has been able to spend more time exercising.



Watch
Zhao Jianhua's
performance

PIECE *The Great Wall Capriccio*
First Movement:
Strolling Through
the Mountain Pass

COMPOSER Liu Wenjin

CONDUCTOR Yeh Tsung

CONCERT Huayi 2013: Rainbow
Verses – An Evening of
Poetry and Music
(co-produced with
Esplanade), February 23,
2013

VENUE Esplanade Concert Hall

DESCRIPTION This work is performed together with the poem *Nian Nu Jiao: Reminiscing at Red Cliff*. Against a backdrop of ringing bells and crescendo triplets, the orchestra hits the heights in musical tribute to the Great Wall of China. The erhu solo then goes into a deep and serene melody, describing the composer's mood as he strolls through the mountain pass, by turns in awe and contemplation.

An artistic illustration of an erhu, a traditional Chinese two-stringed bowed instrument. The instrument is shown in a dark reddish-brown color, with a long neck and a small, rounded body. A hand is depicted in a vibrant pinkish-red color, positioned to play the instrument. The background is a light green color with large, overlapping, semi-transparent shapes in shades of blue, green, and brown. The overall style is modern and graphic.

èrhú





Zhao Jianhua

A Life and Career *Lifted by a Beloved Mentor*

An incident nearly 40 years ago on a warm September afternoon is one that Zhao Jianhua will remember and cherish for the rest of his life.

He was in Shanghai, at a neighbour's place when his grandmother hurried over to inform him that his teacher Min Huifen was waiting at his home to offer him lessons before a national erhu music competition in Beijing.

The then 23-year-old was stunned – the visit was totally unexpected as Min, the indisputable queen of the erhu, was recovering from major cancer surgery at Huadong Hospital, then a medical facility exclusive to Chinese Communist Party cadres and government officials.

He rushed home immediately to be greeted by the sight of his teacher sitting in his living room, still catching her breath, and looking sweaty and very tired.

Min, who was 40 then, had mistakenly assumed that his house was only a 30-minute stroll from the hospital. It was actually much further. To make matters worse, she lost her way and ended up taking more than two hours.

“I was shocked to see her and could not believe how she risked taking two hours walking and looking for my house so soon after her surgery,” Zhao, now Erhu Principal at the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO), said.

When asked the reason for her sudden visit, she replied that it was because of the music competition to be held two months later.

“She was worried that I wasn’t prepared as top erhu players from all over the country would be there to compete,” Zhao said.

After a two-hour practice session, he accompanied Min – a representative of the National People’s Congress and member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Committee – on a bus back to the hospital, chatting happily on the way.

It was only a few years later that Min revealed the real reason for barging into Zhao’s house that September afternoon in 1985.

In an introductory message she penned for his first solo concert in Shanghai in 1991, she said: “He was very distracted by my illness and surgery, and instead of practising for the competition at home, he spent his time in the hospital with me.”



She said that whenever she asked him about his preparations, Zhao would become evasive and only play tape recordings of his practices, often reluctantly and in tears, for her to comment from her hospital bed.

Zhao was in fact considering withdrawing from the competition as he did not want to burden his stricken teacher. That would not do, Min said, and her surprise home visit was intended to jolt him out of his funk and get him to concentrate on the upcoming competition.

Although Zhao managed only third place along with Li Baoshun, then an undergraduate at the Central Conservatory of Music and now SCO Concertmaster, he was very touched by the incident which showed his teacher’s selfless love for him.

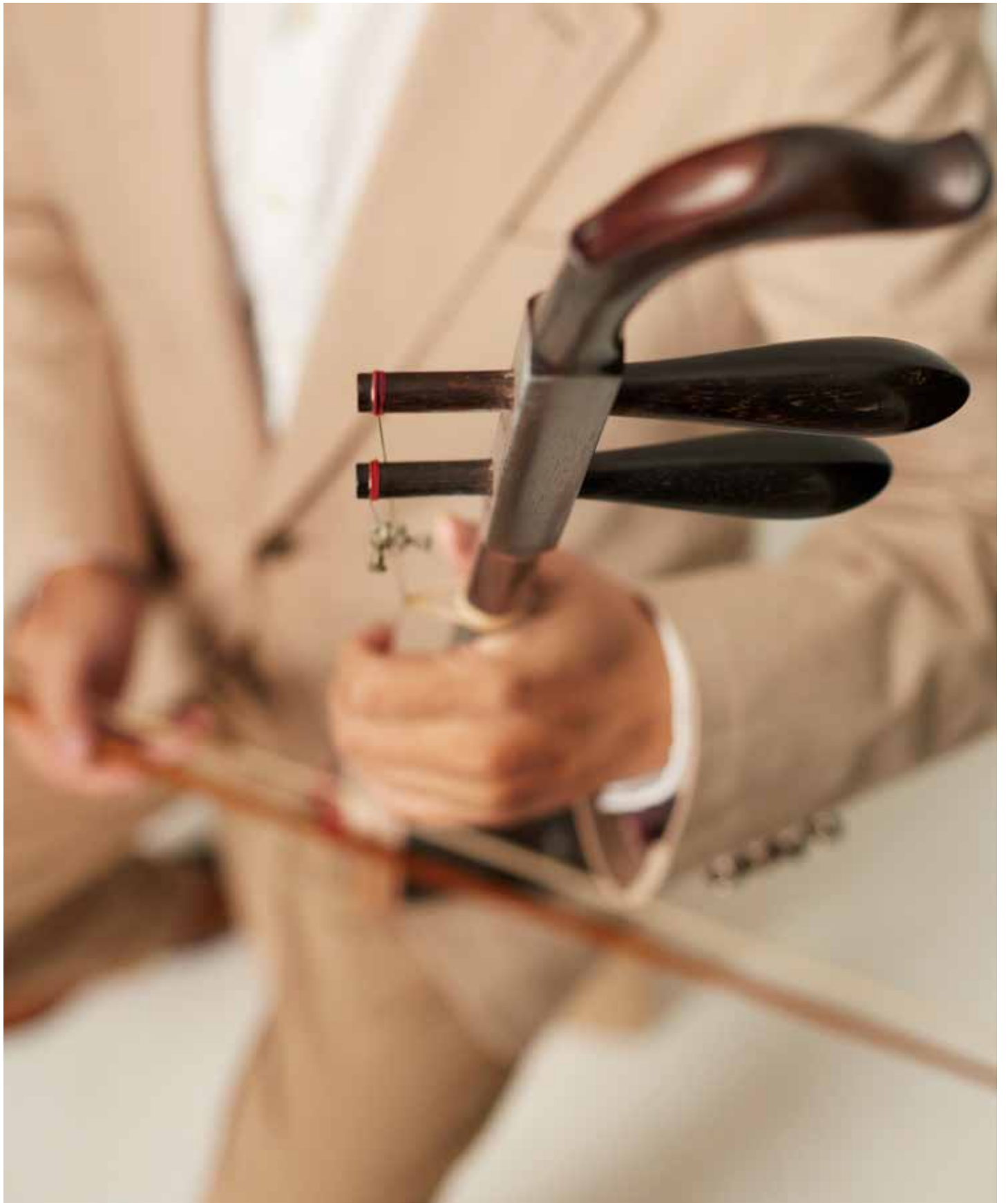
Two younger erhu players, Gao Shaoqin and Song Fei, who later joined Li at the Central Chinese Orchestra, were among the top prize winners at the competition held at the Beijing People’s Liberation Army Academy of Arts.

“I will remember her great devotion and the care she gave to me for the rest of my life,” declared Zhao, who joined SCO in 1997.

Zhao with his mentor Min Huifen when he was with the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra in the early 1980s.

Zhao performing *The Great Wall Capriccio*
at the SCO concert *Maestros Extravaganza*
in 2016.







Maestro Min, then a professor at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music renowned for her signature pieces such as *Parting at Yangguan Pass*, *River of Sorrow* and the erhu concerto, *The Great Wall Capriccio*, was diagnosed with melanoma, a form of skin cancer, in 1981.

The cancer later spread, and she spent the next three decades battling the disease, undergoing six surgeries and 15 rounds of chemotherapy. She survived and lived until May 2014 when she died from a brain haemorrhage, aged 69.

She accepted Zhao as her student in 1978 when he was admitted to the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra as an

apprentice, aged 16. She remembered that two years earlier, she had seen a broadcast of his performance.

At that time, Zhao had topped the Shanghai Spring International Music Festival competition for young people which was recorded and televised.

One evening, Min and her then choreographer boyfriend Liu Zhenxue were walking when they saw a large crowd outside a shop viewing a small 9-inch black-and-white TV. On the screen was the young Zhao playing the erhu. They were very impressed by his performance and believed the teenager would go far.

Zhao recalled that when he met Min at the Shanghai orchestra, her very first words to him were: “So you were the young man I saw playing the erhu on the little TV screen!”

Like mother and son

Min remained his teacher and mentor until her death in 2014. Zhao remembered her as a teacher extraordinaire and as the reason why he is still playing the erhu today.

“She didn’t just teach me the erhu, but about the arts and life as well,” he said.



Zhao in his 20s.

For example, knowing Zhao's weakness in Chinese literature and knowledge of the classics, she would insist that he memorise a piece of Tang or Song dynasty poetry before every lesson.

In Min's view, the ability to grasp and understand poetry "which expresses so many things in so few words" would help musicians visualise the emotions and beauty in the music they play.

She took care to provide the background and explain the nuances of every piece before going on to teach the techniques to play the music.

"In the end, beyond playing the erhu, she also taught me how to live well and meaningfully and to be a true musician," Zhao said.

Noting that Min came from a family of musicians, he said she had really lived up to the Chinese adage in praise of teachers which says: *"yi ri wei shi, zhong shen wei fu"*. It means that a teacher, even if only for a day, will be like your father or parent for life.

Indeed, Min's 36-year relationship with Zhao was just like that of mother and son.

It is therefore no wonder Zhao is a firm believer of such a mentorship system, which probably started in Chinese orchestras and music conservatories in China in the 1950s and 1960s. It likely already existed between individuals in earlier times when an apprentice learned the skills of a craft from a master.

Under such a mentorship scheme, each new member who plays an instrument in an orchestra, or a student taking a course at a conservatory, would be assigned a teacher or mentor at the beginning.

The student pays no fees learning under the teacher or mentor whose primary responsibility is to pass down his or her skills to the younger generation and make sure they succeed in their studies.

The contract is solely between the student and teacher. Students traditionally pay their teachers or mentors in kind, like gifts during festivals or by running errands for them, but they are all voluntary acts, never made compulsory.

It is also common practice for one teacher to recommend his or her students to another during vacation breaks – sometimes across schools in different provinces – for a short duration of instruction, simply with an introduction letter.

According to Zhao, musicians of his vintage, including senior members in the SCO who hailed from China, are probably among the last of their generation to benefit from such a mentorship system.

All the SCO Principals and Associate Principals, including Concertmaster Li Baoshun, featured in this commemorative book had a mentor or two when they were music students.

However, in the modern world today, it is no longer practical for musicians or music teachers to give their time and teach without charging a fee like in the past.



Zhao and Li Baoshun, then in their 20s, both won third place at a national erhu music competition in Beijing. They are now SCO's erhu principal and concertmaster respectively.

Strategic choice of music in turbulent times

Zhao was born in Shanghai in 1962, the elder of two boys. Both his parents were chemical engineers.

Growing up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), he picked up music relatively late at age 11, learning the erhu from his uncle, Li Liang, a well-known erhu master and composer.

He found the erhu, a bowed string instrument known in ancient China as a “foreign nomadic string instrument”, easy and interesting to learn.

A member of the huqin family, it appeared during the Tang dynasty more than 1,500 years ago. The erhu, however, was not developed until the early 1900s, especially by the legendary master Liu Tianhua in the 1920s.

The two-string erhu is special for its versatile range. It can evoke heart-wrenching sounds, create battle scene noise and even mimic the galloping and neighing of a horse.

But Zhao hoped that some semblance of the old mentorship scheme could be introduced at the SCO or other Chinese orchestras in Singapore given its many benefits, like preserving tradition and grooming the next generation of musicians to ensure continuity.

For example, workshops or master classes could be conducted by senior SCO musicians, especially for the younger and newer members in the orchestra.

One mentorship scheme was started in 2004 at the Singapore National Youth Chinese Orchestra after it came under SCO a year earlier. Zhao felt it could be strengthened by encouraging more musicians to mentor the young members there.

Zhao's decision to study music was the result of the upheaval during the Cultural Revolution when most young people were directionless because schools were not functioning normally, and all tertiary institutions closed.

During those turbulent years, parents were fearful that their children, especially their eldest sons, would be sent to remote areas for re-education programmes or made to do hard physical work in farms and construction sites.

"A way out would be to take up music and excel in playing an instrument, and so even if they were sent away, they could play music in propaganda teams or music and drama groups," he said.

Unlike Zhao, his brother Jianming, who is three years his junior, did not face such a problem. He did well in school and later worked in the banking and finance sector.

Zhao showed early promise as a student of the erhu, winning the top prize for performance when he was 13 at a national youth music competition in 1975.

Three years later he joined the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra as an apprentice where he met his teacher Min.

Two of his SCO colleagues, Yangqin Principal Qu Jianqing and percussionist Shen Guoqin, also joined the Shanghai orchestra at the same time in 1978.

“Beyond playing the erhu, she also taught me how to live well and meaningfully and to be a true musician.”

He remembered Qu as the youngest member. Though just 13, she was allowed to join the orchestra because of her exceptional talent. The minimum age for admission was 16.

“She was a child prodigy and even Shanghai's Party Secretary Peng Chong singled her out as someone the country should invest in and groom,” Zhao noted.

Zhao, Qu and Shen spent their first three years as apprentices before they started to perform with the orchestra as full members.

In 1982, Zhao won the top prize at a national competition for Chinese instruments in Wuhan, his first as a professional musician, thus securing his position as a top erhu specialist in China.



He went on to win two more competitions in Shanghai in 1985 and 1986, and was promoted to the orchestra's Erhu Principal chair in 1987.

The year also saw him giving solo performances in Hong Kong and Germany as a member of touring Shanghai arts troupes.

In 1991, he performed in several cities in Australia and New Zealand with a cultural troupe representing China to promote Chinese music and culture.

Just a year earlier, he decided to pursue further studies and enrolled in a degree programme at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

But after a few months, Zhao, who was then married with a newborn baby girl, found it difficult juggling work and studies and raising a family.

To make ends meet, he made frequent trips to Taiwan and Singapore in the early 1990s to perform and seek business opportunities.

Fresh beginning with SCO

He first came to Singapore in 1992, to know more about the Chinese music scene and business environment. To get him going, his teacher Min wrote an introduction letter to Ku Lap Mun, then Music Director of the People's Association (PA) Chinese Orchestra.

He set up a business in Singapore with friends here and in Taiwan dealing in musical instruments. The business did well initially and he was granted permanent residency the next year.

But his frequent travels and businesses soon took a toll on his family, studies and music career. His marriage failed, and he was unable to graduate from the music conservatory in 1993 for failing to take his last paper on Marxism.

Although he was still soloist and erhu principal with the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra, he found few opportunities to perform in China.

Zhao with (from right) wife Chen Shu-hua and daughters Zhao Mi and Zhao Na.





Zhao with veteran conductor Choo Hoey at the SCO concert *Maestros Extravaganza* in 2016.



As he recalled, the next two to three years were uncertain as he was busy shuttling from China to Taiwan and Singapore to perform and for business.

So when he heard news of the PA Chinese Orchestra being upgraded to a national orchestra in early 1996, Zhao did not hesitate to apply to join and clinched the Erhu Principal position.

He then left his business and the Shanghai orchestra and moved to Singapore with his then seven-year-old daughter Zhao Mi.

Min was supportive and happy with his new move. She was the guest soloist at SCO's inaugural concert at the Victoria Concert Hall in April 1997, when she performed her signature piece, erhu concerto *The Great Wall Capriccio*.

Min was invited by SCO to play the erhu concerto again in 2006 and would have come for a third time in 2014 if not for her unexpected demise earlier that year.

In 1999, Zhao was sent to the Taiwan National Chinese Orchestra as its erhu principal on a three-month exchange programme.

Soon after his return, he married Taiwanese erhu player Chen Shu-hua who joined SCO later in 2002, the same year their daughter Zhao Na was born.

Zhao considers joining SCO 25 years ago as a fresh beginning.

He further regards the years with SCO as his happiest because SCO is a well-managed world-class orchestra which has allowed him to grow professionally and realise his potential as a performer.

He has staged many memorable performances with SCO but singled out *The Great Wall Capriccio*, the erhu concerto made famous by his teacher Min, that he played in April 2004.

What made the event extra special was that the composer of the work Liu Wenjin was the guest conductor for the concerto with Zhao as the soloist. This was to become Zhao's signature piece. He played it with SCO during the Huayi Arts Festival at the Esplanade in February 2013, and again at the SCO concert *Maestros Extravaganza* in July 2016, the year the orchestra celebrated its 20th anniversary.

Zhao also found time to perform with Min overseas. He was the guest performer at Min's solo concert with the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra in March 2007. Zhao played another of Min's signature tunes – the very popular erhu piece *In the Deep of the Night*.

In 2009, at the invitation of the Taipei Chinese Orchestra, he performed with Min and her son Liu Ju as guest conductor at a concert in Taiwan. Liu is the resident conductor of the National Ballet of China.

There was one tour where Zhao was engulfed in profound sadness. Five days before SCO's concert tour to China in May 2014, Min died in Shanghai three months earlier.

Zhao was plunged into grief throughout the tour, stealing time to pay his last respects to his mentor when the orchestra was in Shanghai, and skipping his performance in Suzhou altogether in order to attend her funeral.

In July the same year, Zhao performed at a special SCO tribute concert for Min, *A Bowed Affinity*, with her son, Liu Ju, as guest conductor. Zhao played the sorrowful *Song of Sadness* by Chinese composer Yang Liqing.

A year later, Zhao took part in a concert to mark Min's first death anniversary at the Shanghai Symphony Hall in Shanghai in May 2015.

Many top Chinese erhu players such as Zhu Changyao, Deng Jiandong and Song Fei turned up to perform. So did Min's brother Min Yuekang, a conductor; sister Min Xiaofen, a pipa virtuoso, and son, Liu Ju.



Zhao performing Yang Liqing's composition *Song of Sadness* as a tribute to Min Huifen at SCO's *A Bowed Affinity* concert.



Zhao's oil painting of Min Huifen and her husband Liu Zhenxue he did in 2014.

It was a grand and solemn event in which Zhao played his mentor's favourite and award-winning piece, *Yin Shi Xin Qu*, meaning poetry in sound and music from the heart, for erhu and orchestra. She composed the piece with Qu Chunquan.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has halted most live concert performances since 2020, Zhao has not been idle at home. Besides spending more time practising and playing the erhu every day, he is doing more oil paintings, a hobby he picked up more than 10 years ago.

