

YOUNG MALAYSIANS

ADELINE WONG STANDS WITH THE VANGUARD OF A NEW MALAYSIAN MUSIC. SHE MIGHT ALSO HELP CLASSICAL MUSIC'S IMAGE MAKEOVER

'THE COMPOSER FOR the symphony orchestra' is male, preferably old and European, with bad hair and partially deaf. Thankfully not so one of the budding Beethovens of Malaysia's own music scene, the charming young lady who at the inaugural series of MPO Forums showed her mettle (and metal) when she astonished the audience with her orchestral edifice *Steel Sky* and its energetic predecessor *Synclastic Illuminations*.

MEET ADELINE WONG, whose highly colourful musical language has found advocates from as far as Australia and Europe. The KL'ite who teaches at Akademi Seni Kebangsaan and Sedaya College, was recently heard at last year's theatre production *Five Letters from an Eastern Empire* and the piano festival at the KL Performing Arts Centre in August where she melded city sounds with the piano in *Paces*. This November, we'll be treated to yet another new work, a cello concerto titled *Snapshots* that will be premiered by the Malaysian Philharmonic.

YOU'VE BEEN VERY BUSY MUSICALLY SINCE THE MPO FORUMS, HAVEN'T YOU?

Yes, I was invited to be part of the Australian Composers' Orchestral Forum in November last year. Immediately after that, I was selected to be part of TACTUS: Young Composers' Forum in Brussels, Belgium. Last December, the Belgian National Orchestra under the direction of Pascal Rophe premiered my new orchestral work, *Starburst*. In February, I was invited to participate in the Apeldoorn Young Composers' Meeting in the Netherlands, where I worked with the great Dutch composer, Louis Andriessen. During that composers' meeting, the Orkest de Ereprijs premiered my chamber work, *Voices*.

THE CELLO WRITING FOR FIVE LETTERS FROM AN EASTERN EMPIRE WAS PHENOMENAL! WAS THE CHOICE OF THE SOLO CELLO A WARM-UP FOR YOUR CONCERTO PROJECT?

The choice of the cello and a boy soprano was, for me, a suitable sound for the play. I love the sound of strings. To paint Bohu's world, I could immediately hear sounds of

innocence, warmth, anger, grief, pain – all made possible by the use of the cello.

I THINK WE'LL BE IN FOR A TREAT THIS NOVEMBER WHEN YOUR CONCERTO IS PREMIERED AT DEWAN FILHARMONIK. TELL US MORE ABOUT THAT.

Snapshots for cello and chamber ensemble was specially commissioned by Steve Retallick from the MPO. Steve played the cello in *Synclastic Illuminations*, and also attended the premiere of *Steel Sky*. These two works of mine appealed to him, and right after the second Forum, Steve commissioned me to write him a cello concerto!

IT ALREADY LOOKS VERY INTERESTING FROM THE SCORE – THE GLASS HARMONICS, THE DIVIDED DOUBLE-ENSEMBLE, THE STRING GLISSANDI AND QUARTER TONES.

I divide the ensemble into two groups of mixed instrumentation. The intention is to create a floating and unfading sound quality where layers of sound and melodic lines are tossed from one instrument to another. To create a 'child-like' quality, I use ordinary drinking glasses, glass bottles and porcelain bowls filled with water which some of the musicians (besides the percussionists) will stroke around the rim with wet fingers to give long and singing tones.

FASCINATING! WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Snapshots is inspired by Alice Sebold's *Lovely Bones*. I bought this book at the airport on my way to Amsterdam in February, and read it on the plane and during my stay in that lovely city. In a nutshell, it tells of the narrator, Suzie Salmon, 14, who is kidnapped, raped and murdered. From heaven, she looks down on earth to observe the lives of her loved ones. Her story is not about her gruesome death. For me, *Lovely Bones* is about the narrator watching her family and friends heal and find their way back to one another; it's about the restoration of a family after it is devastated. It's this luminous and hopeful quality in the book that touched me.

Snapshots is not an entirely programmatic work, nor does it follow the sequence of the incidents in the book. The voice of the cello suggests the voice of the narrator, which floats free and omnipresent.

