

Minimalism and cross-cultural assimilation take the lead? I mean, where IS new music today?

“This is a huge question!” admits Field. “We are talking about new music of the western art tradition and therein lies the problem — tradition! 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. To date, we have performed over 80 works from living composers over the last six seasons — for a non-specialist, new music ensemble this is quite a feat; it’s a path down which many quality orchestras are travelling. New music performances in Europe, for example, are thriving and being driven by first-rate works from first-rate composers, from IRCAM [Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique] to the BBC Proms. Only through regular integration of the new with the old will audiences become more aware and less ‘afraid’ — and box office managers more daring!”

Prior to the Forum, the MPO had already dipped its toes into the territory with commissions from Chong, Sunetra Fernando and Tazul Tajuddin. With more Forums and more new works, we may well see the day when Malaysian music forms a permanent part of each season’s programme. “We all have a part to play,” says Field. My experience with MPO



Chong, ‘The Professional Prize Winner’: His work demands almost specialist technique from the players

audiences proves that they are just as inclined to accept the new as they would a symphony of Brahms. I think it also has to do with indigenous classical Indian, Malay and Chinese music, all of which are as fresh and contemporary in sound and colour as a work by George Benjamin, for example. It would in part explain the success of the MPO new music series... back to your second question about where new music is now — probably at the same place now as it was for Berlioz then.”

A moment of déjà vu, as I recall an interview with the Queensland Philharmonic a decade ago when the music director remarked that in Mozart’s time, orchestras and audiences were looking forward to the next new piece that was being written. The QPO ran regular competitions for its local composers, and I had in that article advocated that we do the same for Malaysians. Field has done a remarkable job in making this vision a reality, but more work needs to be done. The Forum will need to reach out and gradually involve more sectors of the community and engage more partners in order to provide more opportunities for local art music to grow and flourish.

Still, the MPO has made significant inroads. It has earned its stripes in helping pull us out of the dark ages of art music. Field offers an insight to this dark past: “During the planning of the Forum, I spoke with a number of potential composers... One phone call ended with the person slamming down the receiver, after telling me of an incident that took place when the MPO was first formed where they were all at a formal gathering of VIPs, only to be advised one to one [by] a key official that no individual composer in Malaysia was capable of writing for an orchestra of this standard.

“On hearing this, I was as shocked and angry as that composer. The experience of the call sharpened my focus on the development of the Forum.” Field adds that this official has long since left the organisation, but while he has worked hard to dispel the myth with such an admirable line-up of Malaysian compositions that we have thus far been treated, such an ignorant remark leaves lasting scars. “It just goes to show what a negative impact such a venture can have,” says Field. “All the more reason to keep at getting it right.” **E**

Tickets for the MPOICA concert are priced at RM30 and RM15 (students). For more information, call (03) 2051 7007 or email box_office@petronas.com.my.

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UPFRONT with four NEW Malaysian works

Phase 2 of the Malaysian Composers Forum presented new challenges to our composers, and while in some places the results were not as exciting as in Phase 1, the music on the whole was just as compelling.

Chong Kee Yong showed supremacy in the medium, producing a work far tauter than his earlier piece, *I Hear The Wind Calling*. Containing hidden tributes to Stravinsky, Ligeti and Sciarrino and “a little something of himself”, *Starry Night’s Ripples* opens with a waft of rising flutes ushering in a tumultuous splash of colour, a crash of elements reminiscent of the shimmering climaxes of *Messiaen* or the nebulous opening of Tippet’s *4th Symphony* (minus the heavy breathing).

The piece has a clear sense of drama often lacking in this medium — the apocalyptic trumpets announce a bluesy key motif Bb-Ab-G-F-Gb, a solo cello plays a plaintive Japanese-styled microtonal melody, the violins sing angelic whispers in harmonics, the Thai gong draws us back to an ancient memory, the tuba and trombone pedals uncover primeval forces. It culminates in a clash of *Messiaen*-like birdsong in the woodwinds against raging percussion, whooping horns alluding to Stravinsky, the battle ending in a triumph for nature as the violins emulate the evaporating harmonics first heard in Phase 1 (Chong’s tribute to himself?).

Johan Othman’s *Topeng 1* was initially a bit of a disappointment after the extrovert excitement of *Ittar*. However, repeated encounters revealed its many redeeming elements — his strong sense of identity was persuasive, his approach highly original. *Topeng 1* is a huge arch that opens and closes with an extended sequence of quiet chords on the piano that is as deliciously bluesy as it is nervously Schnittkean. The centrepiece introduces Johan’s trademarks — the pulling and pushing of obsessive melodic threads that seem to play together yet yearn to rip apart in pseudo-canons, while sustained hairpin crescendos and strange isolated low chords build into the sort of whirlwind episode we now know from *Ittar*, so much the more dramatic with a full string section. The maelstrom is silenced by the toms and nervous calm descends once again. Inspiring stuff.

High on appeal was **Adeline Wong’s** *Steel Sky*, which opened with some truly unnerving orchestral stabs (which might have prompted Vaughan Williams to say, “I didn’t like it but it’s what she meant.”). Over 2½ minutes of sustained high E delicate swirls of material gather force, glissandi sigh like howling wind in the distance — a touch of glockenspiel here, a knock on the tom there, and you think, “Oh no, she’s trying to be Chong!”

But like the clearing of mists, a touching descending scale reveals the heart and soul of the work (and you think, “Ah, Adeline!”). The simple Aeolian scale (3-2-1-7-6-5-4-3), a pun on the Greek God of Wind Aeolus perhaps, brings a personal touch to the work.

Wong masterfully marshals the forces of tranquillity and disruption into a stunning tapestry. With a final huff and puff, the orchestra is spent, and in the sustained epilogue it is unclear if sky or steel wins, as an undercurrent of tension unwinds and melts into the metallic bass E on the piano. It’s that final uncertainty in the harmony — Wong does such wonderful things with simple scales — that saves *Steel Sky* from being what a local critic called, “too brainy”.

The missed opportunity of Phase 2 was **Ahmad Muriz’s** colourful *Benih Harapan*, which tried to be more brainy than it needed to be. With too much good material packed into 15 minutes, Ahmad would have written a far better work with just a fraction of what he had. Individual sections reveal Ahmad as quite a master of colour and mood, and the quiet bits were effective. Unfortunately, the sum of the many parts did not produce a satisfying whole, but that’s part of the learning experience and we will hear more good music from Ahmad in future. —
By C H Loh **E**