He said he became interested and started painting after accompanying his daughter Zhao Na for her art lessons with painter Chen Chudian when she was still in primary school.

"Later, I also took lessons from Chen," he said. The artist, who lived in Singapore for nearly 30 years, died in Shanghai in 2021 of liver cancer, aged 78.

Zhao has become a prolific artist. Walk into his 2,000 sq ft flat and you will see the walls adorned with his paintings.

But one work stands out in the living room – a painting on canvas, unframed and sitting on an easel.

It features Min and her husband Liu Zhenxue. Asked about the portrait with 90 per cent likeness of the subjects, the amateur painter said: "It was from a photograph I took of the couple at a restaurant in Shanghai many years ago."

Painted soon after his mentor's death in 2014, it has been placed on the easel ever since.

Maestro Min may be gone, but this is the way Zhao has chosen to remember her as his mentor and remain close to her.

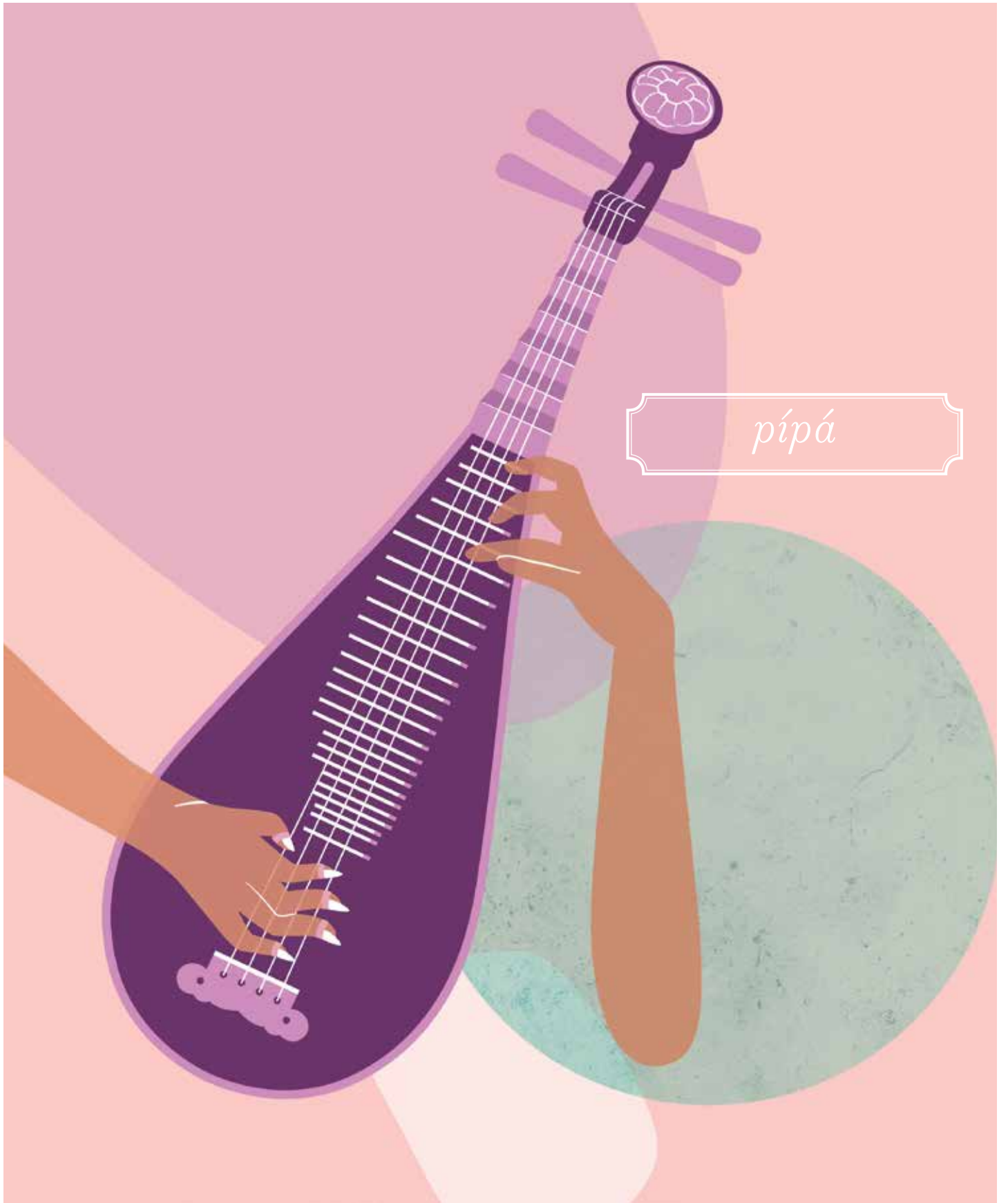
Zhao is also emulating her example of teaching and guiding the young: "Earlier this year, both myself and wife Shu-hua signed up to be mentors to musicians at the Singapore National Youth Chinese Orchestra," said Zhao.



Watch Yu Jia's
performance

PIECE *Arise, You Lion of Glory*
COMPOSER Gordon Fung Dic-lun
CONDUCTOR Yeh Tsung
CONCERT Kam Ning with SCO:
Butterfly Lovers –
Europe Pre-Tour Concert,
August 24, 2019
VENUE SCO Concert Hall

DESCRIPTION This composition draws
inspiration from traditional Chinese
lion dances. It comprises 12 poetically
named sections which make reference
to the lion dance and won the First
Prize at the Singapore International
Competition for Chinese Orchestral
Composition 2015.



πίπα





Yu Jia

Pipa Passion

When four-year-old Yu Jia took her first lessons from her pipa master father Yu Songlin in 1978, her little fingers could barely reach all the 24 frets on the fingerboard. That's because the pear-shaped, plucked string pipa – standing 80 cm tall – that she held vertically around her arms was still too big for her although it was designed for children.

It was not until she was nine when she was a Primary 4 pupil at the junior school of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing that she used a pipa for adult learners. Her teacher then was the famous pipa virtuoso Li Guanghua.

Over the decades, Yu has performed with many pipas of different types and quality, including her father's century-old instrument made of very old rosewood.

Her lifelong passion for the ancient instrument has taken her around the world and to Singapore, which is now her home. She joined the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) in 1997 after graduating with a degree in pipa performance from the conservatory and is now the SCO's Pipa Principal.

Her beloved pipa has been hailed as the queen of the plucked string instruments in a Chinese orchestra. The pipa, which has four strings, is of West Asian origins and has been played in China since the second century. Its name is derived from the two ancient Chinese words describing how the instrument is played. The forward plucking finger movement on the strings is called *pi*, and the backward plucking movement, *pa*.

Yu explained that the pipa has a limited life span as it is difficult to maintain its sound quality, unlike the violin. The prices and value of pipas too are not determined by their age or the fame of their makers.

In China, there is no tradition of pipa-making as a professional master's craft, unlike in Europe where highly sophisticated skills and methods in instrument-making are taught even at universities. The Chinese history of instrument-making as an industry is a relatively short one.

Moreover, the pipa's structure poses a real problem as it is not made like many Western music instruments. Its body, including its back, may be made of fine wood, but its surface board and parts like the frets use



“I also wanted to be a ballerina, but my parents wouldn’t agree because I didn’t have the attributes and training to be one would be more difficult too.”

other materials. This means that sound quality will be affected as the surface board wears out.

Relating her own experience, she said she bought a good small red sandalwood pipa from China's pipa maker Man Ruixing in 1992 but after about 20 years, it could not yield the same beautiful sounds that it used to even with a new surface board.

Yu playing the pipa at four.



Yu performing at the SCO's Fundraising Gala Dinner and Concert in 2018.





The same problem arose with her family's old rosewood pipa which she could no longer use for her solo performances. "I only use it for practices and rehearsals nowadays, and leave it behind in the SCO concert hall instead of bringing it home," she said.

For solo performances, she relies on two pipas of excellent sound quality, both made of big red sandalwood crafted by Man Ruixing.

Her special collection of five pipas at her house was featured in an episode of the mini documentary series on SCO musicians entitled Human Diaries, produced and released on SCO's social media accounts such as Facebook, Instagram, WeChat and YouTube during the Covid-19 pandemic in June 2021.

They come in different sizes and sound ranges, including an electronic pipa studded with more than 10,000 pieces of Swarovski crystals all over it. She bought and decorated the pipa to make it sparkle for two special SCO events in 2010.

The first was a recital with her husband Wong Sun Tat, then Gaohu Associate Principal with SCO, at the Esplanade's Recital Studio in July. It was followed by an SCO fund-raising gala dinner and concert at the Fullerton Hotel two months later.

At both events, the husband-and-wife duo used their pipa and erhu to perform Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*, accompanied by Pan Yian on the piano.

Yu pointed out that the most expensive pipas worth millions of dollars are those made of the rare sea yellow wood from Hainan Island, but felt that they do not necessarily produce the best sounds.



Yu using an electronic pipa studded with Swarovski crystals at an SCO fund-raising gala dinner and concert in 2010.



Yu with her father Yu Songlin.

“My late teacher Li Guanghua had such a rare piece and showed it to me once, but I think it is a collector’s item with his family now,” she said. Li taught Yu for 14 years from 1983 until she graduated from the conservatory in 1997. He passed away in 2018, aged 71.

Learning the pipa from papa

It is no surprise that Yu’s musical journey began at a tender age as she came from a family of musicians. Born in Beijing in 1974, she was the only child of pipa master Yu Songlin and his violinist wife Sun Rongqi.

She was placed under the care of her paternal grandmother in Shanghai from the time when she was just a baby aged barely four months until she was four in 1978, two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976).

Her parents had to send her away because as musicians with the China National Ballet Company during the Cultural Revolution, they were busy travelling all over the country to give *yangbanxi* or model revolutionary performances, such as *The White-haired Girl*.

Yu’s father Yu Songlin came from a big family with an elder brother, two elder sisters and two younger sisters, all musically inclined. She remembered that at her grandma’s house, her uncle played the sanxian and the pipa very well. So could all her aunts.

They all loved singing the Suzhou Pingtan, a form of folk ballads with narrative singing which had its origins more than 200 years ago in Jiangsu, a coastal province near Shanghai renowned for its beautiful landscaped gardens and houses.

Usually performed in duets, Pingtan features one musician playing the sanxian and the other the pipa as they sing and narrate tales from the classics and legends from history in the soft and beautiful tones of the Suzhou dialect.

With two chairs for the performers and a table in between as props, it has been a popular form of entertainment in teahouses and the open alleys in Suzhou and its surrounding areas since the early 19th century.



Today the traditional art form is kept alive as a tourist attraction in the older Suzhou towns where young and attractive Pingtan musicians perform in teahouses and private studios.

One of her aunts, Yu Xueping, was a popular Pingtan performer in Shanghai in the late 1970s and early 1980s, earning herself the title, “Yu Diao Wang”, meaning queen of Pingtan music.

Yu remembered her early years to be filled with pipa and sanxian music and Pingtan singing at home. To the amusement of all, she would mimic playing the pipa with her little hands while her uncle and aunts played and sang such hits as *Su Hang Hao Feng Guang* and *Yu Qing Ting*.

“Before long, I could also hum Pingtan tunes and sing popular pieces such as *Die Lian Hua*, *Da Li Shu Yi* meaning Butterflies in Love with Flowers, Reply to Li Shuyi, with lyrics from Mao’s famous verses,” she said, referring to Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People’s Republic of China. Some of those recordings are still with her.

So she found it easy to begin learning the pipa from her father while taking piano lessons at the same time when she returned to Beijing from her grandmother’s house in Shanghai.

She learned ballet for a year too, after accompanying her mother frequently to rehearsals at the National Ballet Company, but she did not pursue it. “I also wanted to be a ballerina, but my parents wouldn’t agree because I didn’t have the attributes and training to be one would be more difficult too,” she said.

Her father was a strict and demanding pipa teacher, waking her up by 5.30 every morning for an hour of practice before she was allowed to go to school.

“I remember we had to put handkerchiefs under the pipa to soften its sounds so as not to disturb our neighbours who were still asleep,” she said.

After coming home from school, Yu had to put in another one or two hours of practice before she could call it a day. That was her daily routine for over a decade until she finished high school.

All her hard work and persistence paid off in 1987 when she won her first music competition in school when she was 13, and the second prize in the China ART Cup international pipa championship for young people two years later.

Her first major success came when she clinched the first prize for her pipa performance at the first instrumental music competition organised by the Central Conservatory of Music in 1994.

Three years later and just months before she graduated from the conservatory, she heard rumours that Central Chinese Orchestra’s Music Director Hu Bingxu would be leaving with a group of Chinese musicians for Singapore to lead the newly-formed SCO.

“My father, who was then the Chinese orchestra’s leader and Hu’s colleague, wanted me to go with him to start my music career there,” she said.

Her father told her that if she remained in Beijing and joined the orchestra he was leading, their relationship would pose a conflict of interest.

Yu reflected that SCO’s offer could not have come at a better time. Although she was a fresh graduate, she met the criteria set by Hu who handpicked the first batch of Chinese musicians to give SCO a head start as Singapore’s second national orchestra. The first was the Singapore Symphony Orchestra set up in 1979.

The pioneer group of about 10 musicians included SCO’s Zhongruan Principal Zhang Ronghui, Concertmaster Li Baoshun and Erhu Principal Zhu Lin.

A flamboyant style

At 22, Yu was the youngest and the first from the group to land in Singapore when she was invited by SCO to play at its inaugural concert at the Victoria Concert Hall in April 1997.

As fate would have it, on the first day of rehearsals for the concert, she was surprised to see Wong Sun Tat, her Secondary 1 schoolmate from the Central Conservatory of Music, playing the gaohu in the newly-formed orchestra.

Wong, who hailed from Hong Kong, had joined SCO earlier that same year. Yu said they met as 11-year-olds but lost contact after secondary school when they

“If one does not practise for a day, he himself will know. If he fails to practise for two days, his teacher will notice, and on the third day, everyone will know.”

pursued studies in different instruments and courses at the conservatory.

She was thus delighted to see a friendly familiar face at SCO. “Both our parents also knew one another and were also schoolmates at music conservatories in China,” she said. Wong’s father, Wong On Yuen, an erhu master, was leader of the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra and his mother was a musician playing the zhongruan in the orchestra.





Yu performing a solo piece *A Thousand Sweeps* at an SCO concert in place of a Hong Kong player who faced travel restrictions during the Sars epidemic in 2003.

Samuel Wong, co-founder and creative director of The Teng Ensemble who was taught by Yu for two years, featured her in his 2003 book on musicians, *Impressions of a Pipa Player*.

Quoting a friend's views on her former teacher Yu, he wrote: "Yu never did command 'The Look' of the typical Chinese instrumentalist but was a perfect candidate for attention-getting. She always wore huge gowns affectionately called 'pong-pong' dresses when she played solo."

He said some people deemed her "too hip to play Chinese music and too modern and young to excel in it". There were those who loved her unconventionality, while the more traditional regarded her demeanour and dressing as simply vain indulgence.

"But everyone agrees that she plays with that wonderful streak of rebellion," he noted.

Unfazed, Yu took all these comments in her stride and continued projecting her "glam" image to become one of SCO's leading musicians.

By 1999, just two years after she joined SCO, she was promoted to the Pipa Principal chair, and was given frequent opportunities to perform solo parts at its concerts.

Yu returned to Beijing after the inaugural concert on April 20 to complete her final papers at the conservatory before she graduated. She then started work officially in Singapore in September as a pipa player.

Yu's unexpected reunion with her long-lost schoolmate Wong at SCO soon developed into a romantic relationship. After getting to know each other better and working together in the orchestra for five years, they tied the knot in August 2002.

They were soon billed as *Jim Tong Yu Nv*, or the golden couple, in the Singapore Chinese music scene for their talent and youthful looks. Yu was much envied for her elaborate gowns, eye-catching hairdos, glittering accessories and jewellery which sparkled under the spotlight on stage.



“I have at least one to two solo performances a year and that helped improve my skills a lot as playing a concerto requires many hours of preparation and practice,” she said.

Highlights of an eventful career

One very challenging moment, she recounted, occurred in 2003 during the Sars pandemic when a Hong Kong pipa player scheduled to perform a 15-minute solo piece, *A Thousand Sweeps*, by Hong Kong composer Law Wing-fai, could not show up for an SCO concert due to travel restrictions imposed at that time.

“I was told to stand in for the player and given only 20 days to prepare. So I spent at least 10 hours every day practising the piece until the day of the performance,” she said.

Of course, there were many other memorable moments. One of the happiest was the SCO concert, *Music Ties*, in May 2008 which featured Yu, her husband and father-in-law Wong Yuen On, together as a family.

She played the solo piece, *Spring And Autumn*, by Chinese composer Tang Jianping, who was inspired by the turbulent times of the Spring and Autumn period in Chinese history. “It was a special evening for us and I hope we can do it again,” she said.

Yu has performed at many international music festivals in Europe, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Malaysia over the past 25 years.

Singapore is now home but she nearly left SCO when her husband Wong quit the orchestra in 2011 to pursue new career options in Hong Kong or China. “That was a very uncertain time and I even delayed accepting my Singapore citizenship after my application was approved,” she said.



Yu and SCO Music Director Yeh Tsung at the Award Presentation and Concert of the 2015 Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition.

Fortunately her husband was recruited in time by the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) as head of the Chinese Music department and they decided to put down roots here.

Like many SCO musicians, Yu started teaching private students as well as those in schools soon after she arrived in Singapore. Of late, she has also started teaching diploma-level students at NAFA.



An important concert in her career was the one entitled *Three Pipas I & II* in November 2012 when she was pitted against two top pipa virtuosos from Beijing, Zhang Qiang and Yang Jing.

She remembered SCO Music Director Tsung Yeh telling her: “To know how good you really are, play with them at the same concert.”

Yu rose to the occasion playing a famous Liu Dehai masterpiece, *Swans*, arranged by Qu Chunquan, impeccably against the other two more senior and experienced Chinese players.

Together, the trio ended the concert performing the world premiere of Chinese composer Kuan Nai-chung’s *Joy of a Toast & Whirling Dance* commissioned by SCO for the special concert to show the distinctive individual musical styles and personalities of the three pipa players.

A milestone concert was the Award Presentation and Concert of the 2015 Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition when she played the winning piece, *Arise, You Lion of Glory* for solo pipa and Chinese orchestra by Hong Kong composer Gordon Fung Dic-lun.

Yu playing her signature piece *Arise, You Lion of Glory* during SCO’s tour to Europe in 2019.



Yu grooms her pet dog herself and even got a pet grooming certificate in 2021.