HMM, RAPE, GRUESOME DEATH. TO THINK THAT WE JUST HAD COFFEE AT BANGSAR SHOPPING CENTRE... OK, HAPPY THOUGHTS. TELL US MORE

ABOUT PACES FOR PIANO AND ELECTRONICS WHICH PREMIERED AT THE 2005 PIANO FESTIVAL AT KLPAC.

This work is a departure from my normal style. Since the first MPO Forum, I've always wanted to explore the area of electronics and I'm glad I finally have the opportunity to do so.

Paces is a portrait of city life, a fun and showy work for piano fused with familiar sounds heard in a city such as construction sounds, blaring car horns, sequences of traffic, classical, techno, ethnic music, mobile ring tones. The use of electronics and samplers suggest technology in our culture. I've always enjoyed the music of Bjork, Aphex Twin, Orbital and you can hear their subtle influences in this work.

TECHNO? YOU'RE JOKING, I ALWAYS THOUGHT YOU WERE THIS PROPER CONSERVATOIRE TYPE, HAVING GRADUATED FROM EASTMAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC. YOU KNOW, HOMELY, SITS BY THE FIRE READING JANE AUSTEN WITH MOZART PLAYING IN THE BACKGROUND.

I used to go to clubs occasionally when I first came back from the US. Also, during my time in London, I'd check out the clubbing scene when big international DJs were spinning. I still remember being drawn to the sounds of a groovy bass line and warping bass of *Doom's Night* by Azizo da Bass, which remains one of my favourite dance tracks!

And the music of Bjork – I admire the diversity of her voice, ever-changing. It can turn from weak, unstable and almost child-like to bold and powerful in just a few notes. With Aphex Twin, it was one of the panellists of MPO Forum, Fraser Trainer, who drew my attention to Richard James aka Aphex Twin. His appeal lies in the stripped-down simplicity that gives his arrangements tremendous energy, and also his ability to find the right sound. It could be a combination of ambient sounds, rich electronic music or complexities of real sound – the way he mixes them up, using pulse that suggests the momentum. And the logic of his melodies is fascinating.

APHEX TWIN IS ONE PERSON? YOU LEARN SOMETHING EVERY DAY! HAS JOINING THE MPO FORUM CHANGED YOUR LIFE, MUSICALLY OR CAREER-WISE?

Yes, definitely. With the Forum, I was introduced into the Australian music scene and had the opportunity to expand my network in the arts industry. The MPO is a

great orchestra and I had the privilege to work with the conductor Kevin Field and the musicians, all of whom I have great respect for. Also, I met my fellow composers and realised that we all have one thing in common – the love and passion for music – it is a wonderful feeling knowing that we composers are in this together...

I have great respect for my colleagues Johan, Kee Yong and Muriz. The outcome was not unexpected – winning the competition was not the most important goal. It was the experience and working with everyone, from the composers to the conductor and musicians, which was the most rewarding. Anyway, it was a stepping stone to the international music scene for me.

AND HAVE YOU MADE INROADS INTO THE AUSTRALIAN SCENE WITH THE AUSTRALIAN COMPOSERS FORUM THAT FOLLOWED?

ACOF was a good introduction. I met Australian composers Peter Sculthorpe, Brenton Broadstock and Andrew Schultz and had the opportunity to work with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra. After the Forum in Hobart, I had more meetings with composers and performers and attended contemporary concerts in Melbourne and Sydney. I'm in touch with some of them and am optimistic about future engagements in the Australian music scene.

SO WHAT ARE YOU UP TO TODAY, APART FROM THE CONCERTO?

I would like to work more on electronics later in the year. Also, there is a possibility of a collaboration of my music and art installation. I would also like to begin writing my new string quartet.

ANY LAST THOUGHTS FOR MERDEKA DAY?

The first thing that comes to mind is the state of being free, where my thoughts are unhampered and creativity flows. My work will not conform to a set pattern, and I'm free to express myself.

I SECOND THAT EMOTION! ■

Adeline Wong's Snapshots receives its world premiere on Wednesday, November 16, 6pm at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas. The rehearsal on November 15, 2 to 5 pm, is open to the public.