Recalling Home: Looking at Western Classical Music in Singapore 100 Years Ago

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2019 marks two major anniversaries in Singapore.

The first—following the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819—is that of the 200th anniversary of what prime minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong has called the beginning of "a modern, outward-looking and multicultural Singapore", at the launch of the Singapore Bicentennial. The second is that of the 40th anniversary of the first professional performing arts group in Singapore, i.e. the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) which was founded in 1979.

It is this second anniversary within the context of the first that is of interest in this article.

The guest of honour at the SSO's 40th anniversary gala—which was held at the country's main performing arts centre, Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay—was also the prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong. Lee's message in the programme booklet for the occasion is telling of the role the type of music commonly known as Western classical music plays in the nation's development and the necessity of support for such music.

Referencing Singapore's second deputy prime minister Dr Goh Keng Swee's comment in 1973 that it was a "minor scandal" that Singapore did not have an orchestra then, Lee noted that "Our nation would be soul-less without an appreciation of arts and culture" and that "our founding fathers believed a symphony orchestra would enrich our culture and show the world that Singapore aimed to be a gracious society."

The more obvious question thus to ask would be: How did the practice and performance of Western classical music take root in Singapore and rise to a position of prominence until the founding fathers of Singapore believed that a symphony orchestra would enrich the country's culture and show the world that she aimed to be a gracious society?

Work done in early 2000s by myself to address this question while as a research scholar with the National Institute of Education had revealed various challenges. The main one was that the attempt to trace the arrival of "Western classical music" in the 19th century and to re-construct musical interaction between European and Asian communities in the early and mid-20th century revealed (and still reveals) a paucity of histories of musical activities in Singapore during the period mentioned. Primary documents (such as memoirs, correspondence, data on clubs or associations) pertaining to Western classical music activity from at least 1819 up till the mid-1950s and secondary histories—primarily journal or newspaper articles by a pioneering generation of musicians born in Singapore who emerged after World War II—generally remain relatively few and far between.

The presence of Western music is an *a priori* assumption, attributed to the colonial past and a causal relationship implied between activities of pre-independent Singapore and her future. There is thus the following on Singapore of the 1950s in composers Ting Chu San, Leong Yoon Pin and Bernard Tan's chapter titled "Singapore" in Ryker Harrison's *New Music in the Orient: Essays on Composition in Asia Since World War II* published as recently as 1991:

As a colony, the major cultural activities were all greatly influenced by currents from the West: music was no exception. At that time, the only established musical institution was the Singapore Music Society, previously known as the Singapore Philharmonic … In addition to regular concerts, there were an annual music contest, an annual performance of Handel's Messiah: both events provided some basis of future development.

Other writers (also renowned practitioners) such as Joseph Peters and Paul Abisheganaden attribute music education (vis-a-vis the creation of the post of Master of Music in 1935) in government and mission schools as a factor which led to the development of an interest in Western classical music among the young in pre-independent Singapore.

Yet, the bulk of the data or information on musical activity in 19th century and up till mid-20th century Singapore remains in the multitude of contemporaneous newspaper reports, advertisements, trade figures of instrument trade, anecdotal histories or recollections which still require much verification of facts and a historical framework to make sense of.

However, while looking through the newspaper reports (especially those of the Singapore Free Press in the late 19th century and up till early 20th century) and whatever published secondary material that is available, a few primary questions emerged: What did music making (i.e. Western classical music) mean for a group of people (i.e. the European and more specifically the British community) who were living away from their home? Why did it matter to them? And would that answer be same to that of why Western classical music matters to a Singaporean society of the 21st century?

As Singapore celebrates its bicentenary (and as the arts group which was founded to show to the world Singapore's aim to be a "gracious society celebrates its 40th anniversary), it is perhaps timely and instructive to reflect on an article on music written a hundred years ago to celebrate Singapore's centenary, so as to see what the musical past has to offer the present and next generation of arts practitioners, managers and researchers.

One hundred years of Singapore

Just two years short of a hundred years ago, a two-volume book documenting the history of Singapore from its founding as a British settlement in 1819 up till 1919 was published to celebrate the centenary of the capital of the Straits Settlements.

Titled *One Hundred Years of Singapore: Being Some Account of the Capital of the Straits Settlements from its Foundation by Sir Stamford Raffles on the 6th February to the 6th February 1919*, the book was sponsored by a Centenary Committee that was appointed by the Straits Settlements government a year earlier in 1918. The committee was chaired by the acting Colonial Secretary George Maxwell. *One Hundred Years of Singapore* was published in 1921 in London and the tome came up to close to 600 pages per volume.