The work, which drew inspiration from traditional Chinese lion dances and won the top Composition Award, has become one of Yu's signature pieces. She last played it during SCO's tour of four European cities in 2019.

Away from the sounds of the pipa, Yu has found a totally unrelated new pursuit – pet grooming. An SCO digital documentary series Human Diaries featured her getting a certificate from the International Professional Groomers in April 2021 after four years of training.

“My interest started two years after I came to Singapore in 1997 when I had my first pet dog and started to groom him myself,” she said. Now she even has a special room at home to conduct pet grooming for friends if they seek her service.

Her foray into pet grooming has not diminished her commitment to her music practice. The Covid-19 pandemic and travel restrictions have in fact given her more time to practise at home, up to seven to eight hours most days.

“That I have to thank my father who reminded me since I was a child that if one does not practise for a day, he himself will know. If he fails to practise for two days, his teacher will notice, and on the third day, everyone will know.”

Ever keen to upgrade herself professionally, she completed her Master's degree in pipa from the China Conservatory of Music in 2021 after four years of distant learning. This involved writing more than a dozen academic papers and presenting two solo concerts, the last one online because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

After finishing her final dissertation in May, she signed up for another Master's course with the conservatory, this time in another Chinese instrument, the ruan.

When asked if she might one day forsake the pipa and switch to a different instrument, she said coyly, without elaborating: “Well, you might see me performing with the ruan at the SCO soon.”

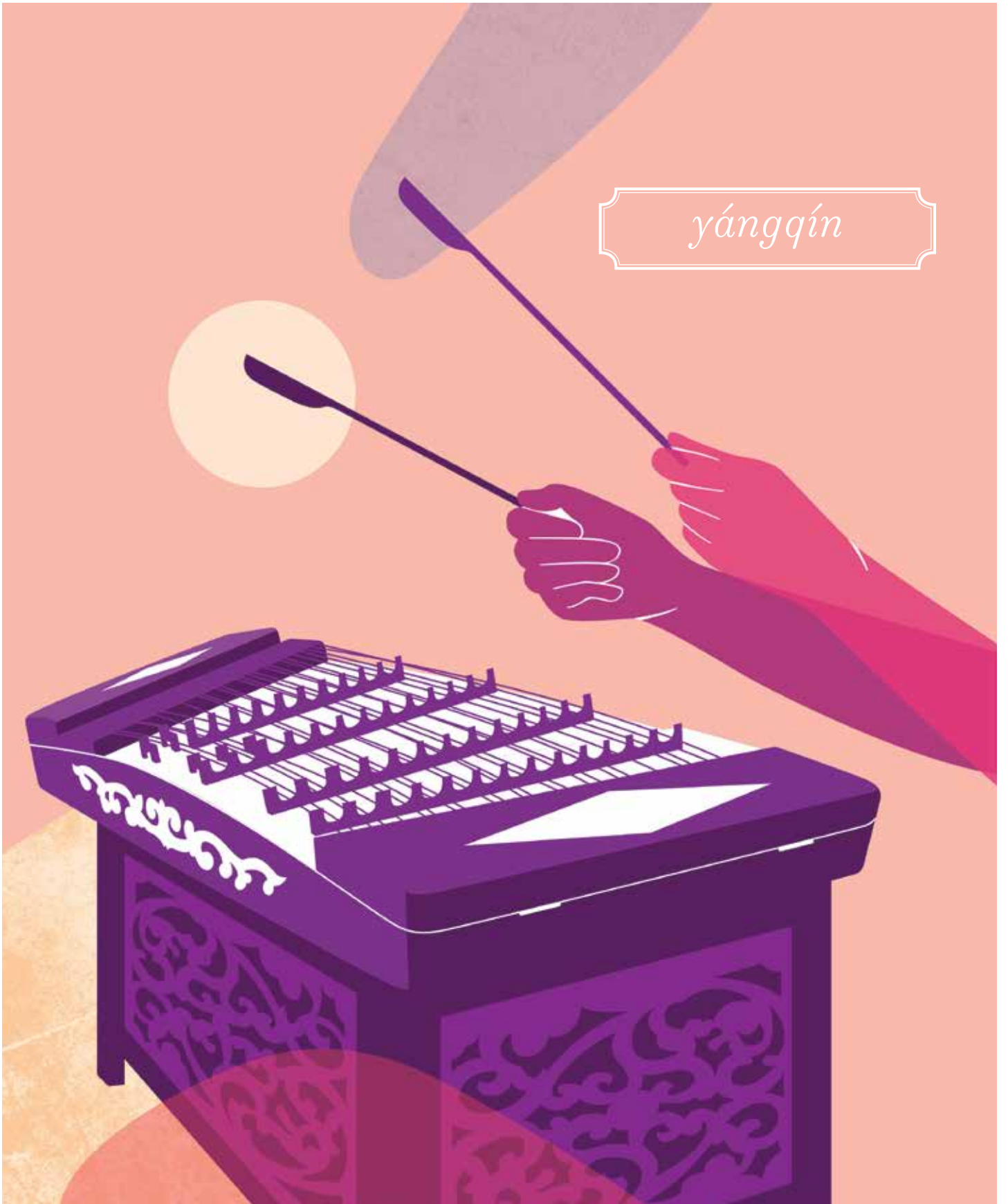


Watch
Qu Jianqing's
performance

PIECE *Love Song of Tianshan*
COMPOSER Kuan Nai-chung
CONDUCTOR Ku Pao-wen
CONCERT Spring Dreams of
the Red Mansion,
February 28 & March 1,
2014
VENUE SCO Concert Hall

DESCRIPTION This work was composed during the composer's first visit to Hong Kong and was commissioned by the Music Office of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of Hong Kong. Originally composed for pipa and orchestra, it was later rearranged for yangqin and orchestra. The piece bears influences of the Xinjiang style, but it was not composed as an authentic Xinjiang work. In particular, the 7/8 and 3/8 compound rhythms used are in fact of Tajik origin.

yángqín







Qu Jianqing

A Lifelong Love Affair *with the Yangqin*

The Chinese know it as yangqin but people in the Middle East, where the instrument originated in Biblical times, call it santur.

While it is better known as cimbalom in Eastern Europe, it goes by the name of hammered dulcimer in the Anglophone world.

It is hackbrett in Switzerland and Germany, tsymbaly in Russia, salterio in Mexico, santoor in India and khim in Thailand.

They may have different names but they all hail from the same family of hammered string instruments and share a history dating back several thousand years.

They vary in structure, size and range of sounds, depending on when and how they were adapted, developed and played in their respective countries.

Basically, the yangqin or any of its cousins is a chordophone instrument comprising a trapezoidal box resting on a wooden stand with metal strings strung horizontally across it.

The player makes music by simply striking two little hammers or beaters on the strings which usually number more than a hundred.

Spellbound from the beginning in Shanghai

Qu Jianqing has been playing the instrument for the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) for nearly 25 years and remains very much in love with the yangqin, which many believe came to China during the Ming Dynasty more than 400 years ago.

“I enjoyed playing this hundred-string instrument from the very beginning as it is truly an international one with a big global family,” said Qu, who has played at almost every SCO concert, since the orchestra made its debut at the Victoria Concert Hall at April 1997.

“The piano probably came from it as well because it has a similar mechanism of hammers striking the strings to make music,” she noted.

Born in Shanghai in 1965, the youngest of three daughters from a working-class family started learning the instrument at the age of nine at a *shao nian gong* or Youth Palace, a popular cultural and recreational centre for youngsters.

“I didn’t choose the instrument. It was given to me after I was selected to attend music classes at the Youth Palace,” she said. But it suited her and after only a few months, her teacher Wang Youde realised her special talent.



The opportunity to show off his protégé came at a concert in Shanghai at the City Hall in 1978. That was two years after the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), a proletarian movement to purge the country of values perceived as bourgeois.

The decade saw more than 1.5 million people killed, many of them artists, musicians, writers and intellectuals suspected of having foreign connections or being corrupted by the West. All popular musical performances were banned during the period, except eight *yangbangxi* or “revolutionary model performances” featuring proletarian protagonists.

Qu was a student of Shanghai’s Jumen Road Primary School when she performed at the youth concert at City Hall which featured the city’s best talents in songs, dances and other traditional Chinese performances.

Dressed in a white long-sleeved blouse, red skirt with a matching scarf, and a ribbon tying up her long hair, she played *Happy Cotton Harvest*, a folk tune her teacher Wang wrote for yangqin. The second piece, *Azalea*, was based on a song from the popular 1974 revolutionary war movie, *Sparkling Red Star*.

Qu performing a yangqin solo for foreign guests at the Youth Palace in Shanghai.



Qu performing *Rhapsody on Di Nu Hua* at
SCO's annual Mother's Day Concert in 2016.





The Jiefang Ribao newspaper praised Qu's performance at a youth concert in 1978.

The concert was reported in most major newspapers in Shanghai the next day, with several heaping praise on her. She was described as playing flawlessly and impressing the audience who included Shanghai's top political leaders and musicians. Her performance was broadcast live on national television.

A child prodigy had thus been proclaimed, and a star born.

Qu remembered it as an important music event, as it was the first time that traditional Chinese music and other performing arts had been staged since the end of the Cultural Revolution. She still keeps a copy of the newspaper, Jiefang Ribao or Liberation Daily, which displayed a picture of her at the concert with the caption: "Only 15 but playing like an old arts warrior on stage".

"It was a turning point in my life and the beginning of my lifelong passion for yangqin," she said.

Although she fell short of the required minimum age of 16, she was recruited immediately as an apprentice by the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra which was set up in 1952 but was shut during the Cultural Revolution.

Invitations to perform began to pour in, both in Shanghai and from overseas. Soon she became a much sought-after yangqin performer. In 1979, she was part of a Shanghai children's arts troupe which toured the then Yugoslavia.



Qu with her first yangqin teacher Wang Youde (left) and mentor Xiang Zuhua.



Qu (first from left) with fellow members of the Shanghai children's arts troupe during their tour to the then Yugoslavia.

Taught by great Chinese yangqin masters such as Xiang Zuhua, Pang Bo'er and Zhang Xiaofeng, Qu won many accolades, including the Shanghai City Outstanding Youth Award in 1981 and the China National Ethnic Emulation Performance Prize the following year.

In 1985, as a member of the Shanghai Song and Dance Troupe, she went to Greece to take part in an international arts festival featuring musicians, singers and dancers from around the world.

From visitor to citizen

She visited Singapore for the first time in 1987 when the 56-member Shanghai Chinese Orchestra performed at the Victoria Concert Hall, playing to full houses over five consecutive evenings.

Qu, then 22, was among the youngest in the orchestra whose members included illustrious players such as leader and guqin master Gong Yi, conductor Qu Chunquan, erhu virtuoso Min Huifen, rising pipa star Yang Wei, percussionist Shen Guoqin and konghou or Chinese harp player Ma Xiaolan, daughter of the orchestra's resident composer Ma Shenglong.

Qu's performance of a solo piece, *Festival of Tianshan*, left an indelible impression on a 16-year-old secondary school student and aspiring erhu musician with the Chinese clan association Chin Kang Huay Kuan's Chinese orchestra.

He is Terence Ho, who joined SCO as its marketing manager in 1998, and rose to be its chief executive in 2015. Ho recalled attending all five performances by the orchestra brought in by the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations. "It was a great success and the best we ever had at the time, and it even attracted fans from across the Causeway."

The then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, now MediaCorp, recorded the concert and televised it later on Channel 8 by popular demand.



Looking back, Ho believed that the series of concerts had a greater impact on the Singapore Chinese music scene than was previously thought.

During a chance meeting with Gong Yi some years ago, he was told that Singapore's then President Ong Teng Cheong had invited the Shanghai orchestra's leader to the Istana immediately after their performances at the Old Vic. The president wanted to find out more about the orchestra. "I believed the Singapore government had already started thinking of elevating the then People's Association (PA) Chinese Orchestra to a national music company at the time," Ho said.

He reckoned that the Shanghai orchestra's successful concerts in Singapore had helped to make that dream come true. SCO became Singapore's second national orchestra in 1996, after the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) blazed the trail in 1979.



Ho expressed surprise at seeing several top musicians from Shanghai, including Qu Jianqing, coming to join SCO. "They really helped to raise the quality of SCO musicians and set high standards for the orchestra right from the start," he said.

After nearly 25 years, Qu, percussionist Shen Guoqin and Erhu Principal Zhao Jianhua, who was not involved in the 1987 concert, are still with SCO in 2021.

Conductor Qu Chunquan joined PA's Chinese Orchestra in 1993, and was SCO's founding Resident Conductor and Deputy Music Director for three years before he returned home in 1999.

As for Qu Jianqing, in 1990, three years after her first performance in Singapore, Chinese cultural group Hsinghai Art Association invited her and several other Shanghai orchestra musicians, including its conductor Qu Chunquan, for another concert. They played to full houses for two nights, also at the Victoria Concert Hall.

Qu came prepared to play the world premiere of the *Yellow River* yangqin concerto, written by Qu Chunquan. The new work was based on the *Yellow River Cantata* composed by Xian Xinghai in 1939, and the *Yellow River* piano concerto by a group of Chinese pianists led by Chu Wanghua in 1969.

Qu playing the world premiere of the *Yellow River* yangqin concerto at the Victoria Concert Hall in 1990.

The concerto for yangqin was an instant hit and became one of Qu's early signature pieces. It soon became a seminal work for the instrument.

In a review in the Singapore Chinese-language daily, Lianhe Zaobao, Chinese music critic Quek Yong Siu, a former dizi player with PA Chinese orchestra, praised composer Qu for his "great labour of love" creating the masterpiece, played beautifully by his colleague, Qu Jianqing.

The next year, Qu was invited to perform the new piece at the prestigious 14th Shanghai Spring Festival, an international music event, winning her and the composer a special performance award.

The same year Qu flew to Australia and New Zealand for a series of performances with 12 other Shanghai orchestra musicians led by their Music Director Gu Guanren.

In 1993 she came to Singapore a third time for her first solo performance in collaboration with the now-defunct Theatre Arts Troupe Orchestra conducted by veteran suona player Yeo Siew Wee, a founding member of the Singapore Chinese Music Federation.

Qu played mainly Qu Chunquan's works at the one-night only concert at the Singapore Conference Hall. They included *Walking in Chaoxiang*, and *The General's Order*, which was re-arranged from a traditional Sichuan folk tune. And for the finale, she performed the much-anticipated *Yellow River* yangqin concerto, to rousing applause and approval from the audience.

*"I hope that one day
the cimbalom, santur,
hammered dulcimer,
hackbrett, tsymbaly,
khim and the yangqin
can all come together
to play at a CWA
congress in Singapore!"*

After her three performances here, Qu observed that support for Chinese culture and music was strong in the Chinese community and that the garden city was a very beautiful place to work and live in.

"I was very surprised that so many people in Singapore were playing and learning Chinese music instruments as well," she said. This prompted her decision to move to Singapore the next year to start life anew. But it meant ending her 16-year relationship with the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra.





Qu represented Singapore at the Cimbalom World Congress in Belarus in 1997.

She was invited frequently to play at Chinese orchestra concerts of community clubs, the National Trades Union Congress and other amateur music groups.

But all that changed when SCO was formed in 1996 and she felt she could play an important role in the new national orchestra. She auditioned and became a member of SCO's pioneer batch of foreign talent as its Yangqin Principal.

Although she started playing professionally again, she was still able to teach at the same time. "It is a great honour to play for the national orchestra and promote Chinese instrumental music," said Qu, now a naturalised Singapore citizen.

Barely 29 then, she had intended to teach and promote the yangqin, and lead a simple and quiet life, performing only at local concerts and community events.

She started to teach at a small private music school, and her first community engagement was the 1994 National Day dinner in Tanjong Pagar attended by then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the Member of Parliament for the constituency, and Mrs Lee.

Over the years, she has taught the instrument at several Singapore institutions, including National University of Singapore, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, School of the Arts and many secondary and primary schools.

Many of her students are top prize winners at national Chinese music competitions, and several are following in her footsteps teaching the instrument in schools.



Putting Singapore music on the world stage

As fate would have it, just when she was playing and teaching the yangqin in Singapore in the early 1990s, the Cimbalom World Association (CWA) was founded in Hungary by musicians from 10 countries to popularise the instrument.

Led by Hungarian cimbalom virtuoso Viktoria Herencsar, the inaugural Cimbalom World Congress was held in Budapest with 28 participants in the same year the association was formed in 1991.

The biennial event was held mostly in East European cities initially, before moving to Beijing in 2005 and Taipei in 2013. It was held for the first time in South America in 2009, in Mexico.

Qu represented Singapore at the congress in Belarus for the first time in 1997. She was accompanied by her mentor Xiang Zuhua, the father of the modern yangqin

in China who was also a CWA founding member and vice-president. He died in 2017, aged 83.

“It was an eye opener for me to see the cimbalom in different forms and from different countries played by the world’s best musicians,” she said.

Since then, she has been a regular participant, attending the congress in Moldova in 1999, Switzerland in 2005 and in Hungary in 2011 when CWA celebrated its 20th anniversary. Her last appearance was at the congress in Hefei, China, in 2019, shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic broke out.

She regarded it as an honour to represent Singapore at those meetings because they gave her a platform to promote the yangqin and Singapore music on the world stage.

She started taking her Singapore students to the congress in 2013 when Lim Jia Hann performed at its 12th edition in Taipei. Two years later, another student Lim Sen Ji accompanied her to the congress in the United Kingdom.



Qu with her student Lim Jia Hann at the 15th Yangqin World Congress in 2019.

She was pleased to note that since CWA's formation, the repertoire for cimbalom and yangqin music has grown to include many works for symphony orchestras. They include works by several Hungarian composers such as Zoltan Pongracz's *Concertino for Cimbalom* and Swiss composer Paul Huber's *Concerto for Cimbalom and String Orchestra*.

Qu also contributed to the growing repertoire. Besides the *Yellow River* yangqin concerto, one other important work is Singapore composer Phoon Yew Tien's *Rhapsody on Di Nu Hua* for yangqin and Chinese Orchestra which she performed at its world premiere in Beijing in 2000. A single movement orchestral piece, it is based on a well-known song from a Cantonese opera, popular in Hong Kong and South-east Asia including Singapore, in the 1960s.

Another is *Wang Jiang Nan*, concerto for yangqin and Symphony Orchestra, also by Phoon, which she performed at its world premiere at an SSO concert in 2003 featuring works by Singapore composers.

Two years later, Qu commissioned Phoon to write the yangqin solo, *Boat Song and Reflections*, in preparation for her participation at CWA's congress in Beijing in 2005.

"I was very excited playing the piece at the congress because of its strong Nanyang flavour inspired by a Malay folk song," Qu said.

Her yangqin works, including those which Phoon had written for her, were compiled in a compact disc entitled *Boat Song and Reflections* in 2008.

