



If you have time for just one concert this year, keep Nov 27 free when our very own Chong Kee Yong presents his winning work, *The Starry Night's Ripples*, at the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra's International Composers' Award (MPOICA). The Kluang farm-boy who has earned the very apt nickname "the Professional Prize Winner" in Belgium will be vying for a tenure as MPO's composer-in-residence and a prize money of US\$30,000. And if you're interested in music at all, then you have no excuse but to catch Chong at the workshops beginning Nov 23 and the final concert.

Starry Night's Ripples premiered at the MPO Forum this March, and it gave Chong the edge over fierce competition from equally masterful works by three other Malaysians, Adeline Wong, Johan Othman and Ahmad Muriz. Chong's dramatic clash of elements, as earth-shaking as the very creation of the stars itself, earned the Belgian resident a place in the MPOICA on a three-two vote.

Johan's *Topeng 1* was as classy and compelling, if not as colourfully vibrant as his Phase 1 entry *Iftar*, and Ahmad's *Benih Harapan* showed plenty of promise, but I venture that Wong's magnificently constructed *Steel Sky* was the one that came close. Both Wong and Othman are certainly composers to watch — Wong herself is writing a cello concerto that will bring Malaysia's name to the Australian Composers Orchestral Forum 04 (ACOF), and we will not be alone in hoping she will win.



They only look innocuous: The contestants of the MPOICA

Risky BUSINESS

As the shock of new Malaysian art music subsidises, a Kluang native's *Starry Night's Ripples* is set to take on four composers from around the globe

In fact, this reviewer would go so far as to say that all six participants of this first round of Forums deserve their day in the sun, and their talent ought to be continually nurtured. With a world-class orchestra and a world-class venue, there is surely room here for more than one composer. But there had to be one winner, "with a very small 'w,'" as Forum director Kevin Field repeatedly stressed at the end of Phase 2, and there was never a doubt that Chong would be the one.

"He was the one composer who successfully integrated the total Forum experience into his work. He adopted suggestions without sacrificing his goal, continually showed a strong understanding of the medium and suggested to the panel that he could stand alongside international composers in the MPOICA...", says Field.

Chong's work demands almost specialist technique from the players, but the MPO did a superb job of making it sound easy. Field admits that easy was far from the case, "the closely related issues of ensemble, blend and balance, to name but three. It will all come together that much easier in the MPOICA through familiarity. This is why for audiences and orchestras alike, second performances are more important than any original commission and premiere. We all need to grow into a 'new style' and this takes time."

Listening to four works, one cannot help but notice this "new style" that had influenced all the composers. Unlike Phase 1, which was a happy clash of different musical personalities, it seemed as if everyone was trying very hard to be a Chong in Phase 2. "That's your opinion, I disagree," says Field.

"I think writing for the second round orchestra of such

proportions was a bridge too far for some, and this will be addressed in the next Forum. [Here] they were free to write for any ensemble within the orchestra, but they all decided to open Pandora's Box! Having said that, what each composer impressed on me was their single-mindedness — they very much believed in themselves and their work and this is an essential fact when dealing with 105 members of an orchestra. It is important for the conductor to believe in them too if the performance is to be worthwhile."

Undoubtedly, the passion and commitment of Field and the orchestra were first-rate; far more persuasive, in fact, than a regular MPO concert I recently attended. My hours at the rehearsals of Phase 1 were certainly more memorable than most concert performances I have ever attended here or elsewhere, and this is no exaggeration. I can't recall a single bar of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* nor a fragment of Joyce Koh's *Tai*, but I can still remember the trumpet motif in *Starry Night's Ripples*. And I didn't even like Chong's music at the start.

The audience at Phase 2 was equally appreciative: "A very 20th century programme well performed... I never knew there were so many great composers in Malaysia," says one. There were some constructive critics, who said the Forum would be "immensely more enjoyable if the composers had told a human story rather than a representation of natural phenomena... some of the works do not have sense of direction... a bit too avant-garde, the sense of tension is rather unpleasant... we are ideally in search of new sounds, not just to emulate but [aim for] an identity [that is] non-pretentious and mature in understanding... something to call our own".

What does Field have to say on some key learning points so far? "Orchestration... intelligent thematic 'development' no matter how individual the style or idea. One question common to all was, 'What was your first idea or germ from which the remainder took root?' I was always surprised to discover that in most cases the original 'cell' was submerged by orchestration or lost in the overall structure, leading us all to bark up the wrong tree."

The Forum itself is learning from this experience. Field is considering keeping all candidates on board for the complete two-year run of the Forum and offering a larger ensemble for the first round, a smaller orchestra for the second. To make it more interesting, candidates might perhaps be

asked to orchestrate an existing piano prelude like Debussy's. "These are not set in concrete, just ideas for now. You'll have to wait until May of 2005 for the 'new improved version'!" says Field.

What should a composer take note of when writing for such a competition? "They can write their wildest dreams — [Forum panellist] Fraser Trainer's quote, not mine!" says Field. "Few composers would write with a specific competition in mind — I would worry if they did. A winning work... successfully communicates the composer's dream to the audience. The Forum allows the individual to grow, free from the burden of total competition. Only later in the second round does it get a bit juicy in that regard!"

One of the panellists, composer Gerard Brophy, adds: "[In the current rounds] we were looking for composers whose work demonstrated some level of excitement and innovation... the second round [emphasised] issues of musical expression — for example 'musical confidence', the clarity and effectiveness of musical utterance. I must emphasise that these criteria transcend any stylistic considerations and, above all, we did not encourage innovation for innovation's sake, which as we are all aware can result in stilted, awkward and ultimately inexpressive music."

Performances of new music tend to be satellite activities to larger festivals or hot-housed in ghettos of dedicated new music ensembles and institutions by virtue of the greater public fear and resistance to all things new. The formula 'new = risk of box office income' rules. — Field

Brophy recommends that future aspirants focus on "[issues of] clarity of musical notation, clarity of musical expression and formal/architectural considerations. In order to achieve these goals, I encourage the applicants to completely immerse themselves in a comprehensive study of the chamber and orchestral repertoire. It is only through this activity, combined with considered reflection, that a composer can liberate completely their musical imaginations and thus indeed fully express their musical personality."

It's clear we're off to a good start, and long-term plans for a regular Forum and Field's advocacy of new music in general augur well for a Malaysian art music scene that is self-sustaining, and which may even lead the way regionally. Does the conductor who brought so many new pieces to life have any idea of what shape this music scene would eventually take? Are we headed the Contemporain way, or would Post-



Field waves the big stick