The compilation of material for the book was entrusted to the hands of three editors who in turn worked with a London subcommittee of former Singapore residents. The editors were prominent persons in Singapore then: Walter Makepeace (1859–1941) who was proprietor/editor of *Singapore Free Press* as well as a public figure; Gilbert Edward Brooke (1873–1936), Port Health Officer; and Roland St John Braddell (1880–1960), whom historian Mary Turnbull regarded as the "most illustrious of the three editors" in her introduction to the 1991 reprint of the book, a prominent lawyer and a scholar of Malayan history who would subsequently play a key role in the negotiations leading to the formation of the Federation of Malaya.

For the three, as they stated in their preface to the book, the writing of the articles was a "labour of love: how great a labour only those who have worked in Singapore and have had occasion to rummage in the scrap-heap of its history can realise." As there was "no cultured class with ample leisure to spare for making an exhaustive chronicle of the past" in Singapore at that time, the various articles were contributed by volunteers whom the three editors felt were "public-spirited enough to turn their leisure hours into more work".

The article on music appears as a subsection of a chapter titled "Amateur Theatricals and Music" in the second volume of the book. This section (based on the 1991 Oxford University Press reprint of the book) occupies about 16 pages or about just slightly more than one per cent of the entire book. The other chapters addressed a vast array of topics including Sir Stamford Raffles, land tenure, education, public works, municipal government and social life.

The author of the article was one Edwin Arthur Brown (1878-1955), a man who until his memoirs *Indiscreet Memories* from 1935 was republished in 2007 by Singapore publisher Monsoon Books, was largely forgotten by a younger generation in Singapore. He was remembered only by pioneering Singapore musicians such as Alex Abisheganaden, Vivien Goh and Victor Doggett. Today, Brown warrants an entry—dating from 2009—in the National Library's free online electronic encyclopaedia, Singapore Infopedia. He is described as a "Singapore broker, municipal councillor and long-time stalwart of music and theatre in Singapore."

At the time of writing, Brown was a partner with Adis & Ezekiel exchange brokers, in command of the Chinese company of the Singapore Volunteer Corps (having been commended for his command during the 1915 sepoy mutiny) and choirmaster at St Andrew's Cathedral up till the outbreak of World War II in Singapore, amongst other responsibilities.

His obituary in the November 1955 issue of *Malaya: Journal of the Association of British Malaya* perhaps best summed up his legacy:

"E.A" will be remembered by all who lived in Singapore between 1900 and the Japanese invasion as a churchman (the cathedral was almost his second home), for his musical ability, and for his services to the S.V.C. The way he threw himself into all that he undertook was characteristic of the man for his zeal was unlimited.

Almost 100 years later, Brown's article which looks back at music 100 years from his time of writing (presumably between 1918 and 1919) is revelatory.

Up till its time of publication and even until now, the article remains perhaps the only contemporaneous historical account of Western classical music activities in Singapore in late 19th century and early 20th century Singapore.

Music over one hundred years

That which Brown regarded as being "music" can be obtained through the layout of the article in the book. Every odd-numbered page of the article (and of the book) is given a topic title at the top of the page. Thus in Brown's article, the topic titles refer to a subject matter that was addressed at length.

The first of these topics was: "Edward Salzmann", a man whom this article will further discuss. The second was "Orchestral Concerts", which referred to the activities of the Singapore Philharmonic Society, a society of amateur musicians founded on

the initiative of William Graeme St. Clair (1849–1930). St. Clair was a polymath: he was editor of *Singapore Free Press,* an amateur musician, and had formed the Singapore Volunteer Rifles. Makepeace in his article *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya* described him as the "doyen of Press in the Straits Settlements". In his obituary of St. Clair for the *British Malaya* magazine in May 1930, Makepeace wrote that it was 'difficult to name any part of the life of Singapore during the years he was there that he did not influence and stimulate". The first organ at Victoria Concert Hall, the St. Clair Organ, was named after him.

"Sweet Singers of Singapore" followed, which referred to amateur vocalists in Singapore, while the fourth topic, "Choral Society" was about a choral society Brown himself had formed within the congregation of St Andrew's Cathedral and also the Philharmonic Choral Society which had been in decline at that time.

The topic "Regimental Bands", which spoke about the role military bands played in assisting productions and providing music for public occasions, as well as their own performances, closed the article.

Brown: "To sit quietly on the verandah after dinner was over …"

Yet, as my research has shown, Brown's article as history is to be read with caution.

A series of errors and omissions emerges when one tries to verify Brown's account with contemporaneous newspaper accounts.

This is evident in Brown's account of the man whom he placed at the centre of his narrative: a musician called Edward Charles Salzmann, whose photograph, the only image in the section on music, is placed at the beginning.