In 2002, at SCO's invitation, a notable major work Qu performed was *The Phoenix* – Concerto for Orchestra written by Tianjin-born Chinese composer Xu Changjun. The piece, which used modern Western composition techniques while drawing heavily on traditional Chinese music, such as percussion parts from Peking operas, succeeded in highlighting the uniqueness of the yangqin.

"I am proud to say that today it is taught in most music conservatories in China and elsewhere," Qu pointed out. She played the piece in Poland with the Wroclaw Chamber Orchestra when she was invited to take part in a music festival there in 2006.

Composer Xu later re-arranged the piece for the symphony orchestra in 2016. Qu was invited to perform it with the Tianjin Youth Symphony Orchestra in Shanghai the following year.

Two years later, she was back in China to play the same piece with the Tianjin Symphony Orchestra at a special concert to mark the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China in November 2019.

Since arriving in Singapore, she has been living alone except for a period of three years when her niece from Shanghai, Wang Jiayao, joined SCO to play the erhu in 2010.



Qu with Cimbalom World Congress founder Viktoria Herencsar (right) and Belarus cimbalom soloist Katherine Anokhina (left) when they were invited by SCO to perform at a concert in 2003.

The concert entitled Eurasian Journey of the Yangqin was the Asian debut for the two leading East European musicians. It was also SCO's first featuring the cimbalom.

"It's a rare opportunity for us to come. As the cimbalom family is a big one, to be able to enter this door means more people can hear and see the wonder of this instrument," Herencsar told reporters then.

Qu also played *The Phoenix* – Concerto for Orchestra which SCO had specially commissioned Chinese composer Xu Changjun to write for the concert.

Herencsar was invited again to perform at SCO's 20th anniversary fund-raising gala dinner and concert at the Marina Bay Sands in 2016. Some 10 other young yangqin players, many of them Qu's students, also performed in an ensemble in the evening featuring the cimbalom and yangqin.

Qu's big dream? "I hope that one day the cimbalom, santur, hammered dulcimer, hackbrett, tsymbaly, khim and the yangqin can all come together to play at a CWA congress in Singapore!"

"Those were very happy and memorable years as we would go to rehearsals and perform on stage together," she reminisced. Her niece returned home to get married at the end of her contract in 2013.

What does she expect to achieve next with SCO? "I want to be able to play more new works for the yangqin, which has developed from an accompaniment instrument to one for solo performance, but more important is to organise CWA's cimbalom congress in Singapore sometime soon," she replied.

"The association has been asking me to host the event in Singapore for many years now, but it remains a daunting task," added Qu, a member of CWA's management committee since 2003.

The closest she came to doing so was in persuading SCO to invite CWA founder Viktoria Herencsar and Belarus cimbalom soloist Katherine Anokhina to Singapore to perform at a special concert in 2003.



Watch
Huang Guifang's
performance

PIECE *Grasslands*
COMPOSER Gu Guanren
CONDUCTOR Chen Xieyang
CONCERT The Winds Breathe On,
November 4, 2006
VENUE SCO Concert Hall

DESCRIPTION This large sanxian concerto consists of two movements. First, the beautiful and boundless grasslands are quiet but full of life. Its people are hardworking, and life on the grasslands is peaceful and blessed. Second, the bugle announces the commencement of the joyous Naadam Festival. The exhilarated crowd arrives at the festival from different directions. The youngsters challenge each other at wrestling, whilst the children break into a joyous dance. The horse-racing propel the festival to its climax.



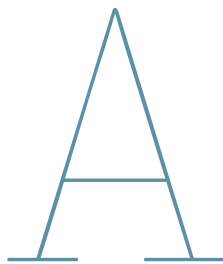
sānxián





Huang Guifang

Blossoming of a Golden Flower



n all-girl ensemble playing plucked string instruments took Beijing and beyond by storm in the 1980s.

Called Five Golden Flowers, the quintet, all in their early 20s and graduates from the China Conservatory of Music, became a household name in the Chinese music world for more than a decade.

Their fans will remember Huang Guifang performing on the sanxian which literally means “three strings”, Yang Jing on the lute-shaped pipa, Lin Ling on the guzheng, Li Lingling on the yangqin and Wei Wei on both the liuqin and ruan.

Huang’s instrument was the sanxian which has a history dating back a few thousand years. It has a sound box or drum wrapped with python skin that is attached to a long-necked, fretless fingerboard.

The women faded from the limelight by the mid-1990s when they went their separate ways in pursuit of different career paths.

They were thrust back into the news when Liu Dehai, their mentor and long-time pipa professor at the conservatory passed away unexpectedly in Beijing on April 11, 2020 from multiple organ failure. He was 83.

He was well-known for his innovative playing style and techniques, particularly his interpretation of the dramatically intense pipa solo, *Ambush From All Sides* and for popularising the pipa in the West.

Obituaries published in China and elsewhere credited Liu as the maestro behind the once famous Five Golden Flowers.



Huang (third from left) with other members of Five Golden Flowers, Li Lingling (first from left), Lin Ling (fourth from right), Wei Wei (third from right), Yang Jing (first from right) and their mentor Liu Dehai (fourth from left).

In a report shortly after Liu's death, Singapore's Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao quoted Huang, who is now Sanxian Associate Principal with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO), as saying: "The growth of all five of us was guided and inspired by our teacher. We were one family. I was very worried when he was hospitalised, but did not expect him to leave us so suddenly."

Travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic prevented Huang from joining her fellow Five Golden Flowers in a series of concerts to mark Liu's first death anniversary at the China Conservatory of Music Concert Hall from April 8 to April 12, 2021. Her place was taken up by 50-year-old popular sanxian soloist Shang Zhongyuan, also a teacher at the conservatory.

They played the celebrated Peking opera-style piece, *In the Deep of the Night* re-arranged for plucked string instruments years ago by Liu, to thunderous applause. This was one of the Five Golden Flowers' signature pieces which evoked memories of their golden years.

Huang could only watch a video recording of the performance. "They played well, and it was a pity that I couldn't be there or it would be a reunion for us too," she lamented.

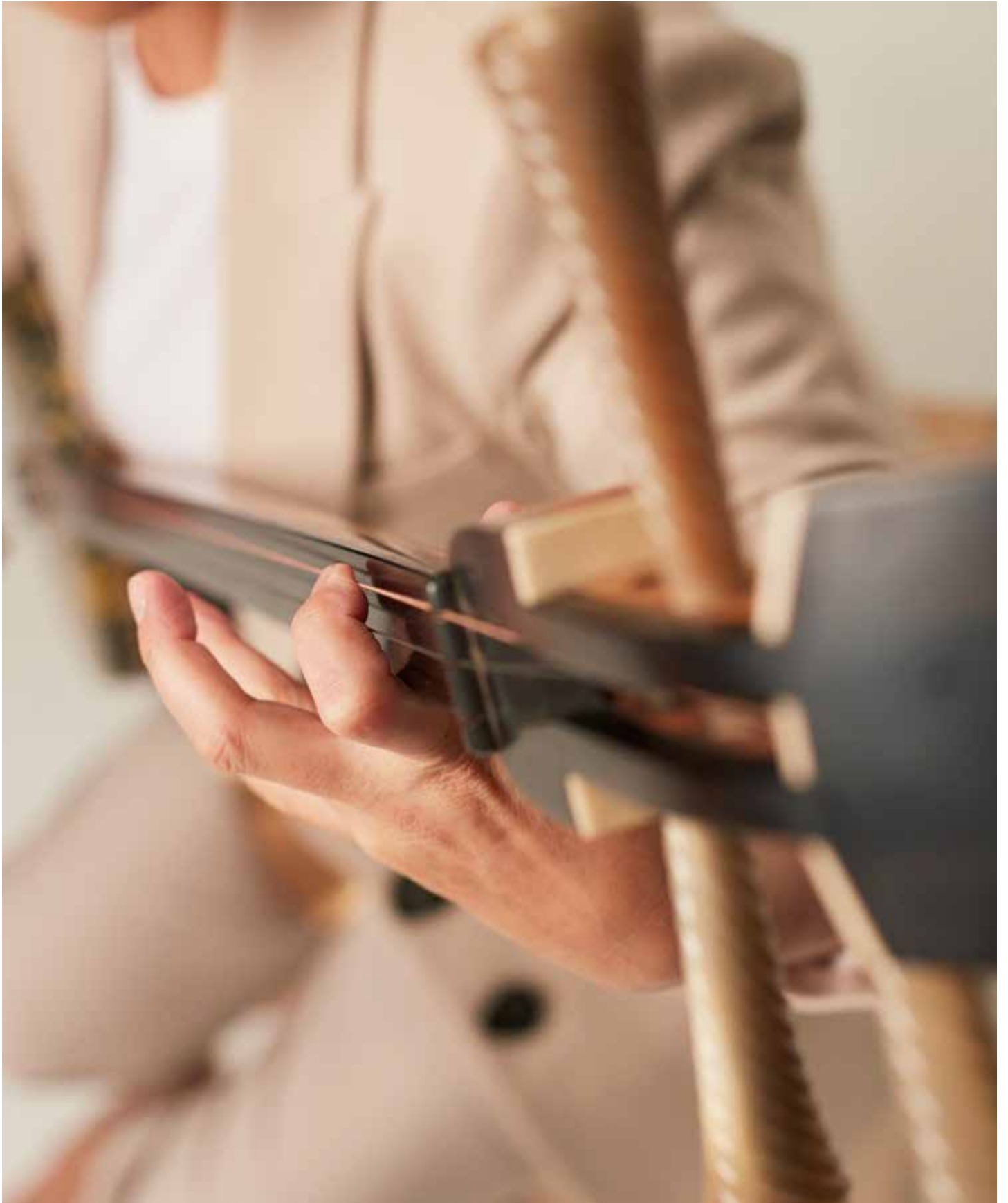
Her fellow "Flowers", who are now in their late 50s, are students-turned-professors at the music conservatory. The last time they performed together was at a concert to mark the conservatory's 40th anniversary in 2004. They played the same piece, *In the Deep of the Night*, in the presence of Liu in the audience.

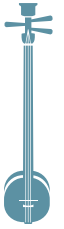
From forming group to overnight success

So how did the Five Golden Flowers come about? The group was formed when the China Conservatory of Music was planning to reach out to the community with regular performances in the mid 1980s, Huang recollected.

Huang performing *The Nanyang Gate*, a concerto for sanxian at the Eric Watson's World of Chinese Music concert in 2017.







Huang performing in Japan in 1991.

Liu handpicked the girls – all top graduates of different instruments who were teaching or working at the music conservatory. They included Huang who was then with an experimental music outreach group there.

She remembered they did not have much time to prepare for their maiden performance at the opening of the new 1,800-seat concert hall on January 10, 1986.

Huang played the sanxian solo, *He Huan Ling*, and Yang Jing gave her rendition of *King Chu Doffs His Armour* on the pipa. The group also played a medley of popular tunes such as *Lucky Cranes and Fairies' Shadows* and of course, *In the Deep of the Night*, the audience's favourite. "It was a huge success and so we continued to perform together as a group from then on," she said.

In the same year, they were invited to perform in Canada, Hungary and the United States as well as Asia, including Japan, the Philippines, and North and South Korea.

At home, invitations from music schools came in quick succession. They visited many schools and major music conservatories in China within a few years and recorded several albums which sold well.

The group's formation coincided with the opening of the Beijing Concert Hall, home to the China Symphony Orchestra, in 1986. The conservatory was among those invited to play at its inaugural concert.

"Our teacher Liu prepared us to perform as an all-girl plucked strings ensemble and so we made our debut at the concert hall's opening," Huang said.

The five-member music group was the first of its kind in China before similar ones followed after its success later.

Huang attributed their popularity among the music students and in community concerts to their performances which were also informative and educational.

Their repertoire included evergreens such as *Moonlit River in Spring* and *White Snow in Spring*. Their performances, especially those held in schools, were often followed by talks on the music and the instruments, usually by Liu himself.

SCO's Zhongruan Principal Zhang Ronghui, then a student at the secondary school affiliated to the Xi'an Conservatory of Music in Shaanxi Province, was a fan of the Five Golden Flowers in the late 1980s.

"I never saw them perform live, but was very excited whenever I could catch them on television because of the interesting ways with which they played Chinese music," she said.

Huang said the group did not have a name at first, and was simply referred to as a five-member plucked string ensemble. But following their stunning success, fans called them Five Golden Flowers, after the title of a popular romantic movie produced by Changchun Film Studio in 1939.

Huang might have found stardom as an instrumentalist but it was her singing talent that opened an important door for her in her teens.

The youngest of six children from a working-class family, she was a pupil of the famous No. 4 school on Qiqi Ha'er Road in Shanghai, well-known for its musical performances at the height of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976).

That was the period when all school children were taught revolutionary songs. "I have loved singing since I was a child and when I was in Primary 2, my teachers selected me for the school's music group because I could sing well," she said.

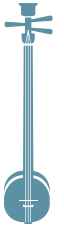
She remembered the school had very good and dedicated music teachers who included Ran Dianyang, a vocal trainer, and Liu Weichang, an accomplished accordionist.

One memorable event occurred in 1972 when the school music group was selected to perform for US President Richard Nixon in Shanghai during his seven-day visit to China. The groundbreaking visit ended 25 years of hostility and normalised relations between the two countries.

In school, Huang picked up several Chinese instruments, but was taught only extracts and never the whole composition. All she could remember playing well were revolutionary songs for children, such as *I Love Beijing Tiananmen*.

One day, her teacher found a sanxian lying around in the classroom and asked if she would like to try her hand at it. It was not a popular instrument as it was bulky and most students found it difficult to learn. "I was probably asked because I was bigger in size among my peers and musically stronger too," she said.

Although she did not receive formal training in music, the rudimentary knowledge she gained was good enough for her to play the sanxian and other instruments at school concerts and community events.



Huang with sanxian master Xiao Jiansheng in 2019.

Singing prowess wins her a coveted spot

When she was 13 in 1976, the year the Cultural Revolution ended, teachers from the Central Conservatory of Music went to her school on a recruitment drive. She was among 12 students shortlisted after several rounds of auditions and was the only one selected to attend the secondary school affiliated to the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing.

While her ability to play the sanxian was a great advantage, she believed it was her vocal prowess that gave her the edge.

She recounted that at the final audition, she was asked to sing a song after playing the liuqin and sanxian. “I sang a revolutionary song in praise of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai so beautifully that the teacher signed me up right away.”

Still, Huang described herself as a “blank piece of paper” when she set off for Beijing to start her formal music education. In contrast, some of her fellow students were child prodigies while others could already play their instruments very well, having started learning them from a young age.

“There were only a few of us in the class learning the sanxian, not a popular instrument because it was difficult to learn and even harder to master,” she said.

Two years later she was transferred to the China Conservatory of Music where she came under the tutelage of sanxian master Xiao Jiansheng.

Xiao, a very dedicated teacher, would cycle to school by 7am every morning to give her warming up exercises and music drills before proper lessons start at 8am, Huang said. That went on for years, even when she was an undergraduate at the conservatory.

“He always emphasised the importance of laying a strong foundation and the need to get the basics right before one could master the sanxian,” Huang said.

Her teacher has long retired after a lifetime of grooming generations of players and modernising sanxian music with new compositions, playing techniques and improvements made to the instrument.

In 2005, he invented artificial python skin for the sanxian’s sound box to make the instrument more durable, especially for outdoor performances, while maintaining its sound quality.

Possibly the oldest living sanxian master, Xiao was 95 when he was featured in a report by Guangming Ribao, a Beijing newspaper, in June 2021, showing him looking well and playing the sanxian at home.

Huang chalked up her first accolade as a sanxian instrumentalist at the inaugural National Chinese Music Competition in Beijing in 1982 when she won a distinction award for her performance of the two-part sanxian concerto *Liu Hulan*, a group composition by Xiao and two other musicians.

She was already one of China’s top sanxian players then, according to Zhang Nianbing, a sanxian master and a retired Chinese music professor from Shanghai Conservatory of Music who saw Huang’s performance at the competition.

Zhang, who moved to Singapore with her artist husband Chen Chudian in the mid-1990s, taught Huang briefly in 1985 when she went to Shanghai to learn from her.

“I was happy to come as I can perform with the national orchestra and that’s what I like to do.”

“She was introduced by her teacher Xiao to see me once a week for about two months during her school term holidays and impressed me with her diligence and eagerness to master the instrument,” said Zhang, a long-time member on SCO’s Artistic Resource Panel.

After graduating from music school, Huang started to perform actively, unlike many of her peers who remained at the China Conservatory of Music to teach.

Besides gigs with the then newly-formed Five Golden Flowers, she also performed with other all-girl music groups such as the nine-member Jiu Fang Music and the Ai Yue Women Music Troupe led by Zheng Xiaoying, China’s first female conductor.

She travelled extensively with the groups to perform in China and overseas, including the United States, France, Germany, Japan and the Philippines.





Huang was invited to be a guest soloist at the Victoria Concert Hall by the Boon Lay Community Club's Chinese Orchestra in 1995.

As talk began swirling about upgrading the People's Association (PA) Chinese Orchestra in early 1996, Huang and other talented Chinese musicians were targeted by the proposed national orchestra, which subsequently became SCO.

"I remember it was Lum Yan Sing from the then PA Chinese Orchestra who approached my teacher Liu Dehai for names and he recommended me among others," Huang said.

In 1995, she won the top prize for her sanxian performance at an international Chinese music competition in Beijing, thus establishing herself as a leading sanxian soloist in the country.

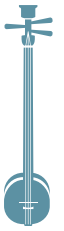
Then came a momentous event in the same year when the Boon Lay Community Club's Chinese Orchestra invited her to be a guest soloist at its concert at the Victoria Concert Hall. She played Chinese composer Li Heng's new work for sanxian, *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute*, based on ancient tunes inspired by songs and poems about the life of Han Dynasty poet Cai Wenji.

She was then happily married to her teenage sweetheart and fellow graduate from the China Conservatory of Music, cellist Ji Huiming. Starting life anew in Singapore was not a difficult decision to make as her husband, then teaching at the conservatory, was game to move over too.

So in 1997 Huang joined the pioneer batch of foreign talents in SCO as a sanxian and ruan player. "I was happy to come as I can perform with the national orchestra and that's what I like to do," she said.

Two years later, her husband was recruited as a cellist with SCO when a position became available.

The couple has now been performing together at SCO for over 20 years. They live with their daughter Ji Jie, who works as a marketing executive.



Promoting the sanxian in Singapore

Soon after arriving in Singapore, Huang began promoting the sanxian in local schools but found it an uphill task. Unlike the more popular instruments such as the erhu, guzheng, pipa and even sheng, she noticed the sanxian was not found in many school Chinese orchestras and amateur music groups in the community.

