



POCO A POCO

SUITS ME FINE

BY CH LOH

A SORT OF MALAYSIAN
MUSICAL ADVENTURE

THE EDGE

I CONFESS, I have spent more time in KL traffic jams than I ever have in our world-class Malaysian Philharmonic. Strange? I thought so too. Buried deep in my subconscious was the dark secret why. It wasn't the Haydn, they don't programme him that often. The parking fees are frightful, but that's not it either.

Like a Hitchcock thriller, it all came together one evening as I make the treacherous trek towards Petronas Towers, its twin peaks glowing sinister in the thunderstorm that lashed the city (no, really). Headed for my first MPO concert featuring my favourite composers John Adam and Tchaikovsky, my sense of unease was unabated.

The tall English gentleman leans over with five cryptic words: "Do you have a jacket?" The spinning spiral in the blue screen behind me whirls to Bernard Hermann. Deep in the recesses of the complex at the coat department, several extremely polite Dewan Filharmonik staff offer to alleviate my dressing woes. "May I have your driver's licence please?" she smiled. I exchange it for an ill-fitting coat, which I struggle to put on. The coat is on the house but I am inconsolable.

"Enjoy ..." bids the Englishman like the doorman to Herr Dracula's manor before

vanishing into thin air. As I squirm in my Petronas-owned jacket and struggle in my seat, John Adam's *Chairman Dances* with its chugging, insistent ostinati mutate into the theme from *Psycho*. The man with the large hair frantically waves his stick. A huge white lady sings Chausson's *Poeme*, and suddenly, like a flash of lighting, it suddenly becomes crystal clear to me – Richard Rodgers cribbed the main theme to *Victory At Sea* from Chausson, the scoundrell!

Meanwhile my eyes water and my ears hum... an oppressive nausea overcomes me. It's the suit... it's the suit... I try to tell my bulky neighbour as vertigo sets in. I won't survive the second half of the programme. Between losing the suit and listening to Tchaikovsky's unremarkable *1st Symphony* I opt for freedom. Leaving the coat behind, I escape from the steely Alcatraz into the fresh KL night air (the storm had improved our Pollution Index slightly).

Recollecting happy memories of concerts in the distant past in distant lands, of listening to Tchaikovsky's *5th* in jeans and sneakers, I wonder if a dose of high art is worth the suffocation? I could of course purchase a batik shirt for my next symphonic adventure. Or I could just stay home and put on a CD. ■

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google of "Malaysia", "reading" or "writing" will show up.

Or, our "thirst for information" will lead us back to the big bookstores anyway, to beg an hour's browsing from a plastic-wrapped book.

Or, as revealed by a more recent *Straits Times* study of reading habits in the Southeast Asian region, "Malaysians [who] now seem increasingly focused about making money" will search out tomes such as *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, *Retire Young*, *Retire Rich* and *The Millionaire Mind* (top of the MPH bestseller list for May 2002) – and hopefully make enough money to buy and read more books, of their own initiative.



AS A "LIFESTYLE product" in itself, Zaid's book will look good on your real-wood bookshelf, increasing you status as "cultured individual". It is truly portable, unlike blogs or e-groups, that is, completely independent of any external devices or power source for access (except, arguably, a nice hot teh tarik). Best of all, it is tactile. It wears its age and experience on its skin, like us humans – becoming creased at a favourite page, bearing a stain – a tear? Spilt coffee from the heat of an intense encounter? – which immediately transports one back to the moment that created it. And, as all reading does, it "liberates the reader and transports him from his book to a reading of himself and all of life".

But in the end, as well as at the beginning, "culture is conversation," remains Zaid's conviction in *So Many Books*, and "what is important about culture is how alive it is, not how many tons of dead prose it can claim".

Books can be treasure or they can be trash, he says, not worth the price of their recyclable cellulose content. You may have heard this truism before, but Zaid goes on to argue that this happens regardless of a book's cultural or intellectual content—the fate of countless unread "orphaned" books that have fallen "outside the constellation in which [they] make sense".

Since "there are more books to contemplate than stars in a night sky", it is no mean task for "a reader to find his personal constellation, those books that will put his life in communication with the universe". Yet despite the numerous pitfalls and failures of selection, marketing, timing, cataloguing etc that could, and do, prevent a book from reaching its intended reader, "time and again the miracle occurs: a book finds its reader, a reader finds his book". And the conversation continues. ■