Salzmann, who died in Singapore in 1930 at the age of 87, is a name largely forgotten today. Born in Florida, educated in Europe, a professor of music at Royal Naval College and a member of Michael Costa's (1808–1884) orchestra at Covent Garden Opera in London before coming to Singapore as organist of St Andrew's Cathedral in 1874, Salzmann played a central role in Singapore's classical music life up till his death. He was also the oldest European in the community at the time of his passing.

Brown and Salzmann were close friends. In *Indiscreet Memories,* Brown wrote that his friendship with Salzmann and Salzmann's wife was one "that never faltered, never was broken until death itself cut the chain. How good they were to me in those days! Almost every Sunday after church they would have me up to dinner …"

In fact, Brown's account of Salzmann in his article for *One Hundred Years* is possibly the only existing secondary source of Salzmann's early life in Singapore.

Yet, interestingly, his introduction to Salzmann is riddled with errors.

First, he notes that the first public notice of Salzmann appeared in the "March papers of 1874: 'Mr Salzmann, Professor of Music at the Royal Naval College, London, had been appointed organist of St Andrew's Cathedral." Brown then follows this with "On the 11th March of that year, Madame Arabella Goddard gave a concert here, at which Mr Salzmann, Mr Buckley and Mr Crane performed. Mr Salzmann had succeeded a Mr Iburg, who left for Shanghai after a short

stay here, his predecessor at St Andrew's being Mr E B Fentum."

In 1874, there were two English newspapers: *The Straits Observer* and *The Singapore Daily Times*. The unavailability of copies of the former dating from the period mentioned by Brown necessitated a focus on the latter.

Here, research revealed that the first notice of Salzmann in *The Singapore Daily Times* did not appear in March but in April. More significantly, Arabella Goddard (1836–1922) who was England's leading pianist of the second half of the 19th century, did not perform in Singapore in March but on 4th and 8th May. According to *The Singapore Daily Times* in February of that year, Goddard was in fact originally scheduled to perform in April but she did not arrive till 29th April, hence her performing only in early May.

This error may seem innocuous at first glance but if one looked at other "omissions" in Brown's article, it would appear that something else is at play.

In Brown's entire article, there are only two mentions of visiting professional musicians to Singapore: Goddard's performance in 1874 and a performance in 1889 by Tasmanian-born soprano Amy Sherwin (1855–1935) who was known as the "Tasmanian Nightingale" and in 2005 was inducted into the Tasmania Roll of Honour for her service to the arts.

Sherwin did perform in 1889 in Rossini's *Stabat Mater* conducted by Salzmann as Brown notes:

In 1889, Miss Amy Sherwin took a leading part in a performance of the Stabat Mater with Mr Salzmann's choir, in which Mrs Salzmann sang 'Quis est homo' with Ms Amy Sherwin. The celebrated artist also played in Turned Up …

What is not mentioned however is that Sherwin had performed with her own company earlier in 1889 during which Salzmann came into contact with her.

Research has also revealed that there were other artists who visited Singapore during the period which Brown was writing about: in 1886 there were concerts by the famed violinist Ede Remenyi (1828–1898) whose playing was said to have influenced the great composer Brahms and in 1896, there was a recital by Polish pianist and composer Antonie de Katski (1817–1899) who was the first classical pianist to give a concert in the Philippines. These were concerts by musicians who were as famous as Goddard and Sherwin and whose performances drew considerable excitement among audiences in Singapore. More significantly, chronologically, their concerts took place much closer to the time that Brown was writing.

Similar omissions can be found also in the works that Brown listed as being performed during the period under review. The only works highlighted were oratorios and cantatas, all performed by Salzmann's choir of the Singapore Philharmonic Society:

1889 : *Stabat Mater* by Rossini
1891 : *The Rose Maiden* by Frederick Cowen
1892 : Musical evening of oratorios and selections from *Messiah*
1893 : Selections from *Elijah* by Mendelssohn
1895 : *Ruth* by Alfred Gaul, *Crusaders* by Nils Gades and *Lauda Sion* by Mendelssohn
1896 : *Stabat Mater* by Rossini

In fact, when in his article Brown subsequently recounts the "outstanding efforts" over the past 20 years, he referred to a performance of the *Messiah*, selections of Costa's *Eli*, the formation of a choir to sing at the official reception of the Duke and Duchess of York (later King George V and his queen) and a choir formed on the occasion of the coronation of King Edward VII during which the song *Land of Hope and Glory* was sung.

Brown seems to have ignored other works performed by the Singapore Philharmonic Society then: movements from Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*, Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 20 in D-minor* and Mendelssohn's *Piano Concerto No. 2*. These were concerts which the society had been proud of.