Many students used the ruan instead of the sanxian which is tougher to learn and master, she said. Moreover, the sanxian is expensive and not easily available.

“An ordinary sanxian costs at least \$2,400, and better ones more than \$4,000 each, amounts many students cannot afford,” she said.

Maintaining the instrument is also problematic as the python skin used for the sound box can be damaged easily when weather conditions change. The snake skin needs to be replaced periodically to maintain its good sound quality, she explained.

Since man-made python skin was created in 2005 for the sanxian by her teacher Xiao, prices have fallen a little, but skilful makers of the instrument in China are now few and hard to find.

“For my private students I would lend them my sanxian first and get them to buy one only when they are really sure of learning the instrument,” she said.

Most sanxian players in Chinese orchestras double up as ruan players and those proficient in sanxian are very hard to come by, she said.

She has briefly taught two Singapore-born talents, Chia Wei Jian and Kenny Chan, who were recruited by the Suzhou Chinese Orchestra in China to play the sanxian and ruan in 2018 and 2019 respectively.



Huang with her husband Ji Huiming, a cellist with SCO, and their daughter Ji Jie.



Huang performed two world premieres, *Summer Palace* and *Samsui Women*, at SCO's fund-raising gala dinner and concert in 2019.

Huang said she has enjoyed the many opportunities given to her as a sanxian player, especially from SCO Music Director Yeh Tsung and China-born Singapore composer Law Wai Lun.

Law included the sanxian in many of his compositions, including re-arrangements of Western music pieces for Chinese orchestra, she said.

After relocating to Singapore, Huang has continued to blossom as a performer with SCO and was promoted to Sanxian Associate Principal in 2020.

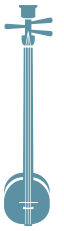
She has performed in world premieres of several SCO-commissioned works such as Chinese composer Yang Qing's sanxian solo *Lady Su Xiaoxiao* in 1999 and a modern piece, *Narrow Strip of Sky* by young Chinese composer Cui Quan in 2003. The more significant works included the two-movement sanxian concerto *Grasslands* by Chinese composer Gu Guanren in 2006.

Inspired by his first visit to Xiamen in Fujian province, UK-born Singapore-based composer Eric Watson wrote *The Nanyang Gate*, a concerto for sanxian and Chinese orchestra, for Huang to play at its world premiere at an SCO concert in 2017.

One example was when Law replaced the banjo playing the melodies for American composer George Gershwin's 1935 musical, *Porgy and Bess Suite*, with the sanxian for an SCO concert in 2013. "I did it because the two instruments sound very similar," Law explained.

Like most composers, he had initially avoided using the sanxian in his compositions because he felt that its unique sound could not blend easily with the other instruments.

But he later changed his mind and included the sanxian in many of his works after learning more about its characteristics during a casual conversation he had with Huang in 2003.



He has even tried to write a concerto for sanxian, but after bringing the instrument home to learn more about it, he found it too difficult. “I am putting it aside for a while now,” he said.

The sanxian was in the spotlight at SCO’s fund-raising gala dinner and concert in 2019. Titled *Sanxian Serenade*, it featured mainly sanxian instrumental music led by Huang.

Huang performed two world premieres that evening. With the support of an SCO ensemble, she played *Summer Palace* by Chinese composer Kong Hongwei. The second, *Samsui Women*, written by SCO’s Composer-in-Residence Wang Chenwei, was played by Wang and three other musicians including Huang.

Huang expressed optimism about the future of her beloved instrument and its role in SCO. She noted

that the sanxian is one instrument a Chinese orchestra cannot go without. It is also experiencing a revival of sorts in China as many young people there are learning the instrument and using it to play popular tunes at concerts as well, she said.

When asked whether she would consider establishing a Singapore version of the Five Golden Flowers, she replied enthusiastically: “We have just formed a similar one among SCO players in June 2021!”

The ensemble has adopted the name Vibrant Strings. Members of the plucked string music group comprise Huang herself on the sanxian, Yu Jia playing the pipa, Ma Huan on the yangqin, Xu Hui on the guzheng and Jing Bo on the ruan.

The group made its first public appearance in an interview with MediaCorp’s Chinese radio station 95.8FM on July 4, 2021. Its first public performance is expected to be in November 2021.



Vibrant Strings was formed in 2021. From left: Ma Huan, Yu Jia, Huang, Jing Bo and Xu Hui.



Watch
Yin Zhiyang's
performance

PIECE *Lingering Snow on
the Broken Bridge*
COMPOSER Liu Xijin
CONDUCTOR Yeh Tsung
CONCERT Flavours of Chinese
Music – A Night of
Liu Xijin's Works,
March 4, 2017
VENUE Victoria Concert Hall

DESCRIPTION This is a single movement concerto written for dizi solo and Chinese orchestra based on the folk music of Jiang Zhe (Jiangsu and Zhejiang), infusing the evoked scenery with emotion and lyricism. Utilising the rich colours of the full orchestra and bringing out the charms of the solo flute, it celebrates the beauty of Jiangnan and exalts the existence of true love in the world.

dízi







Yin Zhiyang

From Hidden Pit to Centre Stage

Yin Zhiyang, Dizi Principal at the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) for about two decades, cannot forget his debut performance as a soloist 33 years ago.

He had hoped it would be his passage to instant musical fame but it turned out to be a disaster.

Then 22 and a first-year student at the China Conservatory of Music, Yin was given short notice to replace his teacher Zhang Weiliang at a major concert at the new Beijing Concert Hall.

Because of a mix-up in his schedule, Zhang was not able to perform the *Bangdi* (Bamboo Flute) *Concerto* with the China Central Philharmonic. The 1981 work is by Taiwanese composer Ma Shui-long, who has been praised in a review by the New York Times for “letting his instruments speak in a European voice but with an Asian mind.”

Having barely any time to prepare, Yin was a bundle of nerves during the performance. Nevertheless, he was thrilled to make his debut as the “accidental” soloist for the concert, believing it as a golden opportunity to make a name for himself.

“It was the first time I played with a symphony orchestra, so I wasn’t sure how the conductor, Chinese American Deng Changguo, would conduct the piece,” Yin said.

It was when Deng swung his baton quite differently from conductors in a Chinese orchestra that he realised he could not follow him. In the second of the two-movement concerto, he stopped looking at Deng.

Yin remembers the fiasco to this day. “After 33 years, I still cannot bring myself to watch the recording of that concert because so many things went wrong that evening.”

But the sobering experience has taught him to be well-prepared and confident for every performance. Such a stance has stood him in good stead throughout his music career.

That unexpected debut in 1988, despite being far from stellar, triggered his love for performing on stage, especially as a soloist.



So years later in 2008, when another symphony orchestra, this time the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), invited him to be the guest soloist to play *Symphony No 4 “6.4.2-1”* for dizi and orchestra by Zhu Jianer, a composer from Shanghai, he accepted it as an honour and a rare opportunity. And the experience was vastly different from the concert 20 years earlier in Beijing.

“In fact I quite enjoyed the concert with Lim Yau conducting the piece,” he reminisced.

In 2009, at the invitation of the Kaoshiung Symphony Orchestra in Taiwan, he performed Chinese composer Kuan Nai-chung’s 1988 dizi concerto *Butterfly Dreams*, widely known as an East-meets-West innovative work.

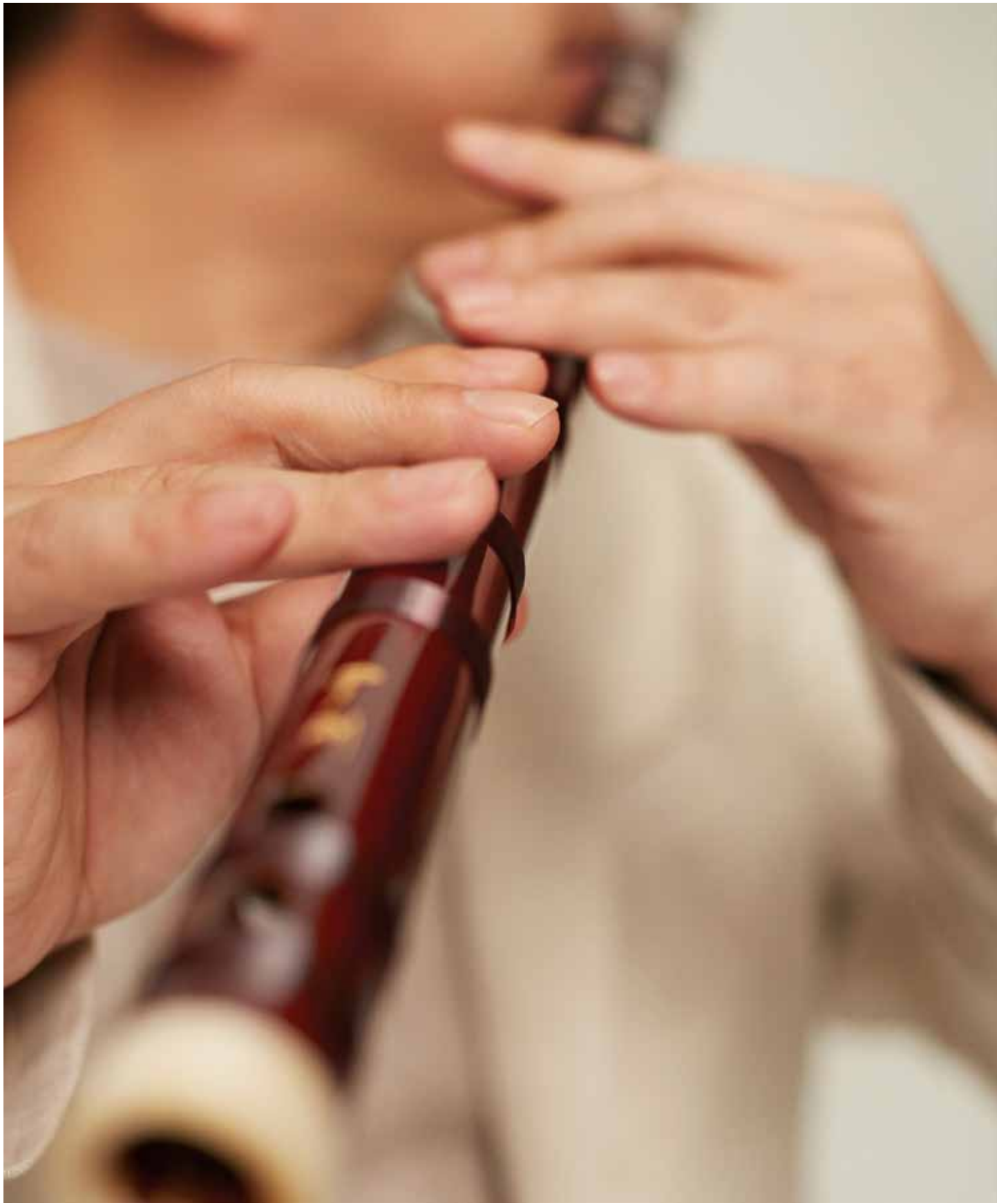
The concert was special because composer Kuan was not only the conductor for his own 20-minute piece but also for the entire programme of the evening.

Yin first performed Kuan’s *Butterfly Dreams* with the SCO in 2000, when Kuan was coincidentally also the guest conductor for his composition.

Yin’s interest in music was nurtured from young by his father, a music lover.



Yin with SCO Music Director and Conductor Yeh Tsung at the SCO concert Flavours of Chinese Music – A Night of Liu Xijin's Works in 2017.





Though a member of a Chinese orchestra, Yin also enjoys performing with symphony orchestras and listening to Western classical music. He has savoured all his outings with the SCO to Europe, especially at its maiden performances at the Budapest Spring Festival, the Barbican Centre in London and Sage Gateshead in north-east England in 2005.

During the SCO's performances at the last two venues, he played *Divine Melody*, a 1987 concerto for woodwind instruments and orchestra by Chinese composer Qu Xiaosong, known for his contemporary classical music works.

What he relished most was playing the concerto with some 10 different ancient Chinese woodwind instruments, including the bangdi, qudi, xun and paixiao, as well as the bawu and hulusi which are traditionally played by minority tribes.

One fond memory that Yin has of SCO's 2005 foray to Europe was hand-carrying all these instruments throughout the trip to make sure they remained in good condition. "My colleagues could go out sightseeing after our performances, leaving me behind to clean and pack the instruments, but I enjoyed doing it nevertheless," he said.

Yin and his family were invited to attend Shenyang Conservatory of Music's 80th anniversary and 30th graduation concert in 2018. Yin was appointed as a guest professor of the conservatory after the concert.

Yin first performed *Divine Melody* based on the poetic *Nine Songs*, written by Qu Yuan from the Warring States period, at the gala opening of the Singapore Arts Festival in 2005 to critical acclaim. It has since become one of his signature pieces with the SCO.

Yin's interest in music was nurtured from young by his father, a music lover.

He was born in Dandong, a coastal city in Liaoning province, as the only son among five children in the family. His parents were active in the amateur music and dance troupes of the textile factory where they were employed.

Yin's father, who was trained briefly at the Tianjin Conservatory of Music in his younger days, was the conductor of the factory's orchestra and could play many musical instruments.

He encouraged all his children – Yin and his sisters – to learn an instrument or two when they were young.



Yin started learning the violin when he was eight and the dizi later from teachers in Shenyang. He had to take a six-hour train journey to Liaoning's capital city for lessons every week.

When he was admitted to the secondary school affiliated to the Shenyang Conservatory of Music in 1979, his father asked him to choose either the violin or the dizi to specialise in.

“In the end I dropped the violin although I liked it more because my violin teacher was not only demanding but also spoke harshly to me,” he recalled.

The teacher once dismissed him as “not suitable material for music”, words which badly hurt and shook the confidence of the young boy.

Yin reckons that if his violin teacher had been kinder and more encouraging, he would probably have continued learning to play the violin instead of the dizi. “I still miss playing the violin, and enjoy listening to violin music,” he said.

But Yin has no regrets pursuing the dizi, one of the oldest Chinese musical instruments which was already in vogue during the period of The Three Kingdoms nearly 2,000 years ago.

The instrument, comprising a bamboo pipe with one blowing hole and six fingering holes, is also handy and easy to carry around, he noted.

Yin took seven years instead of six to complete his studies at the secondary school as he had to stay back for a year to brush up on his cultural and foreign language subjects before he could graduate in 1986.

He was then accepted by the Shenyang Conservatory of Music but declined the offer as he had set his sights on the more prestigious China Conservatory of Music or the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing.

But he failed in his first attempt to enrol at the two conservatories as he did not do well enough in the cultural and language subjects to gain admission.

Father's support paves the way to success

His father then found him a school in Dandong which specialised in preparing students especially in the subjects required for admission into tertiary institutions.

That year-long hothousing paid off. He succeeded in his second attempt to join the China Conservatory of Music the following year in 1987.

Yin attributed his success to his father, Yin Yubao, for “his great encouragement and unwavering support.”

Imbued with a great passion for music, his father has all along spared no effort to inspire and encourage all his children, grandchildren and more recently even a great-grandchild to learn music.



“I remember him borrowing 3,000 yuan from friends to buy a piano for my younger sister Yin Yi when his monthly pay at the textile factory was less than 100 yuan,” Yin said.

His father coached and encouraged his second daughter Yin Li to learn the dizi even when she was in her 40s. She later pursued further training in the instrument and is now a much sought-after dizi teacher in Shanghai.



Yin’s eldest sister Yin Lingling has a son Ai Hongbo, who became a dizi professor teaching at the Chinese Academy of Opera in Beijing, thanks to his grandfather’s encouragement and support.

Yin Yi’s son, Zhenghao, who studied in Singapore up to his A levels and became a Singaporean, was also inspired by his grandfather to pursue music studies in the United Kingdom after completing his National Service.

Even at the age of 83, Yin’s father was still grooming his eight-year-old great-grandson Minghui to be another Yin Zhiyang with weekly dizi lessons at home.

Two years into his three-year degree course at the China Conservatory of Music, Yin’s studies were disrupted by the nearly two-month-long Tiananmen Square student demonstrations in Beijing in 1989 dubbed the June 4th incident.

But fortunately, that did not stop him from being recognised as a promising dizi player later that year when he won an outstanding performance award at the China National Music competition which was recorded and televised nationwide.

Yin’s father Yin Yubao teaching great-grandson Minghui the dizi at home.

He presented his graduation solo concert at the Beijing Concert Hall in December 1990, playing nine solo pieces with the dizi and lesser-known Chinese woodwind instruments like the xiao and xun.

The programme included an ancient tune, *Parting at Yangguan Pass*, re-arranged for orchestra by his teacher Zhang Weiliang, and dizi concerto *Chasing* by Chinese composer Huang Xiaofei.

The concert, which was attended by all of Yin's family members, saw maestro Hu Bingxu, who joined SCO as its founding music director in 1997, conducting the Ai Yue Symphony Orchestra and the China Conservatory of Music Ensemble.

After graduation, Yin was given the option to stay back to lecture at the conservatory or join a professional performing group. He chose the latter, becoming a dizi player with the then Central Song and Dance Ensemble.

Teaching was never his cup of tea, and he thought that being a member of the ensemble would allow him to perform and travel overseas. The pay was also better than teaching at the conservatory.

His hopes to go abroad were realised quickly. In his first year with the ensemble in 1992, opportunities to perform beckoned from a string of Japanese cities and several South-east Asian countries, including a week's show at the Kallang Theatre in Singapore.

“As musicians we can only do our best to be good performers and try to impart our knowledge and skills to the younger generation.”

With the benefit of hindsight, he said that joining the ensemble was not a good decision. He discovered rather belatedly that in the troupe, musicians were ranked lower than the performers such as the singers and dancers, as well as the lighting and sound technicians.

“We musicians were therefore not treated as well, and were even considered less important than the stage hands,” he claimed.





Yin with his son Boxiang, wife Chang Hsiang-ling and daughter Liwen.

But what he rued most was that musicians in the ensemble played in the orchestra pit during the performance, not on stage, meaning he was always out of the sight of the audience.

Best years of my life with SCO

“During my nearly seven years with the ensemble, I was literally hidden below the stage and was never seen playing the dizi,” he lamented.

So when a friend and former music conservatory schoolmate working in Singapore told him about the formation of the SCO in 1996, he knew it would give him a chance to finally go on stage.

He was keen to join the SCO as his first visit to Singapore with the Central Song and Dance Ensemble a few years earlier had left him with a good impression.

Yin applied immediately to join the newly-formed SCO and was ready to fly to Singapore for an audition.

But leaving China and the ensemble in Beijing was not easy. He had to draw on all his savings and borrow from friends to raise 30,000 yuan to pay the authorities as compensation and sureties in order to join the SCO as a dizi player in 1997.

His early years in Singapore turned out to be challenging as he was living in a small rented room in a Housing Board flat. His monthly pay also fell slightly short of his expectation.

He realised that there was nothing he could do except to be patient and bide his time. Indeed, his fortune changed for the better after Yeh Tsung joined SCO as its Music Director and Conductor in 2002.

Soon after he took over the baton, Yeh called for an artistic leadership renewal in the orchestra. After an audition, Yin was appointed SCO's new Dizi Principal.

In the same year, Yin became a permanent resident and married traditional Chinese medicine physician Chang Hsiang-ling who had migrated with her parents from Taiwan to Singapore.



Their son Boxiang was born later in the year. Daughter Liwen came along in 2004.

Yin's children have also shown an aptitude for music. Playing the dizi as members of the Tao Nan Primary School's Chinese Orchestra, they took part in an SCO mass concert, *Our People, Our Music*, at the newly-open National Stadium in June 2014. The event set a new Guinness World Record as the largest Chinese orchestra performance by 3,345 musicians. The participants were led by SCO members. Boxiang plans to go to university after he completes his National Service. Liwen is currently a first-year student at Raffles Junior College.

Yin regards the past two decades as his best years as he raised a happy family and established himself as both a soloist and leading dizi player with SCO.

Although the SCO was established only 25 years ago, it has become a world-class Chinese orchestra, led by strong management and blessed with excellent musicians and a rich repertoire, he said. It has also fostered his professional growth as a musician. "I am happy because I was given opportunities to perform and develop my skills as a member of the orchestra," he said.

"I have always liked performing on stage, and better still in a solo concert."



Yin and his children took part in an SCO mass concert, *Our People, Our Music* at the National Stadium in 2014.



Yin and his teacher Zhang Weiliang in Singapore in 2017.

He praised Music Director Yeh, who has been leading the orchestra for about 20 years, as an outstanding conductor, singling out his ability to train and develop the musicians under his charge.

Yin said the future of SCO and Chinese orchestra music in Singapore hinges on those in leadership roles.

“As musicians we can only do our best to be good performers and try to impart our knowledge and skills to the younger generation,” he said.

He felt he has been doing his part by teaching at primary and secondary schools in Singapore and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) since he joined SCO in 1997.

He is currently teaching the dizi at Tao Nan Primary School and Zhonghua Secondary School in addition to the gifted programme at the School of Young Talents at NAFA and the tertiary-level students there.

In August 2010, he led his students in a concert at NAFA's Lee Foundation Theatre.

He would have liked to hold more such concerts but finds the organisation and preparatory work and logistics involved too overwhelming.

He continues to treasure the joyful memory of the many concerts he has performed in over the past 25 years. One was when he played the dizi concerto *Lingering Snow* on the *Broken Bridge* by Liu Xijin, at the SCO concert *Flavours of Chinese Music – A Night of Liu Xijin's Works* in March 2017.

Yin took great pleasure in the piece based on the folk tunes of the Jiangsu and Zhejiang areas as the single-movement concerto was able to draw on the rich colours of the orchestra to bring out the charming sounds of the dizi.

Just two months later in May, his teacher and mentor Zhang Weiliang gave his latest performance with SCO at the concert *Dreams of Homeland – SCO with Zhang Weiliang*.



Yin said he was very impressed by his teacher Zhang because he was performing nearly throughout the concert.

“He was already 60 then. It gave me great encouragement to see him perform so many pieces with such vigour and passion,” he added.

His teacher Zhang had performed with SCO at two earlier concerts, in May 2002 and July 2008 respectively.

Yin himself played the dizi concerto *Love for the Eagle*, by Chinese composer Liu Wenjin, at an SCO concert *Liu Sha & SCO* in October 2018.

The work was commissioned by the now-defunct Asia Orchestra, a collaborative project of three traditional orchestras from China, Japan and Korea, and performed in the three countries in November 2002.

The following year, it was played at the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra’s 125th anniversary concert by young Chinese dizi virtuoso Tang Junjiao who made the lively and yet traditional composition popular in several Asian countries.

When asked about his plans for the future after almost a quarter of a century with SCO, Yin replied without hesitation: “Of course I would like to play better and be an even more outstanding member with the orchestra.”

He hopes to stage his second solo performance soon, this time with the SCO, as his first for his graduation from the China Conservatory of Music took place way back in 1990.

He believes his tank is still full and he has lots more to contribute as a musician.

“I have always liked performing on stage, and better still in a solo concert,” he said.



Yin playing the dizi concerto *Love for the Eagle* at an SCO concert conducted by Liu Sha in 2018.



Watch Guo
Changsuo's
performance

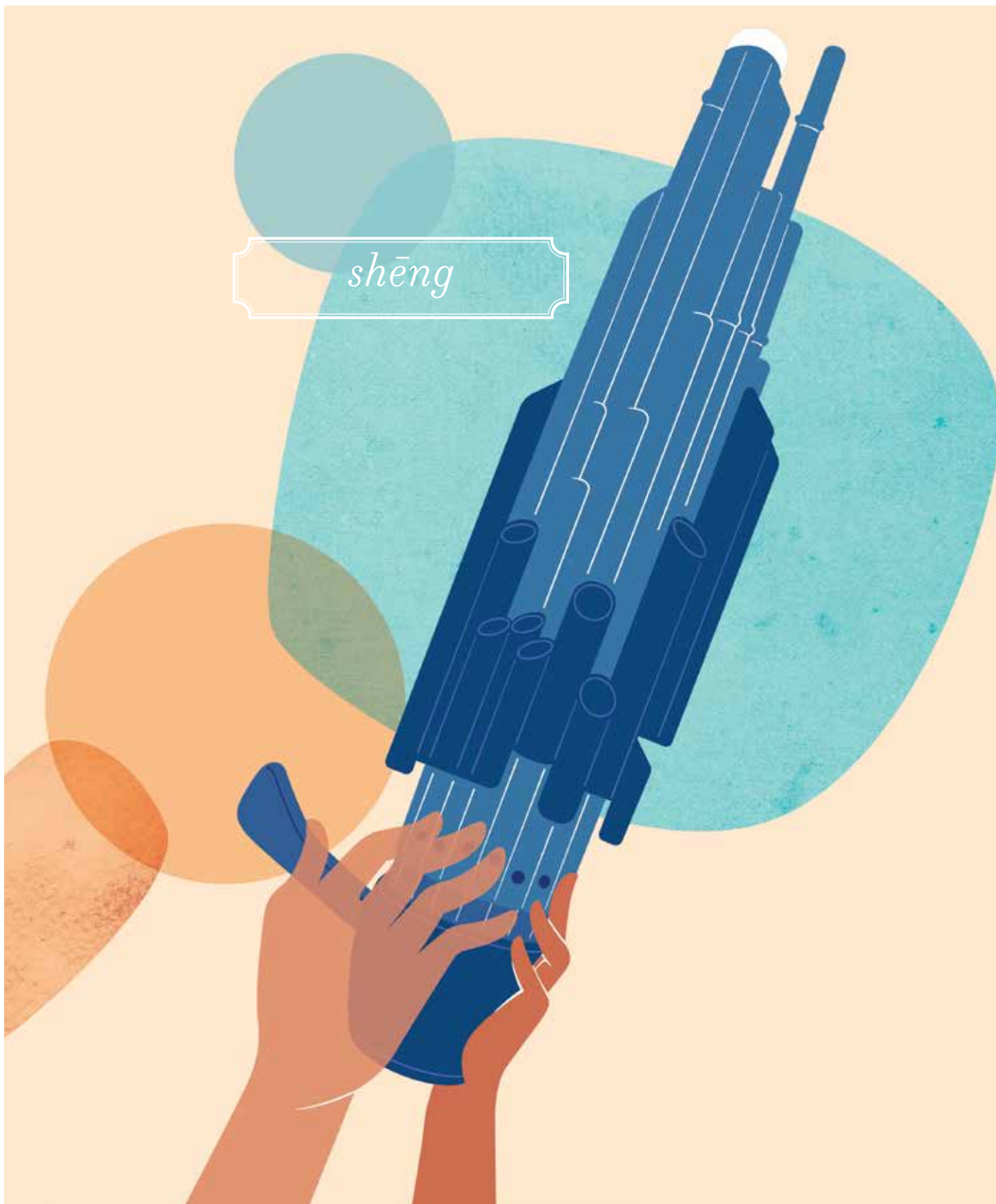
PIECE *The Alluring Span
of the Peacock*

COMPOSER Yan Haideng
CONCERT Untamed Melodies,
October 2, 2020

VENUE SISTIC Live
(Digital concert)

DESCRIPTION Based on the tunes of
folk songs from Jinbei, Shanxi, this
piece pays tribute to the joyous life of
the working class through a depiction
of the beauty of the peacock.

shēng







Guo Changsuo

The Sounds of *Calm and Harmony*

Guo Changsuo's eyes light up when discussing the musical instrument that has been a big part of his life for decades. The Sheng Principal at the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) has much to say about the mouth-blown organ that commands a vital role in a Chinese orchestra.

The great Chinese sage Confucius played the multi-reed, wind pipe instrument during the Spring and Autumn Period more than 2,500 years ago. So did many famous scholars and musicians in the ancient past.

It was an important instrument for rituals, ceremonies and entertainment in imperial palaces and courts in China.

And when its use spread to the community later, it became a popular instrument often heard at festivals, weddings and other celebrations.

In Chinese folk music, it usually accompanies the dizi, guan, suona and other instruments in song and dance.

According to oracle bone inscriptions found in ancient China, it was already in existence about 4,000 years ago and described as an instrument with a harmonious sound.

Historically, its bamboo pipes were shaped like a "phoenix resting with its wings closed". Over the decades, it has evolved through a series of innovations to expand its sound range and enhance its playing techniques.



Guo with Professor Yang Shoucheng, Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing (left) and student Yang Jiwei, co-founder and executive director of the TENG Ensemble.

It is not only one of the oldest Chinese music instruments, but also a valuable one in a Chinese orchestra. Many music lovers may not be aware that it is used to set the pitch at tunings before a concert, like what the oboe does in a symphony orchestra.

Elaborating on its unique features, Guo said its harmonious sounds give an orchestra a *ding hai shen zhen* effect, meaning to set things right, or bring others into the mainstay.

Over the years, it has evolved in size and variety with new features to provide a wide range of sounds and enable different techniques of play, moving from finger hole to button-pushing and key-operated ones.

The versatile instrument can play chords and keys with uniform intonation and timbre. It can also take on any role, such as melody, harmony, accompaniment and bass.

The sheng's rich timbres, Guo pointed out, also blend and harmonise well with any instrument in all four sections of the orchestra, be it the *chui* or woodwind, *la* or bowed strings, *tan* or plucked strings and *da* or percussion section.

"It is quite unlike the guan, sanxian and the banhu. The three instruments each have their own unique sound," he said.

Another notable feature is that the sheng, like the harmonica, can produce sound whether the player blows in or out, and similar to the piano, it can yield more than one note at a time.

"I think the Western pipe organ which came much later was based on the sheng because the two instruments work on the same principles," he reckoned.

At the SCO, Guo, a gaoyin or high pitch sheng player, leads a team of five – second gaoyin sheng player Ong Yi Horng, two zhongyin or middle pitch sheng players Kevin Cheng and Cindy Yang, and a bass or diyin sheng player Lim Kiong Pin.

Guo performing at SCO's fundraising gala dinner and concert in 2015.

Guest-of-Honour
Patron of SCO
Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong







Taiwanese Yang is a recent addition to the team. She replaces Chinese national Zhong Zhiyue, who left in 2019 after nine years with the orchestra to teach at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.

In his impeccable Beijing-accented Mandarin, the affable Guo said half in jest that he believed most sheng players are an unusually calm and harmonious lot, much like the instrument they play.

“We treasure good relationships and that’s why you seldom hear sheng music association members in China fight or quarrel with one another,” he quipped.

So it is with the Singapore Sheng Association he helped to form in 2015 to promote the instrument, he added. He is one of the association’s advisors. His student, Yang Jiwei, who learned from him during his secondary school days, is the president. Yang is also a co-founder and Executive Director of the Chinese music group, TENG Ensemble, where he plays the sheng.

Guo’s friendly nature and willingness to help others has brought much cheer – and in one instance marital bliss – to his orchestra.

Just two years after he joined SCO as a sheng player in 1997, he noticed that the orchestra’s young and attractive zhongruan player Zhang Ronghui was still single.

He introduced her to his friend, Xu Jingsong, an engineer from China. It was love at first sight for the couple. Zhang, then 27, and Xu, 32, who graduated from Tsinghua University, were married in September 1999, just six months after they first met.

“I hope the word Chinese can be removed from SCO’s name one day, just like a symphony orchestra which is not linked to any racial group.”

Zhang, now SCO’s Zhongruan Principal said: “I must thank Guo for bringing us together. If I didn’t meet my husband then, I would have returned to China and wouldn’t be playing with SCO today.”

Both Guo and Zhang were in the first batch of musicians from China to join SCO when the then People’s Association’s Chinese Orchestra was upgraded to be a national music company in 1996.

Sojourn to hometown sparks interest in music

Guo's interest in music began when he was a child, during a period of upheaval in China. He was born in 1963 in Beijing, the second of three sons. His parents worked in heavy industries. China was recovering from the Great Chinese Famine (1959 – 1962) and relations with the former Soviet Union were tense. Confrontation between the two powers seemed imminent and the Chinese people were ready for war.

What compounded the misery for ordinary Chinese was the disastrous Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) to purge the country of perceived bourgeois values and discard the “Four Olds” – old ideas, old customs, old culture and old habits.



Like many residents in the capital, Guo's father sent Guo and his elder brother off to safety, to their native home in Shandong province under the care of their grandparents.

Guo said that his decision to choose a music career was influenced by his experience in Yuncheng county in Shandong from the age of five to seven.

The county, bounded by Henan, Hebei and Anhui provinces nearby, was rich in traditional Chinese operas and music. Wind instruments like the suona and sheng, and percussion ones like drums and cymbals, were popular at festivals, weddings and funerals.

“I grew up listening to such signature suona pieces as *A Flower and Hundred Birds Adoring the Phoenix*,” Guo said. Based on ancient folk tunes, they were the works of composer Ren Tongxiang who wrote them in the 1950s.

“In our village alone, there were four sheng players who were well-known throughout the country,” he recalled.

Guo, his wife Liu Hui (from left) and daughters Pingsuo and Mingai.



Guo's grandfather Guo Jialing, who once ran a Chinese opera troupe, enjoyed listening to both sheng and suona music and encouraged the young Guo to appreciate the wondrous sounds of these venerable instruments.

Guo had only one year of primary school in Shandong before he returned to Beijing at the age of seven to attend the Si Gen Bo Primary School. By then, he was very familiar with traditional tunes played with the suona and sheng.

When he was in Primary 4, at the height of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, he joined the school's propaganda music team, playing the sheng – thanks to his teacher Zhang Chunxiang.

Zhang had found the instrument lying idle in the classroom's cupboard one day. After getting it repaired, he gave it to Guo and also taught him how to play the zhongruan.

Guo was quick to learn the sheng and sought additional lessons from sheng virtuoso Wu Xinshui. In 1978, he enrolled at the secondary school affiliated to the Central Conservatory of Music.

But changes in the curriculum led to his transfer to the China Conservatory of Music, where he completed his studies with good results.

He then proceeded to do a four-year degree course at the conservatory under the tutelage of famous sheng master Zhang Zhiliang.

As an undergraduate, he represented the conservatory at performances in Hong Kong and received rave reviews.

After graduating in 1984, he joined the Central Chinese Orchestra as his friend, Yan Huichang, who was then the orchestra's newly-appointed conductor, wanted him to be his sheng player.

Yan, born in Shanxi province in northern China, went to Singapore in the early 1990s to be music director of a recording company and later obtained Singapore citizenship. He was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 2001.

He assumed the roles of music director and conductor at the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra the next year.

Taking leave to play at nightclubs

In Guo's case, he took leave from the Central Chinese Orchestra in 1988, first to join a popular band in Xiamen, and later another band in Quanzhou, in the southern Fujian province, playing the keyboard at nightclubs.

He resorted to such a move as work for the orchestra had dried up in the 1980s, the early years of Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy and economic reforms in China which led to the performing arts being sidelined. But business was booming for nightclubs.



Guo (middle) and friends formed a band and played at nightclubs in 1980s.

“Nightclubs were in vogue all over China by the mid-1980s and in Quanzhou alone there were at least 100 nightclubs each with a four-piece band comprising a keyboard, lead and bass guitars and drums,” Guo said.

Nightclubs in Fujian were frequented mainly by Taiwanese businessmen seeking opportunities and partnerships with Chinese companies as China opened up to the world.

Guo found it lucrative to play at these popular night spots, where he could enjoy an income of more than 10,000 yuan in a good month, well above what he received from the orchestra in Beijing.

But it was not just about the money. The years spent making music at the nightclubs helped him professionally as a musician and were therefore not wasted, he said.

“For example, playing in a four-piece band, each member must be quick to react to changes in pitch and must learn to always play in harmony,” he said.

But those high-flying days did not last very long. By the mid-1990s, the nightclubs were replaced by karaoke music lounges or KTVs as they were better known. Guo returned home to Beijing in 1992.

“That was also when the Central Chinese Orchestra hired Hu Bingxu as its new music director and conductor, tasked to revamp the orchestra and so he wanted us back,” he said.

Hu later joined SCO as its founding Music Director and Conductor in 1997. He left at the end of his three-year contract.

As fate would have it, in 1994, Guo met a Sichuan-born, Singapore-based artist, Mo Ni at a nightclub in Beijing managed by Guo’s elder brother Changsheng. Guo did not know it then but Mo was to play a large part in transforming his life. Mo, a Tianjin-trained award-winning artist known for her abstracts in oil, was visiting the Chinese capital with another Chinese artist. She and Guo became good friends and continued to keep in touch with each other after Mo returned to Singapore.





Guo with his wife Liu Hui at the opening of an art exhibition by Mo Ni (left) in Singapore in 2017.

One day, in 1996, Mo called Guo to inform him that a national Chinese orchestra was being set up on the island and that it had started to recruit musicians.

Guo jumped at the opportunity as he knew it would be his chance to play the sheng professionally again.

Mo was his guarantor when he flew to Singapore for an audition at SCO's old premises in Kallang, followed by a week of sightseeing and getting to know the Singapore Chinese music scene.

The trip was a success for Guo, who was appointed SCO's Sheng Principal in 1997. But things almost did not work out if not for Mo's persistence and persuasive skills. She recalled going to SCO's office in Kallang to submit his application, only to be told that the deadline for submission had passed.

"I told the managers that Guo Changsuo is a great talent who should not be missed and convinced them to accept his application in the end," she said.