Yet, Brown fails to mention them. Moreover, Brown also fails to give more information on Sazlmann's predecessors, Iburg and Fentum. Why?

These omissions and errors could be due to the fact that, as the editors of *One Hundred Years* qualify, the articles in the book were written by volunteers and not professional historians.

So, we could surmise that Brown was only working on hearsay.

But then the question arises: Who gave him the information of those years before he had arrived in Singapore? What information did he select and why? What does it tell us about what music meant to the community?

In my research, it is likely that Brown's entire article was based primarily on what Salzmann wanted to be remembered or had remembered. In the section on Salzmann, Brown wrote that "If Mr Salzmann could have been induced to write his musical memories of Singapore, this article would have been unnecessary."

This statement was probably written not out of modesty. There is a likelihood that Brown meant it and he was aware that Salzmann could have provided a better account since at the time of his writing, Salzmann had already been in Singapore for 45 years as compared to Brown's 20. Read in another way then, Brown's statement could be taken to imply that since Salzmann could not be induced to write his musical memoirs, Brown's article would then be Salzmann's memoirs. The only way to do this then was to have Salzmann as his main and only source.

In fact, it is highly likely that Brown was relying heavily on Salzmann and this is the possible explanation for the absence of a host of visiting artists and why only certain personalities and repertoire performed were highlighted.

It is through a closer look at these highlighted personalities and repertoire that we can imagine (or re-imagine) what music-making meant to the community of people away from their homeland.

Both Goddard and Sherwin were musicians from within the British Empire and the repertoire highlighted and the "outstanding efforts" remembered by Brown mainly comprised cantatas, oratorios or occasions related to England. As it has been noted, musical life in 19th century Britain was governed not by opera as was the rest of Europe, but by the oratorio.

The artists remembered and the repertoire highlighted in Brown's article were about home. They were all related in one way or another to England, the land where Brown and Salzmann spent their formative years. Brown recalled of evenings spent in Singapore with Salzmann and another prominent figure in colonial Singapore, Charles Burton Buckley (1844–1912), whose book *Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* Brown also drew from:

… it was always a source of delight to me to sit quietly on the verandah after dinner was over, and to listen quietly to the two 'old' men yarning of their old days in London …

In fact, in his memoirs, Brown stated that Salzmann was "conservative" and "hated new things" and "the music he had lived in and on in London was his mind the best, and he would not believe that the best of his days could perhaps be bettered by the best of later days … "

Brown's article appeared in a book whose viewpoint—given the background to the publication of the book—can be deemed to be also that of the public as a whole. This perhaps affirms that music then, given that virtually all memories of performances and performers who visited were from England, in its practice and even in the memories of it, was about home.

Music served, as it were, a means through which a community of people living away from their homeland could continue to reinforce their cultural identity and a way to be culturally at home despite being geographically away.

100 Years On

What then does such knowledge hold for the arts practitioner, manager or researcher in a Singapore of the 21st century?

The programme of the SSO's 40th anniversary gala concert on 18th January 2019 included two works performed at its inaugural concert in 1979: American composer Charles Ives's The *Unanswered Question* and Beethoven's popular *Piano Concerto No. 5.*

The concert however opened with a work written in 1980 by pioneering Singapore composer Leong Yoon Pin (1931–2011), *Dayong Sampan Overture,* a work based on a popular Malay folk tune and the first Singapore work performed by the SSO. As Leong himself said about the work as cited in the SSO's programme booklet:

Against the distant drums, horns and bassoons … herald … the quiet dawn.

The aquatic sports on the southern seas being with the allegro section in full merriment … the timpani … [ushers in] the well-known Malay folk tune, Dayong Sampan, played by the oboe and clarinet against pizzicato strings and tambourine …

A four bar adagio leads into the recapitulation, and the coda is meant to be played with great jollity.

The concert concluded with Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7* which at its premiere in 1813, the audience demanded its second movement to be repeated. The SSO's programme notes on the work for the concert ends with composer Richard Wagner's description of the exuberant final movement as one in which "in the last whirl of delight a kiss of triumph seals the last embrace."

One could say that musically, the concert brought the audience back in time. One could say that musically, the SSO's gala started at home and then moved on to the rest of world.

In this then, one could also say that for a 21st century Singapore audience who is already at home—the concert played to a packed house—music continues to serve a reminder of home but at the same time, it is also an expression of a desire to move forward.

The central part of this article is derived from the author's unpublished thesis Music in Empire: Western Music in 19th Century Singapore Through A Study of Selected Texts *submitted to the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University in 2003 in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of the Master of Arts when the author was a research scholar with the School of Visual and Performing Arts, NIE.* ☐

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