Guo's girlfriend from Beijing, Liu Hui, an academy-trained dancer, joined him in Singapore in 1998. They were married soon after she arrived and their elder daughter Mingai was born in 2000. She is now studying the cello at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, a school of the National University of Singapore.

Younger daughter Pingsuo, a Secondary Two student at Dunman High, is active in the school's dance group, perhaps following in the footsteps of her mother, who is teaching dance in primary and secondary schools in Singapore.

A rewarding career, including as soloist

For Guo, leading the sheng players in SCO for more than two decades has been rewarding as he has been given many opportunities to perform, including as a soloist.



“There are fewer solo works written for the sheng compared with other instruments because the harmonious nature of its sounds makes it more suitable to be an accompaniment in music,” he said.

He explained that it was only after improvements were made to the ancient Chinese music instrument in the 1950s to expand its sound range and musicality that more solo pieces were written.

One sheng solo piece Guo enjoys playing is *The Alluring Span of the Peacock*, written by Chinese composer Yan Haideng in 1957 in praise of the hardworking Chinese people and expressing their happiness.

“It is the piece every sheng player must learn to play well, and while it expresses the splendid way a peacock spreads its wings in delight, it also showcases the sheng’s exceptional sound quality and playing techniques well,” he said.

Guo values every opportunity he gets to play solo pieces and concertos composed for the sheng.

They include *Rainbow*, a famous concerto for the 36-reed gaoyin sheng and Chinese orchestra by Chinese composer Liu Wenjin, who also wrote the erhu concerto *The Great Wall Capriccio*.

Rainbow was commissioned by SCO and premiered at the concert *A Musical Conversation with Hu Bingxu* in 2007. Guo was the soloist playing the gaoyin sheng, with Hu Bingxu as guest conductor.

The three-movement work featuring the theme of nature’s wonders and the rainbow has become a seminal work for the sheng and is taught in all Chinese music conservatories, Guo pointed out.

Guo was also the soloist at the premiere of *Nong Yu Sheng*, another work for the sheng and Chinese orchestra commissioned by the SCO. *Nong Yu Sheng*, which made its debut at the concert *Eight Tones Uninterrupted* in February 2012, is a three-movement concerto. The first is a simple graceful andante, followed by an adagio in the second which brings out the unique timbre and breadth control of the ancient wind instrument. The presto in the third displays the changes building up in its melody and tone throughout the piece.

Guo performing *The Alluring Span of the Peacock* at a digital concert Untamed Melodies in 2020.



“It was simply out of interest and to broaden my contributions to Chinese orchestral music in the schools that I began conducting.”

Guo is gratified that the SCO has fared so well, considering that it is still a young orchestra that is just 25 years old. But he is concerned that winning the younger generation of audience in the years ahead will be challenging.

“The job as SCO’s music director is difficult as he has to balance the fine line between creative art and market demands, and the traditional and modern, especially in multi-racial Singapore,” he noted.

Instead of setting boundaries for itself, he believes SCO should be free to create, innovate and be inclusive, using elements from different music genres and instruments from different races and cultures.

The Chinese orchestra should not remain static but should continue to evolve to meet the expectations and needs of the young, he said.

A forward-looking Chinese orchestra must change and innovate, he declared.

“I hope the word Chinese can be removed from SCO’s name one day, just like a symphony orchestra which is not linked to any racial group,” he said.

Apart from performing, like fellow SCO musicians, Guo has been teaching since joining the orchestra in 1997.

Branching into conducting

He has run classes in the sheng and other wind instruments such as the suona and dizi in many primary and secondary schools over the years. However, about 10 years ago, he started to focus on being a conductor for Chinese orchestras in the schools.

“It was simply out of interest and to broaden my contributions to Chinese orchestral music in the schools that I began conducting,” he said.

He is currently conducting Chinese orchestras in more than five schools, including Ngee Ann Primary and Secondary, Zhong Hua Secondary and CHIJ Katong Convent. He enjoys this role more than teaching students how to play wind instruments.



“The problem with teaching in the schools is that students come and go, so their learning period is usually short,” he lamented.

He is so serious about conducting that he has completed a three-year master’s degree course in it with the China Conservatory of Music, graduating in 2020.

He used the breaks between SCO’s performance seasons to attend the course which involved frequent visits to the conservatory in Beijing for lectures and practical sessions.

Guo enjoys conducting so much that he has completed a master’s degree course in it with the China Conservatory of Music.

“It’s worth it and the theoretical knowledge I gained adds to my practice as a conductor,” he said.

With the master’s degree under his belt, he is more prepared to conduct orchestras beyond the school-level. In 2020, he was appointed Assistant Conductor of the 150-member City Chinese Orchestra, an amateur music group founded by Dr Tay Teow Kiat in 1974. It was formerly known as the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation Chinese Orchestra.

And in early 2021, Guo was invited to be Honorary Conductor for Reverberance, a wind percussion ensemble formed in 2017 comprising young award-winning Singapore musicians, many of them with degrees and postgraduate qualifications from music schools overseas.

Despite his keen interest in conducting, he indicated he is unlikely to swap his gaoyin sheng for the baton and be a guest conductor for an SCO concert any time soon, saying:

“That requires higher standards. I still prefer to play the sheng with the orchestra as I have done for more than 20 years.”



Watch
Jin Shiyi's
performance

PIECE *The Winds
of Marina Bay*

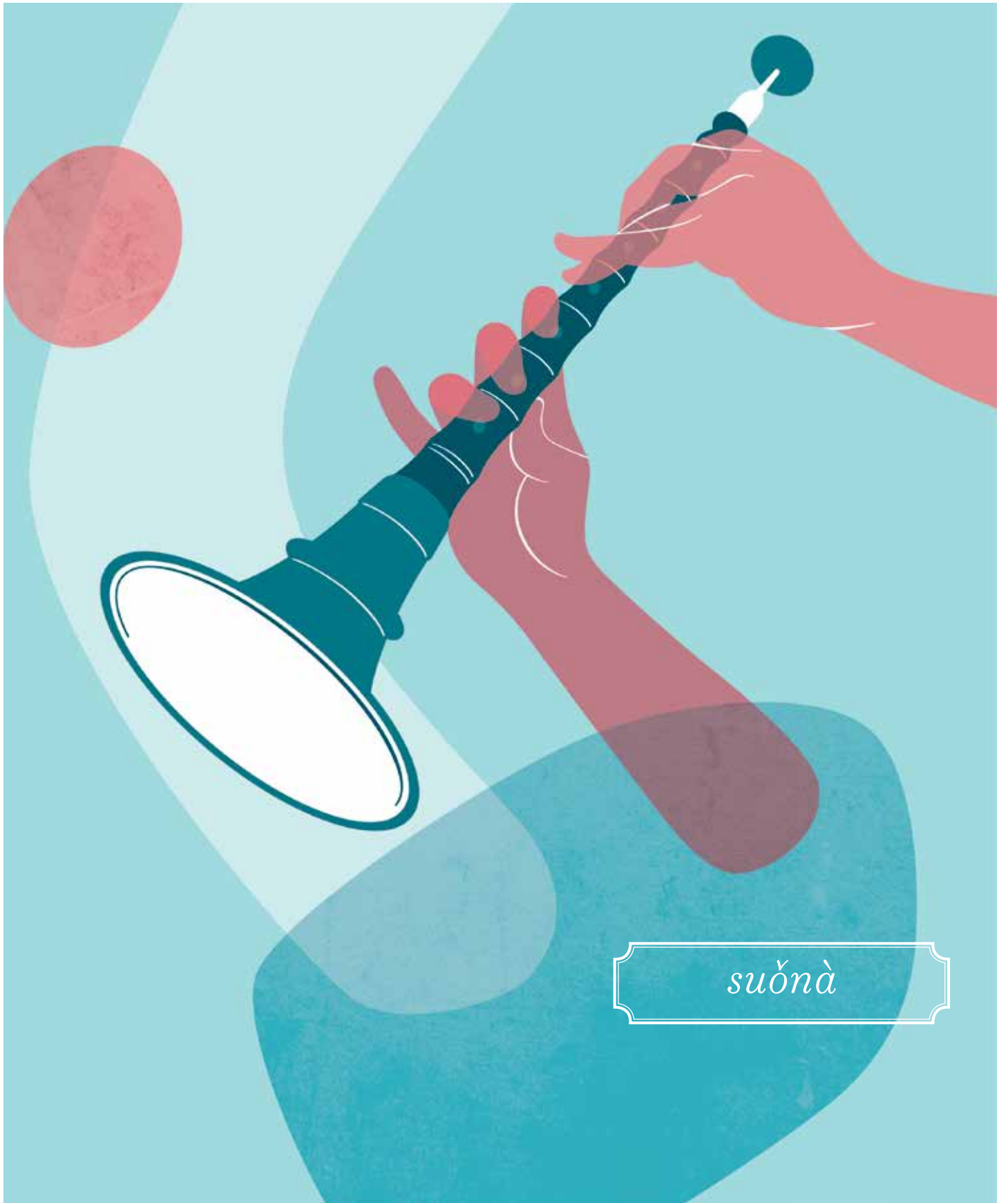
COMPOSER Taiwan Hokkien
folk song, re-arranged
by Jin Shiyi and
Tan Kah Yong

CONDUCTOR Quek Ling Kiong

CONCERT Mother's Day Concert:
Golden Melodies from
The Heart, May 3, 2014

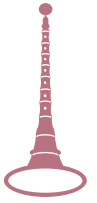
VENUE SCO Concert Hall

DESCRIPTION Drawn from the
Taiwanese folk song, *Spring Wind*,
this piece is infused with pop music
elements. In it, the suona soloist
delights with his ability to play two
suonas in tandem. He also plays the
harmonica, and raps and sings too!
The rich and colourful musical style
of this piece depicts the bustling
Marina Bay, and expresses the hopes
of a vibrant future for Singapore.



suǒnà





Jin Shi'yi

A New Wind Instrument *for Singapore*

Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) Chairman Ng Siew Quan could not hold back his tears. Veteran Singapore singer Angie Lau was choked with emotions. Minister for Communications and Information Josephine Teo was moved to lavish praises on it.

What tugged at their heartstrings was the rendition of a popular Hokkien song often heard at KTV studios by Suona/Guan Principal Jin Shi'yi with an instrument called the SINGuan that he had spent four years developing.

Performed for the first time, the 7-minute musical piece he re-arranged with the help of local composer Phang Kok Jun was based on the song *Gei Au*, which means wife or the woman behind the family in the Taiwanese min nan dialect.

Written by Taiwanese singer-composer Cheng Gin-yi, the heartfelt song about a woman's unfailing love for and devotion to her husband took the region by storm after the queen of Hokkien songs Chiang Hui sang it in 2001.

It became the most requested karaoke song in Taiwan, inspiring a 30-episode China-made television series in 2009 featuring the original *Gei Au* as its theme song.

The groundbreaking performance by Jin took place during the SCO Mother's Day concert *To Mum With Love* held on May 7 and May 8, 2021 with Chairman Ng and Minister Teo as the special guests at the third performance and Angie Lau as a guest vocalist.

The instrument making its debut was the SINGuan that Jin and Liu Jiang, his former student and SCO diyin suona player, created after four years of research and trials.



Compared to the traditional guan (right), the SINGuan (left) makes music modulation effortless and pitch movements smoother.

Quek Ling Kiong beat the djembe drum with his hands in accompaniment.

After the concert, Ng thanked Jin in a note for doing SCO proud with his newly-created instrument. Angie, who often sang the Hokkien song at her getai gigs, said she was surprised to hear *Gei Au* played so beautifully with the SINGuan sounding like the saxophone and clarinet.

Why did Jin, who settled in Singapore when he joined SCO in 1997, create the new instrument? It's a labour of love many years in the making, he said.

Improving the guan

"SING" means Singapore in short. "guan" is the double-reed wind instrument which originated in the Middle East before appearing in Xinjiang, Western China, more than 1,600 years ago.

When combined, "SINGuan" simply means the birth of a new Singapore guan.

The audience at the concert was enthralled by its stirring sounds which elevated the Hokkien song heard in karaoke lounges and getai, open-air street performances, to exhilarating musical heights. The emotional resonance was heightened when conductor

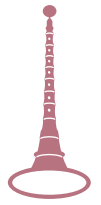
When he was pursuing undergraduate studies at the China Conservatory of Music in the 1980s, he discovered that the guan needed improvements to make it easier for students to learn and play.

The limitations in its sound range resulted in many music students shunning the wind instrument for others such as the suona, sheng and dizi.

The SINGuan made its debut at the SCO Mother's Day concert in 2021.







“I was worried that the guan might just end up in the museum when nobody can or wants to play it anymore,” he said.

Although he became the first musician in China to complete a master’s degree in the instrument in 1992, he never worked on improving it until recently.

Since 2017, he has spent about \$50,000 on modifications such that his SINGuan is now a single-reed wind instrument, making music modulation effortless and pitch movements smoother.

He added a flared bell and increased the number of fingering holes from eight to 11, thus improving the quality and accuracy of the sounds it produces and their range.

“My purpose is to make it easier for people to learn and play while retaining the traditional guan’s characteristics,” he declared, noting that the new instrument can now play a wider range of music, from East to West, ancient to modern.

For now, he has one set of five SINGuan in different sizes and sound ranges custom-made by an instrument maker in China.

Fellow guan experts and composers are assessing the instrument for use at concerts even as Jin awaits approval for its patent from the authorities in China.

Among the first to give it the thumbs up is China-born Singapore composer Law Wai Lun and a former SCO Composer-in-Residence who commented: “It sounds great and promises to replace the traditional guan one day.”

Jin started using the SINGuan with SCO from late 2020, and has made several music videos on YouTube to promote the instrument.

Born in Henan province in 1965, Jin is the youngest of six children of a cultural officer who played the jinghu and a stay-at-home mother.

His early years coincided with the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), a national movement to purge Western values and influences in China.

Jin was the first musician in China to complete a master’s degree in the guan.



His father was branded a rightist and his family banished to a rural farm for re-education. Living conditions were so poor that Jin, his two brothers and three sisters had little to eat, surviving mainly on sweet potatoes and corn soup. He wore torn and tattered clothes handed down from his brothers which were neatly patched by his mother.

His father sang Peking opera songs from *yangbanxi* or model revolutionary performances to get him to bed every night when he was a toddler. By about four-and-a-half years old, he could sing while his father played the jinghu at public places.

He began school at six in 1972, taking active part in the school's children music propaganda teams, singing and acting out revolutionary songs in and outside the school.

Two years later, his elder brother Yongyi started to teach him the sheng before switching to the suona, an ancient instrument which also came from the Middle East before arriving in Xinjiang by the third century.

Often played at weddings and funeral processions, the instrument consists of a double reed attached to a metal staple with an adjustable small circular disc in between for the lips to rest. The three parts are then

connected to a wooden pipe which has a detachable metal bell at the end.

"I hated the suona at first for its blaring loud sound and my brother had to hide himself when playing it at home initially," Jin recalled.

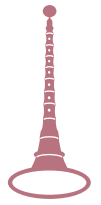
His brother, who was about eight years older, used harsh teaching methods, like forcing him to practise during cold winter mornings, and scolding and beating him whenever he made mistakes. "It was an unhappy time. I hated my brother and nearly gave up learning the suona," he said.

It was not until his brother brought suona player Zhang Baoling from the Henan Song and Dance Troupe home that his interest in the instrument was ignited.

"He was my first proper teacher who lived with us for about one-and-a-half years and taught my brother and

Jin hated the suona at first for its blaring sound until he learnt it from a suona player Zhang Baoling.





“My purpose is to make it easier for people to learn and play while retaining the traditional guan’s characteristics.”

I the suona every day in our home,” Jin said. “Before that, I never knew the suona can sound so beautiful.”

His exceptional talent impressed his teacher Zhang who encouraged him in 1978, when he was barely 12, to enrol in the secondary school affiliated to the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing.

His brother borrowed 200 yuan from friends to take him on a 12-hour train journey for the auditions in the capital. Leaving home and taking the train for the first time, he saw his mother in tears at the railway station, but did not understand why. As he remembered, when the Beijing-bound train started to move, he was so overwhelmed with excitement that he even forgot to look back to wave goodbye.

Little did he realise then that the departure would be a permanent one, taking him to different parts of China and many countries before he ended in Singapore when he joined SCO.

A prediction comes true

Looking back, he recalled a fortune teller telling him that he was destined to travel far but would still love and take good care of his mother until her ripe old age.

The prediction rang true. “My mum passed away on the third day of the Chinese New Year in 2020 amid the Covid-19 outbreak, aged 97. I was fortunate to be home just two months earlier to be with her for the last time,” he said.

In the end Jin did not attend the junior school at the Central Conservatory of Music although he was selected after the auditions. He had to give it up as he could not afford the monthly boarding fees.

With the help of his teacher Zhang and friends, he managed to join the then Orchestra of the Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio, the predecessor of the China Film Symphony Orchestra, as an apprentice.

He was overjoyed because it came with a monthly stipend of about 20 yuan which he could send home. The breakfast at the orchestra’s dining hall every morning was even better than the feast on Chinese New Year’s day at home, he remembered, adding: “I hadn’t seen so much food before, even meat, on the table.”

He has an indelible memory of his sad parting with his brother after his registration at the orchestra. It was extremely painful because he suddenly realised he would be left all alone at the age of 12.

“We hugged and cried uncontrollably at the staircase as I refused to let my brother go. Someone had to pull us apart in the end,” he said. After returning home, his brother Yongyi joined the song and dance troupe of a coal mine in Henan, playing the suona.

The film orchestra that Jin joined was set up in 1949 to provide music for all China-made films, television dramas and documentaries after the formation of the People’s Republic of China.

Jin studied under suona virtuosos Hu Haiquan and Cao Jianguo before undergoing further training with suona master Liu Fengtong at the Central Song and Dance Ensemble.

In his early years with the orchestra, he met many well-known musicians and composers. They included the orchestra’s then leader Liu Mingyuan, who composed classics such as *Happy Year* or *Xing Fu Nian* and *Full of Joy* or *Xi Yang Yang*, and Wang Liping, who wrote the music for the popular 1987 television drama serial, *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Law Wai Lun, a recipient of the 2017 Cultural Medallion who composed and re-arranged many works for SCO, is an alumnus of the film orchestra.

Jin considers his teenage years with the orchestra as his happiest as he had the opportunity to work with many contemporary Chinese musicians.

“I hope to play more traditional music but to transform and make it popular for a younger generation.”

Known affectionately as “xiao Shiyi”, meaning little Shiyi, in the orchestra, he was only 14 when he played the suona in a composition by Wang Liping for the 1982 movie, *Shaolin Temple*, the first martial arts film made in China starring Jet Li and Ding Lan.

He played for several other movies and television programmes including Xu Jingqing’s music for the popular television drama serial, *Journey to the West*, broadcast nationwide in 1986.

In 1984, he took leave from the orchestra and turned popular singer to perform with music groups in several Chinese cities, including a three-month stint with the Central Song and Dance Ensemble on Hainan island.

The period saw him trading his suona for a pop star’s microphone and gear, belting out hits by Taiwanese singers such as Liu Wen-cheng and Pan An-bang.





Jin (right) with his guan teacher Hu Zhihou at his master's graduation concert in 1992.

After two years, when he realised he would never make it in showbiz, he decided to go back to music school for further studies, hoping to teach in a conservatory later.

In 1986, he enrolled at the China Conservatory of Music for a double major in suona and guan. He studied the guan under Professor Hu Zhihou who also oversaw the completion of his master's in the instrument.

Jin married Liu Yan, his sweetheart from the China Conservatory of Music who studied the pipa, in 1990, just before beginning his postgraduate studies.

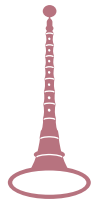
After graduating two years later, he began teaching at the conservatory. His daughter Yujia was born in 1994, the same year when an offer to teach at a Singapore music school came from his friend, dizi virtuoso Zhan Yongming.

“With a family to raise, I accepted the offer straightaway because it paid better and I needed the money,” said Jin, who left for the island while his wife and infant daughter stayed in Beijing.

He started teaching at the Shangyin Music School in Singapore but soon found that the money was insufficient even though he was performing occasionally with the City Chinese Orchestra led by Tay Teow Kiat to supplement his income. Most of all, he missed his family.

Tay, a 1993 Cultural Medallion recipient, helped Jin stage a solo concert at the Victoria Concert Hall in 1995. Later in the same year he won the second prize at the China National Chinese Instrumental Music competition.

Jin returned home to be with his family in the following year. But just months later, he heard news of SCO's formation as Singapore's second national orchestra after the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO).



He went back to Singapore almost immediately for auditions and joined the pioneer batch of Chinese talent in the orchestra in 1997.

With a better pay package, he was able to bring his wife and daughter here to start life anew.

His wife, Liu Yan, taught the pipa privately and later at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. She became a much sought-after pipa teacher after many of her students won top prizes at national music competitions.

Daughter Yujia was musically gifted too, winning the national piano competition at nine in 2003. Four years later, she was a guest soloist at the SSO President's Young Performers Concert playing a Grieg piano concerto.

But she did not follow in her parents' footsteps, choosing a legal career after graduating with a law

degree from the National University of Singapore in 2018.

Pursuing a fusion of traditional and modern music

Jin began his SCO career by leading a suona quartet briefly in 1998, performing many of his compositions such as *Alamuhan* and *Happy Woman Warriors*. He was promoted to the post of Suona/Guan Principal the next year.

Success came in the same year when he played the music from the traditional Chinese opera *Ju Da Gang* at an SCO concert with the suona, guan and other smaller wind instruments such as kaqiang, kouqinzi and the whistle-like shoubashao.

The musical work became so popular that he was invited to perform it at many community events including one for then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, he said.

Also well-received was his 1994 composition for the guan, *Little Cabbage*, based on a Hebei traditional folk song, which he performed at the Taipei Traditional Arts Festival in Taiwan in 2002.

Jin, his wife Liu Yan (first from right) and daughter Yujia (second from left) with President Nathan and Mrs Nathan after Yujia's performance with SSO when she was 13.





Jin performing *The Winds of Marina Bay* at the SCO concert, Hokkien Classics, in 2010.

The piece is included in the *Collection of Guanzi Music Scores* compiled by his teacher Hu Zhihou and published by the People's Music Publishing House in 2000.

In September 2005, Jin played the suona concerto, *The Drunken Man*, a humorous piece about life written by a young Chinese woman composer Zhu Lin and commissioned by SCO for its concert, *The New Frontier*.

What accounts for his interest in Taiwanese Hokkien songs? It started after his success with *The Dark Sky* for suona, kaqiang and kouqinzi and orchestra based on the popular Hokkien song *Ti Or Or*. He arranged it with Law Wai Lun and Tan Kah Yong.

It received rave reviews when he performed the piece at its premiere for the concert, *SCO Goes Pop*, as part of the Huayi Chinese Arts Festival at the Esplanade in

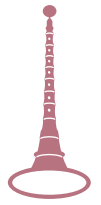
February 2006. SCO Music Director Yeh Tsung said he liked the work because “it is a fusion of traditional and popular music”.

This was followed by an even bigger success with *The Winds of Marina Bay*, which he arranged based on another traditional Taiwanese folk song, *Bong Chun Hong*, meaning longing for the spring breeze. He performed it for the first time at the SCO concert, *Hokkien Classics*, in November, 2010.

Combining elements of pop music with the traditional, it involved him playing two suonas in tandem, whistling with the kouqinzi, performing a rap and singing his hopes for Singapore's future with the completion of the Marina Bay Sands hotel and shopping complex.

It has since become one of his signature pieces which he performs at least once a year.

Perhaps Jin's most memorable moment was when two top suona principals, Guo Yazhi from the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra and Zhou Dongchao from the China Broadcast Orchestra, played with him at the SCO concert, *The Three Suona Virtuosos*, in November 2009.



He played three of his own earlier works – *Tribute to Homeland* which he re-arranged for suona from a Henan folk song; *Seeking Dreams in the Western Regions*, the concerto he composed with orchestration by Lim Kiong Pin and *The Dark Sky*.

“I enjoyed it and played well perhaps because of the pressure from the two very outstanding suona masters,” Jin recollected.

His other compositions included *Hip Hop Orchard Road* which premiered earlier in in 2009 at the concert, *Kaleidoscopic SCO*.

As a prolific composer, he re-arranged many traditional folk songs and works for the suona and guan. His most recent compositions during the Covid-19 pandemic are *Passing Through Yang Guan’s West* or *Xi Chu Yang Guan* in 2020 and *The Year When It Rains* or *Na Nian de Luo Shui Tian*, based on a Hakka song, in January 2021.



Like other SCO musicians, Jin has been teaching the suona and guan instruments in schools and counts Ding Yi Music Company’s assistant conductor Dedic Wong as one of his students.

Jin pursues a wide range of hobbies. They include photography and surprisingly, listening to Western classical music, especially works by great composers such as Mozart, Chopin and Mendelssohn.

He has also kept busy during the Covid-19 pandemic by producing several music videos on YouTube featuring him playing the evergreen Christmas carol, *Silent Night*, and the catchy 2020 TikTok hit, *Savage Love*, to promote his newly-created SINGuan.

Pursuing a fusion of traditional and modern music is the path he will continue to take at SCO, he said.

“I hope to play more traditional music but to transform and make it popular for a younger generation,” he said citing the Hokkien song *Gei Au* as an example of how he would like to turn popular Chinese songs into concert hall musical pieces.

Jin produced several music videos on YouTube during the Covid-19 pandemic, featuring him playing tunes such as *Silent Night*.

EPILOGUE

Here's to the *Next 25 Years*

Self-renewal, staying relevant and keeping up with changing times to remain uniquely Singapore – these are the major challenges facing the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) in the years to come.

By the time the orchestra celebrates its Golden Jubilee in 2046, more than half of its present 85 members would have called it a day. The eight principal players featured in this Silver Jubilee commemorative book would have retired. The same goes for the pioneer members from the former People's Association (PA) Chinese Orchestra who joined the SCO when it was inaugurated as a national orchestra in 1996.

So who would rejuvenate their ranks?

Although the SCO is a relatively young orchestra with the average age of members at 44 in 2021, succession and grooming a new generation of musicians has remained its biggest challenge.



SCO's youngest member Mu Ruixue, 27, joined the orchestra as a zhonghu player in 2019.

SCO hidden gems



Lim Sin Yeo, 64, who is the oldest member with the SCO, has more than 40 years of experience in performing and teaching dizi.

But fortunately the same period saw SCO recruiting six members who included three Singapore-born musicians, all Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) graduates in their early 30s who had obtained higher music qualifications overseas. The three are dizi player Lee Jun Cheng, percussionist Benjamin Boo and daruan player Jonathan Ngeow. Harpist Fontane Liang, a former music therapist, is another Singaporean who joined the ranks of the SCO.

The orchestra's youngest member is 27-year-old Mu Ruixue, a Chinese national who joined SCO as a zhonghu player in 2019. The oldest is dizi player Lim Sin Yeo, 64, who together with nine other former PA Chinese Orchestra members, are still with the SCO.

Like all orchestras, the SCO has had its fair share of turnover through natural attrition and periodic recruitment to replace those who left.

In the past five years, two senior members had retired, three others returned to China to teach in conservatories there, and one completed her contract.

With the passage of time, the orchestra would naturally see increasing numbers of members retiring or leaving, SCO Executive Director Terence Ho noted.

"However, we are committed to recruiting the best talent from all over the world even as we want to attract as many local-born musicians as possible into our fold," he said.

He is glad that a constant stream of NAFA graduates has been joining the orchestra since erhu player Ann Hong Mui, a musician from the former PA Chinese Orchestra, came on board in 1996. The orchestra's Assistant Conductor Moses Gay also graduated from NAFA before leaving for further training in conducting overseas.

EPILOGUE



Erhu player Ann Hong Mui, who graduated from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, has been a part of the SCO family since 1996.

“Most of our musicians have either been teaching or conducting the school and community orchestras for over two decades now, helping to groom many outstanding Singapore Chinese instrumentalists,” he pointed out.

Several young musicians now leading top local Chinese music groups in Singapore were taught by SCO musicians. They include Dedric Wong from Ding Yi Music Company and Yang Jiwei and Samuel Wong from TENG Ensemble.

Maestro Yeh also said that SCO’s successful track record was largely due to the unique “sound” created from its wide repertoire, ranging from a blend of East-meets-West music to its compositions with a Nanyang flavour that incorporates Singapore’s multi-racial elements and music from the South-east Asian region. This was in addition to the traditional Chinese pieces he called “silk and bamboo and Peking opera type” of music.

Over the past 20 years, SCO has expanded its repertoire rapidly, in part from commissioning composers in Singapore and overseas to produce nearly 200 works. It has also created more than 900 re-arrangements or re-orchestration works from different music genres or for various music instruments.

About 85 per cent of the orchestra’s 85 members are Singaporeans or permanent residents, including many who are naturalised citizens originally from China. The gender ratio is quite even at 45 males to 40 females.

The Singapore National Youth Chinese Orchestra (SNYCO) has been a fertile ground for training and recruiting potential members since 2005 when SCO brought it under its wings. Several of the SCO’s present members, including associate principal players Lo Chai Xia and Chang Le, were from the youth orchestra.

Music Director and Conductor Yeh Tsung said SCO’s links with Chinese orchestras in Singapore schools and community groups were important in planting the seeds for the next generation of professional Chinese musicians.

SCO hidden gems



Music Director and Conductor Yeh Tsung initiated the SCO International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Compositions in 2006.

To enlarge its repertoire of works with a Nanyang flavour, Yeh initiated the SCO International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Compositions in 2006. Since then, two other editions were held in 2011 and 2015 respectively with foreign entries from Malaysia, Hong Kong, China and even the United States.

“We should continue to expand our repertoire but these works must improve and evolve over time to suit the needs of the new generation and remain uniquely Singapore,” he emphasised.

The SCO too had to make changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic by speeding up plans to go digital, Ho noted.

In 2016, the year SCO celebrated its 20th anniversary, it created history when it presented the world’s first digital Chinese orchestra performance via live streaming with its concert, *Strings Fantasy*, from the SCO Concert Hall.

Broadcast on a high-definition digital platform in collaboration with Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao, it allowed viewers who had bought an e-ticket with a unique log-in code to enjoy the concert in real time from their devices. What’s more, they could play back any time they liked within two weeks of the concert.

EPILOGUE



SCO launched #RoomforMusic series, a stay-home music initiative led by its musicians, in March 2020.

musicians performing individually or in groups and #DabaoSCO which featured old SCO concerts. An ongoing series, Human Diaries, showcases the lighter side of SCO musicians, focusing on what they do outside work.

Within a short span of about 18 months, it produced more than 200 virtual concerts and videos which have garnered over 1.5 million views.

“The pandemic will blow over, but it has set us thinking about how the performing arts will be presented post Covid-19,” said Ho, who is leading a nine-member SCO digital taskforce set up in 2020 comprising his senior managers.

Ho said the experiment proved to be an invaluable experience for SCO when all its live concerts were cancelled due to the pandemic in 2020 and it needed to reach out to its audience online through social media platforms.

SCO was able to spring into action immediately. It ran online programmes such as #Roomformusic showing

The Human Diaries series, an in-house vlog production, reveals the SCO musicians’ offstage selves.



SCO hidden gems

SCO is also encouraging its musicians to perform in small groups as an ensemble for both live and virtual concerts. Two all female five-member groups, Perfect 5 and Vibrant Strings, were formed in late 2020 and June 2021 respectively.

Ho set forth SCO's aim to be "the preferred orchestra for people to listen, buy, read and donate online."

It also plans to create digital scores for its musicians to replace the printed ones and digitalise the orchestra's archives such as its concert videos, house programmes and all other publications.

SCO has to put its overseas tours on hold until after the pandemic, Chairman Ng Siew Quan noted. It was planning to tour Australia and the United States after its last visit to Europe before the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2019.

"Such overseas concert tours help to raise SCO's profile and gain exposure for our musicians," he affirmed.

He disclosed that SCO is working with the Singapore Chinese Music Federation (SCMF) and the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) to elevate Chinese music making and appreciation on the island.

In September 2021, the orchestra partnered the two groups to launch the second Chinese Music Festival, a month-long programme of concerts, talks and other events which ran live or virtually, with participation from several overseas groups.

To raise standards, plans are now underway to set up a centre of excellence for Chinese music with SCMF and SCCC to conduct research and groom Singapore music talent, both performers and composers.

"We are not only doing it for SCO, but also for the development of Singapore arts and culture," Ng said, noting that several Singapore musicians were already playing professionally overseas.

Two Singapore-born Chinese musicians Choo Boon Chong and Kwok Chin Chye are playing for Chinese orchestras in Hong Kong and Kaoshiung in Taiwan respectively. Another two, Chia Wei Jian and Kenny Chan, are members of the Suzhou Chinese Orchestra in China.

SCO's Ho is also vice-president of SCMF which comprises 10 Chinese music groups, including two new groups, Ruanxian Association of Singapore and Percussion Association of Singapore.

He said SCO and its two partners, SCMF and SCCC, were looking for a suitable site to house the proposed centre of excellence for Chinese music.

"The proposed centre of excellence can be an activity centre for all Chinese music groups in Singapore," said Ho, who expected the search for its premises to take some time.

With these exciting plans in the pipeline and slew of initiatives, notwithstanding the impact of Covid-19, the future is looking bright for both SCO and Chinese music in Singapore.

SCO MILESTONES



The much-anticipated SCO inaugural concert was held on April 20 at Victoria Concert Hall, with founding Music Director Hu Bingxu helping the orchestra. Patron of SCO, then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, attended the gala concert.



SCO launched its first concert season and formed the “Friends of SCO” Club. Huayue, SCO’s quarterly newsletter was launched to share SCO news with friends and the public.

1996

On May 8, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) Company Limited was established under the initiative of then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.

1997



1998

In September, the orchestra took its first international stage in China, holding three concerts in Beijing, Shanghai and Xiamen, under the baton of Music Director Hu Bing Xu.

1999



SCO hidden gems

On the first day of the millennium year, SCO staged the Millennium concert at the Singapore Indoor Stadium, which featured 1,400 musicians.

2000



SCO held twin celebrations to mark its 5th anniversary and move to a new home at Singapore Conference Hall. SCO is the only national Chinese orchestra in the world to have a dedicated rehearsal and concert venue.

2001

2002

World-renowned Maestro Yeh Tsung was appointed SCO's second Music Director. Under his artistic directorship, the orchestra was steered towards discovering and developing its unique Nanyang music style.



The first 'Our People, Our Music' mass concert was held at the Singapore Indoor Stadium with 2,400 performers on July 30, in conjunction with National Day celebrations.

2004



2005

Music Director Yeh Tsung led SCO on its first European tour, where it performed at the Barbican Centre in London, Budapest Spring Festival in Hungary and Sage Gateshead in north-east England between March 28 and April 3.

SCO MILESTONES

SCO launched the Singapore Chinese Orchestra International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition to seek works by talented composers from around the world and to raise public awareness of the Nanyang style of music.

2006

2007

Second concert tour to China led by Yeh Tsung. The orchestra performed at the Beijing Music Festival, Shanghai International Arts Festival, Macau International Music Festival, and also in Guangzhou, Zhongshan, Shenzhen in October.

SCO became the first Chinese orchestra to perform at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland in August.

2009

2010

SCO co-organised the National Chinese Music competition with the National Arts Council for the first time. SCO musicians performed at the Singapore Festivals in Paris.



To mark its 15th year, SCO staged Singapore's first 25-day National Chinese Orchestra Marathon with 52 Chinese orchestral concerts and events from February 3 to 25.

2012

2011

SCO Patron, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong donated \$750,000 to organise the Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition.



SCO hidden gems



The Singapore Conference Hall, home to the SCO, underwent renovations costing nearly \$16 million, which included upgrading and improving the acoustics in the concert hall.

2017

2014

SCO held the 'Our People, Our Music 2014' concert at the newly-opened Singapore Sports Hub. Two Guinness World Records were broken – for the largest Chinese drum ensemble and the largest Chinese orchestra ever assembled, involving more than 4,500 musicians and choir members.

2015

SCO performed in Hong Kong in October and Kuala Lumpur in December as part of the Titian Budaya Singapore Cultural Festival which marked 50 years of Singapore-Malaysia ties.

2016

SCO rolled out the world's first digital concert by a Chinese orchestra, bringing the SCO's unique music across borders. Titled *Strings Fantasy*, SCO collaborated with Lu Si Qing and Qin Li-wei.



SCO MILESTONES

Grammy-award winning violinist Joshua Bell returns to perform with SCO, enthraling music lovers with classics such as *Butterfly Lovers*.

In October, an SCO ensemble world premiered 'Opera in Concert – Painted Skin' in Shanghai.

2018

SCO performed in Gwangju, Korea, in May and embarked on its second European concert tour from August 31 to September 9, showcasing Nanyang music to Prague, Forlì, Ioannina, and Berlin to standing ovations at every leg of the tour.

2019



2020

SCO held the first edition of the Singapore Chinese Music Competition with two new categories – Solo Grand and Orchestra.

It launched over 200 digital concerts and videos which attracted over 1.5 million views.

2021

SCO celebrated its 25th anniversary by presenting two concerts in October and launching the *SCO Hidden Gems – Celebrating Singapore Chinese Orchestra's Silver Jubilee* publication.



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